



# Tricked By the Alien Prince (Planet Atraxis Warriors #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** She wants nothing to do with him... hell do whatever it takes to keep her

Someones been lying to us, to me. Again. This time Im not putting up with it. Im hell-bent on discovering the colony councils secrets. Even if I have to hike halfway across this alien planet, facing dangers untold. Never underestimate a computer scientist on a revenge streak.

So when that mysterious alien male pops up, offering his help, of course I take it.

Only, Ive got a feeling theres something more to this guy with glowing skin than meets the eye. More than his finely toned body, bulging muscles... and other impressively developed parts. The way he hovers over me protectively, lighting up like a mood ring whenever he's close, anticipating my every need with uncanny precision. Why is he so focused on me? Theres clearly something hes not telling me.

I need to remember whats important. Ive got a colony to save, conspiracies to uncover, and an alien mystery to solve. Not to mention keeping my own traitorous feelings in check. Because seriously, a relationship? With him? Please, I dont have time for that...do I?

Tricked By The Alien Prince is a humorous, steamy sci-fi romance set in the Planet Atraxis Warriors series. Expect intergalactic miscommunications, perilous danger, and possessive alien mates.

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

## Chapter One

MAYA

I 'm running for my life.

Okay, so my feet are actually glued to the spot in terror, but I should be running.

I look over my shoulder and promptly squeal when the large green guy turns his gaze upon me. Yep, that's an alien alright. No denying that. He's nearly seven feet tall, with olive green skin and bulging with muscles like some sort of bodybuilder who's worked out way too much. He looks like a rather unpleasant sort, dressed in his leather trousers and fur boots. He's got leather harnesses all over his body, and he's covered in tattoos like some wannabe biker. Only this guy has probably never seen a motorcycle in his life, and given his size, he might just be able to eat a biker for breakfast. He's an alien—so maybe he does eat people? I don't want to be racist, but he and his buddies look awfully frightening as they wave around their axes and spears.

Long story short, I do not want to get on his bad side.

I really have to wonder just how I got myself into this situation. I came to this planet for a fresh start at a quiet life, and instead, I've found myself in the middle of a battlefield.

Only a few minutes ago, my best friend Ariana and I were strolling through our colony's marketplace. I'd like to say it was for shopping, but things have been a bit

tense lately. It's why so many people have gathered here today; to hear some big announcement from the council, presumably about new safety precautions.

A little too late, if you ask me.

I cast a frantic gaze around the marketplace, searching for Ariana amid the crush of people. She is usually easy to spot with her bright red hair, yet for once I just can't see her. Where can she possibly be? We were standing right beside each other only a moment ago!

"Ariana!" I scream at the top of my lungs. Will she hear me? There is absolute chaos everywhere. People are panicking, and those green alien brutes are quite literally roaring.

"Maya!"

I spin at the sound of my name. Ariana is pushing her way towards me, fighting the crowd of people that is swarming around us. I watch as my friend literally shoves her elbow in someone's gut as she forces her way towards me. Ouch.

But it's not enough. There are too many people between us, and if we don't get moving we risk getting trampled by the stampede of fleeing colonists.

She realizes this at the same time as I do.

"Run, Maya! Run!" she yells over the heads of panicking humans.

I'm knocked back, or perhaps I stumble. Does she honestly think I'm just going to leave her? I watch her in disbelief as she turns her face towards the horde of aliens that are invading our little colony village, and grins.

“Stop looking like a suicidal chick planning to storm the gates!” I shout to her, but I don’t think she hears me. I’m a big fan of vids, especially when the hero at the end makes some big dramatic gesture to save his love. Ariana’s grin is wide, a bit maniacal in expression, but she definitely isn’t pulling off the desperate heroine look.

No. Instead, she’s happy.

One moment Ariana led me to some tall cloaked guy, deciding to chat with him while I stood mesmerized by his glowing green eyes, and then the next...

I’m pretty sure that the big green aliens that have broken into our little colony are here for her. She’d gone missing for weeks. When the hunters finally found her and brought her home, Ariana had confessed to me that there were aliens on the planet, big green guys calling themselves Harkcana, and she was madly in love with one of them.

And now they’ve come for her.

She expects me to run, and she plans to go with them.

My heart stutters at the thought of being separated from my best friend. I didn’t lie when I told her that she was all I had. Ariana means everything to me. I came to this planet with barely anything to my name. I was at the darkest moment in my life, and then her bright red hair appeared, bouncing down the dark hallways of our colony ship, glittering in the light like some sort of beacon of hope. She is my superhero. I admire her because she never lets people get her down. She always stands up for herself.

Like I should have.

The thing is, my feet are glued to the cobblestones beneath my shoes. I have no idea

what to do. I can't leave Ariana, I need her and she might need me.

I've never been good in situations like these. Most people experience fight or flight. Me? I freeze.

I notice a nearby Hunter—the people we call our guards—grip an electric baton that he wears at his side with white knuckles, and somehow my brain thinks how he's at least smart enough to not draw it in the midst of a panicked crowd. Of course, my brain notices little details like that, and not the big pressing matter of getting out of harm's way!

I glance back at Ariana, or at least where she once stood. She's gone now, and I feel that rift inside me grow. There's no one around left to trust...

Ariana has to leave the colony. Let's face it; she wants to. Why would she even want to stay here anymore? Walter did unspeakable things to her—stole her fortune, manipulated her, beaten her... I'd want to kill him too if I was in her position. The guy deserves it.

I can only pray that one of these huge alien brutes that are storming our village is her mate, the one she fell madly in love with. She's getting her fairy-tale ending where the hero swoops in, rescuing her in a dramatic finale.

I've got to let her go, let her have her happily ever after.

Even if I don't get mine.

Still, just because I have to let her go, doesn't mean I'm going to let the matter go though.

Ariana doesn't let the world and misfortune beat her down. She's always stood up for

me. It's time I finally did something in return for her. If there's anything I can do for my best friend, it's to clear her name. I need to figure out what's been going on around here. Then perhaps one day we can meet up again.

I came here for a fresh start, a hope for a new life, and perhaps even a family, and instead I ended up in this situation. The colony council has been lying to us. They've used us. They told us no aliens lived on Atraxis, yet the green giants waving swords and spears like Viking warriors begs to differ. Earth brought us here to Atraxis, and for what? Was it truly for the valuable ore or something else? What do they want from us?

I refuse to be used. Not again.

I'm going to get to the bottom of this conspiracy.

I'm going to save Ariana.

I'm going to save everyone.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Two

#### VOLAN

I saunter down row after row of cages. I can't help the way that I walk; everything about my upbringing has taught me how to stand, how to appear towards others. Strong, confident, and capable. Even when I'm surrounded by beasts that snarl and swipe out at me with sharp claws, or by the taunts of outsiders.

Except for one.

I tilt my head, studying the young male. He's waiting quietly at the back of his cage on the metal bench, his dark green skin and dark leather clothing causing him to disappear into the shadows. Too bad for him that I can see quite well in the dark.

My senses flare outwards, searching. All my life I've been trained to expect danger at every turn, especially when surrounded by outsiders. This could be a trap to draw me in, or it could be an ambush waiting for me to lower my guard.

Or it could just be a simple male, waiting patiently for his turn in the Pits.

"You are not like the others," I remark as I step closer to the bars of his cage. Unlike the other warriors and downtrodden males waiting behind bars of their own, he doesn't roughhouse, call out challenges, or glare at me with poorly concealed hatred. This male truly is different.

"What is your name?" I ask as I lean my light grey arm against the bars. The metal is

cool against my flushed and heated skin. The fighting pits are never cool; having so many bodies pressed into the tight confines of one cavern quickly raises the temperature. After years of patrolling these areas, enforcing our own security and quelling any disruptive violence, I've become accustomed to the heat.

"Zoran," the male replies. I don't miss the slight quiver in his gruff voice. He does his best not to show it, but I know he's afraid. After all, only a fool wouldn't fear the Pits. I wonder if this is his first time. It takes considerable bravery to travel this far underground, alone, especially knowing you face certain death. Or maiming.

He must be desperate.

"I am Volan," I flash the luminae markings on my body twice, introducing myself in the way of my species. The blue glow emerging from my skin brightens up his cell momentarily. I doubt Zoran will recognize the formal greeting; most other species don't.

"Why are you here to fight, Zoran?" I ask.

The male shifts in his cell, before standing to his full height. He's taller than me, but only just. I maintain my relaxed composure, not giving any sign that my body becomes tense as he approaches. He's younger than I expected, barely an adult entered into his prime.

"Come to prove your worth to a female?" I ask.

Zoran shakes his head. "My tribe needs more medicine," he states.

Ah. The prize that my father offers to the best Pit fighters. Too bad that many of them go through so much medicine just trying to obtain more from their injuries sustained in the fights. Still, a small amount is potent enough to bring a wounded warrior back



from the brink of death.

I breathe out heavily as I study him. I wish I could help him, but there's very little I can do. There's not enough medicine to go around to all the tribes, and my father keeps a tight control on who receives it.

The male tilts his head, considering me. The action causes some of his dark black hair to fall to the side, revealing a partially shaved scalp covered with intricate, swirling tattoos.

Unlike the markings that cover my body, which glow a soft blue most of the time, his are dark and faded. If he were a Sulthari like me, I would consider him sick and potentially contagious.

"Are you mated?" I ask, blatantly staring at his markings. It should be easy enough to get a mate, at least for me... but these markings, they must be his fated mate marks. I know enough about harkcanas that they believe in that sort of thing. My father ensured that I at least learned the important things about each of the species that lived on the planet—at least enough to know how to strategize against them.

I just didn't believe fated mates were real. It's a concept that I find strangely appealing - that idea of one perfect female in existence who is destined to be yours. Someone you can trust. Someone who will always be at your side, so you never feel apart from those around you.

Zoran chuckles, his laughter a husky rumble. "Hardly. These are my tribal marks."

I scowl, wanting to ask further without giving away that I know nothing of what he talks about. It's rare for me to have the opportunity to talk to outsiders like this. Even now I am constantly listening to hear the shouts of my guards as they track me down. Even when patrolling in the past, it was always in a group. Always surrounded, and

yet somehow never quite connected.

Zoran must recognize my inner turmoil, and for some reason, he takes mercy upon me. He flicks a finger towards his tattooed scalp. “This one shows that I belong to the Ma’Krosh tribe. Unlike you Sulthari, we have multiple tribes on the surface. They aren’t always friendly with each other.”

My spine stiffens when he mentions my people, but his voice doesn’t carry any anger or hate. He speaks as if it’s just common knowledge, and it’s times like this that I wish it were. Not many of the warriors that brave the depths, seeking the Pits, are happy to be here. Many blame us. Many accuse us of hoarding the life-saving medicine for ourselves.

Many would be willing to kill us just to get ahold of it.

It’s why they are behind bars, and I am in the common way, warily watching those waiting to be escorted to the Pits.

Surrounded, but never connected.

Zoran, ignorant of my thoughts, gestures to a tattoo that spreads across his upper arm and shoulder blade. “This means that I have mastered the spear. You should be able to see the spear itself running through the design.”

I can hear raised voices in the distance and I note that my time here is running short. The overall noise of the cavern increases as vicious beasts are disturbed from their slumber and fighters become riled up. The tension is already high, fear and anger thick in the air.

I already know what’s happening. The same thing that occurs every time I’m out of sight; my personal guards are searching for me. No one needs them stirring more

trouble.

Especially this Zoran. He's been helpful, polite even. He either knows who I am and is giving me the proper respect, which I highly doubt, or is simply just a kind male.

It's hard to believe that he's simply so kind. Aren't outsiders all supposed to be vicious, practically beasts? They want nothing more than to tear their opponents apart. At least, that's what my father says. I've always wondered how a civilization can possibly survive if everyone acts like that. This Zoran just proves that not everyone is out for blood.

"A word of advice, Zoran," I say as I step back from his cell, putting space between the two of us. "Not many leave the Pits the way you've come. Your tribe will do better trading for the medicine than sending warriors to their deaths."

Before he can say anything, I flash my markings again, turn, and leave. I'd probably just insulted him. Most likely. But maybe he'd take my warning to heart. Just maybe I've saved a life today.

I continue walking slowly between the cages, pretending to ignore the angry shouts and cacophony that grows louder and louder behind me. It's rare I get an opportunity like this, to walk so casually, even if I am surrounded by outsiders. They represent a world that I've only glanced at, and for some reason find strangely compelling.

A large grey body comes to stand in front of me, blocking my exploration. The male spreads his legs wide, blocking my path with his muscular body and imposing height. I can almost imagine his fingers twitching, wanting to reach for his weapon.

"Prince Volan! I have been calling you," the male admonishes me. His luminae markings glow fiercely in the dim light. He's well-trained, but not well enough if he's projecting his frustration so clearly. I suppose I did make him run through the entire

cavern, past endless cages, each filled with potentially volatile enemies just to reach me...

I raise an eyebrow at him. I try to keep my voice haughty, just like how my father so often talks. “Really, Tanis, did you just chastise your prince?”

Tanis’s markings begin to flash rapidly as he realizes what he said and begins to panic. “Sire, I would never...”

“Are you sure, because that certainly sounded like you were upset with me,” I smile at him as I verbally prod him. Crossing my arms, I glance up at the male. And up. Tanis makes a good guard. He’s tall, especially for a Sulthari. And the male works out, almost non-stop. Almost everyone is fearful of him. Unfortunately, he isn’t the smartest of males. I’ve never once seen him question someone; he just always blindly follows orders. He’s good-humored though, and he doesn’t hold grudges when I tease him.

He’s also probably the closest I have to a friend.

Which is kind of a depressing thought. He’s literally paid to be by my side, day in and day out.

As a guard under my father’s employ, he’s never asked me for anything. In fact, he always patiently lends me an ear and listens to me talk through my ideas, even my outlandish ones. I’ve even gone so far as to tell him my ideas that maybe, just maybe, the outsiders aren’t as bad as we all perceive them to be. After all, they trade food and various items that we need... if it can be considered trading, paying the fee to be granted a position in line to fight in the Pits.

I’ve always wondered if this means that they are paying for us to take them to their deaths. Are we executioners, with just some long-winded process to cover our

reputations? Since when did the glorious Sulthari sink so low?

Before me, Tanis shifts uneasily on his feet. I've been lost in my thoughts for too long, and the poor male's resorted to panic. I laugh and hold up my hand, trying to calm him as he stumbles over his words. "Relax, Tanis. I was only stirring you. You can forgive me, right?"

Tanis's shoulders collapse, and he breathes a huge sigh of relief. I cringe a little at his reaction. Even after all these years, he still fears me. Or more so, he fears who I will become.

For the millionth time, I wonder what it would be like to have someone who would just talk to me. Not listen to me out of duty, but to truly have a conversation with. Maybe even disagree with me.

My father is a strict male, firm in his beliefs and firmer in his punishments. I am not my father. Sure, I enjoy a good fight like the rest of my people, but I am not unnecessarily brutal.

"Come, Tanis, now that you are here, perhaps we can get a sneak peek into what today's festivities will be. I've heard that the scouts have returned with all manner of strange beasts. I know you rather enjoy watching the fights."

Ever since my father forbade me from participating in the fighting pits myself, they have lost most of their appeal to me. Still, they are traditional to my people. Many of our males will even go so far as to participate in them to win glory, and the hearts of potential mates. I'm pretty sure that Tanis has this in mind, given how much he trains.

At least my people do not have to worry about fighting for the valuable medicine. At least they don't have to fear for their lives constantly, or send off loved ones in the desperate hopes of recovery.

I attempt to maneuver past my unmoving companion, glancing discreetly at his marks. It's unfortunate for him that his markings have never glowed particularly bright. He is a fine warrior - indeed my best. He would make a good mate, if only a female gave him a second glance.

He's the closest I have to a friend. I wouldn't mind helping him... if he only asked. He listens, but he never tells me his opinions back.

Tanis moves to block my way, halting me from proceeding to the gates of the arena.

"Sire, the king has requested your presence."

With those few words, my entire day is ruined.

## Page 3

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### Chapter Three

#### VOLAN

“How many times have I told you to stay away from the pits?” King Valnu roars. My father’s normally light-grey skin is dark, and his markings are pulsating with an intensity that makes me want to squint my eyes.

Dare I say spittle comes flying from his mouth? I’m pretty sure remarking upon it would not please him any further.

Of course, the courtiers standing nearby don’t comment either. I might be able to get away with the taunting phrase, but most of them won’t survive questioning their king. Or they might, but will live to regret it. Of course, each and every one of those males has found something else to be looking at with untold interest, studying the intricate decor and glistening metal detailing on the throne room’s walls and ceilings. Not one of them will take the risk to stand beside their future king, even if it means earning their current king’s displeasure.

“The outsiders cannot be trusted. All it would take is for one of those warriors to get ahold of you and...” His words die off. He stares down the tiered platform towards me with hard eyes, and just a hint of fear.

My own grey skin darkens as guilt washes over me. I glare down at the solid, gleaming tile beneath my feet. All he asks is that I don’t place myself in danger. I wish I could say that it’s because he doesn’t want to see his only born son hurt... but it’s simply because I am the future leader of our people. We’ve never exactly had a

caring relationship.

I watch my father shift on his gleaming metal throne. He drags clothing around him, covering up his markings. Unlike me, he can't control them through willpower. They reflect every one of his emotions. So he hides them. He hides himself. On days like this, I fear the distance that has grown between us.

I cannot believe that one of the fight pit warriors would simply attack unprovoked. I've walked among them. Sure, some males are aggressive, but many are also friendly - or at least indifferent.

"Not all outsiders are vile," I argue with the king. "In fact, there was one male that was quite happy to chat. Just before Tanis came, we'd been-"

"I don't care," Valnu says in a sharp tone. "Thoughts of these outsiders are corrupting your mind."

"I've removed you from leading the security patrols," my father states, as if commenting on the weather. "It's no longer your concern."

My stomach drops at his casual dismissal. I had worked hard to earn that position, to prove myself capable of protecting our people. But I push the hurt aside - he must have his reasons. Perhaps he truly believes I'm not ready for such responsibility.

I just desperately wish I could prove myself. After all the work I've done... can't he see that I'm ready?

"I swear that's not the case," I beg him. "Perhaps I can find this male and introduce you both. Then you'd see that-"

"No."



I scowl at the male that is my king and my father.

When is he going to let me prove myself? I am correct in this matter, I know it with all my heart. It's like my very soul demands this. I thought that I could just bide my time, after all, it's only a matter of time before my father cedes rule to me. I am of age. Only the old male doesn't believe I am ready.

"If you'd only listen to me," I argue with him, "You'd see that I could make some changes around here. The light needs to shine!"

Cycles ago, my people feared the darkness. On our home planet, monsters lurked in the darkness, preying on the unsuspecting. The light - the very light our bodies emit - was our salvation. Here, my people have come to fear those that walk in the light instead.

From somewhere behind me, a courtier male hisses his displeasure. Time and again I've argued that our fears are holding us back in the darkness, using our own religion as proof that we must seek the light. It's a sore spot for many who are still devout, even if we haven't felt the soil of our home world beneath our feet in generations.

"Talking like this... how do you expect me to believe you are ready to lead our people?" My father sneers at me.

"I'm not afraid to seek the light. But perhaps you are," I declare loudly for all to hear. A hum of voices fills the air at my proclamation. I've always toed the line, but I've never outright spoken against my father. Not like I am today.

Behind me, Tanis, my ever-faithful guard, shifts on his feet. I sense his movements more than I can hear. I can imagine Tanis flexing his fingers, wanting to reach for the comfort of his weapon.

I flash my markings slowly, showing that I am relaxed and calm. I'm not. It's more for Tanis' benefit than my own, to calm him. Without a doubt, he'll put his body between mine and danger. I fear what might happen if he draws his sword. If this situation truly escalated, I'd order him to retreat. He's my subject. He's mine to protect, not the other way around.

"Let me prove my worth!" I demand. "It is beyond time for me to prove myself to the people that I can be their king and lead them to victory."

I half expect the courtroom to break out into a frenzy. A prince should never, ever, demand his challenge. It's ungainly, a sign of impatience. But I am done with waiting. My father is leading our people deeper into the darkness, retreating from any hope that we may one day return home to where we belong. I can't let him do this.

Instead, the room is deadly silent. Only the flashing lights of skin pulsing in shock confirm that time is still moving. I'm pretty sure that no one even dares breathe right now.

My father lounges in his throne, watching me with narrowed eyes. He breathes deeply, in and out through his nose as if he's just holding himself back from an outburst. With slow, deliberate motions, he drapes his clothing artfully around his body, ensuring that not one of his luminae markings is exposed.

"I will cede my rule..."

My eyes bulge at his words.

"If, and only if, you can complete this one challenge," King Valnu finishes.

"Perhaps then you'll understand why we fear outsiders," my father adds, his voice softening. "Some truths must be experienced rather than merely told. You'll see for

yourself why we keep to the darkness.”

I bristle at his tone, at how he speaks to me like I’m still a youngling needing to learn harsh lessons. But isn’t that exactly what I’m asking for - a chance to prove what I know to be true? To show him that there’s nothing to fear in the light?

Of course. I knew there had to be a condition. There always is.

“You believe so strongly in these outsiders and their good faith. You’ve spoken in the past about a new tribe settling in the land above, these humans... I want you to go to that tribe, and bring back a female. She must return unescorted.”

My mouth drops open, and my skin blazes with my suddenly erratic emotions.

“A female!? How in the light am I supposed to do that?” I demand.

All around us the courtiers are mumbling their own questions, the deathly quiet around us now broken.

“You know that no tribe will willingly just give up a female.”

It’s a ridiculous request! My mind races as I try to figure out just how to obtain a female. A princely challenge must always be achieved by oneself, with no support from his allies. I won’t exactly be able to march into the new tribe and declare myself a prince in search of an alliance through mating. If I’m not killed immediately by their own warriors, then I am guaranteed to be laughed at as a fool.

“A female returning with you, willingly, will prove that you have convinced this new tribe of your strength and cunning as a ruler. And their trust.”

I stare at my father in shock, belatedly remembering to close my mouth. I had

expected, hoped, for a challenge such as killing a vicious Tangler - there's been enough of the beasts about. But this, this is just madness.

"I can't do this," I stammer. "There is no way... It's just not possible! A female? Besides, what is to stop this new tribe from slaughtering me as soon as I try to enter? We know so little about them."

I scowl. Is this what my father wants? Should I truly want to walk to my death? All so he can retain his power and title? Does he care so little for me, his only son?

"I have given you your challenge, Volan. Prove to me that outsiders can trust us, and in return be trusted, and I will cede my title," King Valnu declares loudly enough for all in the courtroom to hear, making it official.

My wide-eyed gaze meets Tanis' panicked one. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I am supposed to become king. I am supposed to lead my people to peace, not walk to my death.

Well, fuck.

## Page 4

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### Chapter Four

#### VOLAN

“I hate the surface,” I declare to no one since I am now alone. The words echo hollowly, emphasizing just how isolated I am in this moment. I glare back at the entrance of the cave, where I had last seen my guard escort disappear into the shadows. Even Tanis, who has stood by my side through everything, cannot accompany me on this quest. I must face this challenge alone, just as I’ve faced everything else in my life.

“How does anyone live in these conditions?” I nudge a clump of wet mush on the ground. The temperature hasn’t dropped to freezing yet, though the guards that escorted me to the surface warned me that it might only take one storm. No, this half-frozen mud is just the universe’s way of reminding me that I don’t belong here. Already I long for the warmth of my underground world, though even there I walk apart from others, separated by the weight of my title and my father’s expectations.

Maybe my father is right; the light doesn’t hold as much appeal now that I’m walking in it. But I’ve always been drawn to it, even when others retreated further into darkness. Perhaps that’s why I feel so alone - I cannot be content hiding in shadows like the rest of my people, yet I have no one to walk beside me in the light. Without that support, I’m feeling all too vulnerable - entirely too seen and exposed.

I am a powerful warrior, until recently the head of security, but there are things in this world that would even make me quake in my boots. My thoughts turn to how several of the guards returned from patrol, reporting that they had spotted signs of a Tangler

passing through the region. They aren't that hard to miss - the damn thing cleaves tunnels through the ground as if it's in water.

It disturbs me that my father wants the thing captured. I can only hope that Tanis can lead my warriors in my absence. I scoff; it's not like my father's guards will assist in any way, even if they are the best trained in the kingdom.

Knowing that my morose thoughts won't get me any closer to my destination, I draw my long grey cloak closer around me, warding off the chill in the air. Its hood helps to block out some of the light that stings my eyes, my eyes all too accustomed to the darkness of tunnels and caves. My boots crunch underfoot with each moody stomp, all the way up and down hills, through pink and blue forests as I make my way to the new tribal village.

It's less than I expected. The tribe has set up some defensive fortifications in terms of wood and stone walls. I find myself wishing I had someone here with me to help formulate a proper strategy. But that's not my purpose here - I have to complete this quest alone, as my father demanded. The weak wooden walls won't stop much, I think. The drakoons in the mountains will just fly right over the top. If my people truly wanted to, we would just come with weapons that spewed fire and burn our way through. At best, it might hold back the harkcana who don't seem capable of anything beyond their primitive ways.

The guards at the gate hesitate when I walk calmly by them. If Tanis were here, he'd probably suggest some elaborate distraction. The thought makes my chest ache - even my most loyal guard can't help me now. I'm not insane—I do keep my hood up and hide my features. One thing I have learned all these cycles of my life is that looking confident is half the battle. The number of times I've slipped past my guards, or Tanis, pretending that I was supposed to be doing something... Just like now. I belong in this village, and the guards should naturally allow me entry.

So they do.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I slip past them, and none of them calls out to halt me. Sometimes it works perfectly...other times it's an absolute disaster. At least when things go wrong in the kingdom, I have warriors at my back. Out here, I'll have no one to blame but myself if this fails.

"Who is this guy? He's so tall!" one male says to his companion as soon as I've passed.

Yes, I am tall, and these beings are short. Their tallest barely comes to my shoulders. They are thin too, even the males lack the muscles that I imagine they'd need to survive the harsh conditions on Atraxis. They look so much like me that for a brief moment I almost mistake them for younglings, yet I can't see a single one with a mark.

Bodies mill around me as I make my way further into their tribal village. It's not quite as primitive as I first thought, especially as I study the architecture and layout of their village. Sure, they don't seem to have much made from metal like the sulthari. Instead, they favor building with stone and wood, but perhaps that's because wood is so readily available up here on the surface.

A female slips by me, giving me a wide-eyed gaze. As soon as I walk past her, she turns to her companions, whispering overly loudly, "Why's he wearing that? Do you think he was hurt in a mining accident and needs to hide his face? Maybe he's super ugly."

I cringe at the female's words, then chuckle to myself. We are two wholly different species. Maybe these females would consider me ugly.

I gaze at the humans around me with interest. They aren't that different from me,

though. While many have covered up their bodies against the cold, some wear shorter-length garments. They lack any glowing markings. Their skin comes in a wider range of hues—some are red, pink, white, and even dark browns. My own people tend to all have grey-toned skins, though some are slightly lighter or darker than others. Their hair is also far more varied. Rather than my long dark strands that fall down my back, theirs come in many dazzling hues. It seems that the females of the species take time styling their strands, arranging them in a variety of ways.

It's all rather overwhelming. More so at just how many females are casually walking around me. I've never seen so many in one place before. My tribe is well secured and well fortified, but even we don't have this many females on the planet.

Is this what it was like in the past, to walk among so many females so casually and relaxed?

Relaxed? I'm far from relaxed. I keep sniffing the air, searching for any threats. With so many bodies pressed around, it's hard to isolate any singular source. This would be easier with someone watching my back, helping to track potential threats. But then, perhaps that's the point of this challenge - to prove I don't need anyone else. To prove that I am capable on my own - because then my father will truly think that I am worthy of ruling our people. Won't he?

I breathe deeply, isolating the scent of a harkcana, lingering just out of reach. I'm about to track them down when the scent's owner comes to me.

A small human female tugs at the sleeve of my cloak. She peers up at me with frightened, yet determined eyes, and asks, "Do you know why the market is so busy today?"

I tilt my head, considering her question. Will she even be able to understand my words? I guess there's no harm in trying—you know, other than being revealed



within their midsts and likely captured.

“Many have been recalled into the town’s walls. Most likely for your safety. The leaders fear an attack, and rightly so.”

It’s amazing what you learn when you just listen to those around you talking.

The female stares up at me in shock. She’s only just realized who I am, that I do not belong here in this world with her.

“Hello, little human female,” I whisper to her, hoping that if I speak softly enough, I won’t startle her. Perhaps this is a good learning opportunity for her though. A female should never be without a guard. “Be careful, little female. There are many males that would love to have your company, and not all are good.”

The harkcana scent flitters across my senses again. I scrunch my nose, searching for it. My eyes widen when I realize it’s coming from her. “I see you have already been claimed. Strange that your mate allows you to walk so freely among males without his protection.”

The expression upon her face is absolute devastation. I do not need to know this species well to witness her absolute heartbreak.

I did not mean to bring up painful memories for this female. I can only hope she is well cared for in her mate’s absence. I breathe in deep, a strange sense of guilt filling me at seeing her vulnerability and knowing I caused it, but something more alluring fills my senses.

Another female joins the first. This one’s skin is much darker, and instead of the fire-colored hair, hers is just as dark as mine. It’s frizzy, though, with tiny curls flying in all directions. I desperately get the urge to slide my fingers through the strands.

Would they cling to me, as she would, as I held her naked body close and...

I growl, absolutely shocked. Where did that thought come from? Since when have I ever felt such overwhelming attraction?

The female's dark face pales, though not as much as her companion's. "Where did he come from? Since when did aliens-"

The fiery-haired female turns to her friend, reassuring her, "Don't worry, Maya. The nice gentleman was just letting me know there's a town meeting later today."

"Nice? Gentleman?" Maya stammers. She gazes up at me with dark eyes, looking so much like a defenseless halvi that I want to just gather her in my arms and promise to keep her safe.

Their conversation finally clicks with me. Me? A nice and gentle male? My shoulders shake with silent laughter. If given the chance, Maya might soon learn that gentle isn't always the best. My little halvi will soon beg for me to be rougher with her, especially when my cock is pounding deep inside of her.

"You can trust him," the flame-haired female says, pulling her friend closer.

Yes, she can. Always. I will never allow a female to come to harm, especially one under my protection. Because she is; this female will be mine.

My attraction to this female is so unexpected and strong, that I fear I might do something stupid just to impress her.

"Sir, we need your help," the females tell me.

Yeah, I'm going to do something stupid, I just know it.

### Chapter Five

MAYA

I 'm back to running for my life, only this time I'm not totally panicking.

All I can say is that I'm glad I'm not also screaming like a banshee like the women around me. Seriously? Why do some people scream when it's unnecessary? We get it, you're scared! But you're only going to draw attention toward yourself.

Instead of running toward the Hunters and other security officers, I set my sights on something further in the distance. The communication tower. If I want to save my friends, then I need to find out what's going on.

Sure, the axe-wielding giants pose a threat, but I have to believe they are here for Ariana. And the colony trained Hunters for a reason; to keep the beasts at bay.

Within seconds I'm slipping through the small alleyways between buildings.

The patchy light blue grass flies beneath my leather shoes. My feet slide through the mud, and I feel the splatter of near-freezing mud hit the backs of my arms. I just know that the back of my skirt is going to be soaked through by the end of the day.

Why didn't we build nice, neat gardens? Raised planter beds? Or better yet, garden paths that I could run along. Instead, I have icy blades of tall grass ripping at the hem of my skirt and branches of alien trees slapping me in the face. It really feels like this whole 'settle on an alien planet thing' is not meant to be permanent, a facade to keep

us placated as something sinister goes on beneath our feet.

My mind is a jumble of impossibilities and I feel completely overwhelmed.

Aliens! The planet is supposed to be empty of sentient life. The government checked... Didn't they?

Now that I think about it, doubts are surfacing. It wouldn't be the first time someone lied to me. Just more things for me to uncover.

Sweat breaks over my skin from exertion; I ignore it. I push through it. I funnel all my anger and desperation and pain into reaching my destination.

The control tower rises up ahead of me. If I'm lucky the commotion has caused the guards there to abandon the tower. It's my one chance to sneak in and actually hack the mainframe!

I've always kind of wanted to say that line.

The direct opposite of me right now. I'm flushed, my ankle-length skirt keeps catching on things, and I'm sweating up a storm. I'm pretty sure that with the way my curly black hair is frizzing around my face, I look ridiculous.

I slam into the side of the stone building.

I'm also not sneaky at all. I'm like the direct opposite of some sort of superhero.

My goal is in sight. I just have to get past the colony walls; huge towering stone and wood barricades that keep the alien wildlife locked out. Or us humans locked in...

I rest my hand against the building wall, clutching my beloved tablet to my chest as I

gasp for air.

Apparently, I'm not even as fit as I thought I was. All those days sitting at a desk, coding the colony's computer systems and helping to design the tools necessary for living on Atraxis has caught up to me.

As soon as I am not so close to passing out from a lack of oxygen, I peer around the corner of the building. Before me is the second colony gate. This one is tiny compared to the main gate. It's meant merely as a maintenance gate rather than for heavy machines to drive through. In fact, I'm not even sure most of the colonists even know about it. I do, since I had to help set up the security access for it.

"Why even bother?" I hiss through my teeth, talking quietly to myself, "If you don't bother actually closing the door!"

Still, my shoulders relax ever so slightly. At least I don't have to hack my way through that exit.

Never underestimate a simple computer engineer. I've taken more coding classes than most, especially as a female working in a male's world. Hacking the computer system wasn't that hard, especially when you're the one who helped build it. When I'd looked into Ariana's situation, I had discovered that she didn't have a debt like we'd been led to believe. In fact, she was rich. Like, filthy, filthy rich.

The colony financial manager, Walter, had been lying to everyone. And we just believed him. Worse, the communications between him and several colony council members had implied they knew what he was doing all along.

Normally I'd be panicking right about now. Running away in fear, perhaps? If I was able to, at least. But fury causes my heart to pound, and determination fills my head.

Anger must be the thing that drives people forward against all hope. And I am really angry right about now.

Glancing around, I can't see anyone. As I expected, everyone's either rushed toward the commotion or sprinted away from it. Sure enough, I can hear plenty of screaming in the distance. A chill runs down my spine at the bloodcurdling cries.

Please, God, let Ariana be okay. All I've got left in this world are my friends.

Hiking up my skirts, I dash through the swinging gate and to freedom. The walls disappear behind me, and the alien forest rises up before me. Tall, pastel blue and pink trees rise up before me. They tower over me, so different from the forests on Earth. It's a reminder of how I have to make this work. I have no other choice.

Atraxis is my home now. I have to stand up for what I want. And that begins with not letting people get away with lying.

I hurry down the mud path toward the control tower. No one's bothered to lay bricks or make a proper path since only a few security guards come out here. It's a small stone building with a huge metal antenna rising into the air from on top of it. Not conspicuous at all... Like seriously... the council insisted we build the walls, and it's pretty safe to assume that they feared an attack. So why did they not bother to build a wall around one of the most important buildings we have — the one that controls our communications and technology?

Oh, that's right. A lot of people just don't understand technology and its requirements. They think it just works. Like it's magic. That concept of "plug and play". They don't understand the hours and days of upkeep required. They don't witness the frustrating nights, staying up late trying to figure out the bugs in the code, how it all comes down to a comma in the wrong place...

I duck my head and glare into the darkened interior. My hands are shaking, and it's definitely because I am so angry. Not scared at all.

I'm angry that people don't take the time to see me. I'm angry that people think they can just do whatever they want and get away with it. I'm angry because I moved to this planet for a fresh start, and less than a year in someone's already gone and ruined it.

Seeing no one here, I slip inside.

"Don't turn on the lights," I whisper to myself as I move deeper into the room. "The guards will see the lights and come to investigate. Just gotta pretend I'm not here. I'm invisible. I'm a ghost. Ohhhh!"

My voice echoes, bouncing off walls and returning to me with distortion. I shiver. Yep, that's definitely from the cold, not my quickly crumbling nerves of steel. Why did I have to mention ghosts? Of all things, going into a dark room in a land where actual monsters lurk... Am I trying to freak myself out on purpose?

Gripping my beloved tablet with white fingers, I rush toward the dimly lit bank of computer screens.

I breathe a sigh of relief when they power on, their screens dispelling the shadows in the room.

Maybe I should have turned on the lights after all.

Quickly, I'm connecting the wire between my tablet and the computers, plugging it in. My fingers fly over the screen, activating apps. The very apps that I used to hack the system in the first place. Seems that no one's caught on to my illicit activities, yet.

My brown eyes widen as I stare at the screen in disbelief. Documents flash before my eyes. Emails and communication reports. Photographs of various aliens flash across the screen, some I am now familiar with like the giant green orcs invading our village, while others are completely, well for lack of a better word, alien.

My attention gets snagged by the blueprints and maps. I tap on the pictures, bringing them up on my tablet's screen so I can get a better look at them. I recognize the area, the same snaking river that runs through this region that makes up a fjord. I can clearly see where the colony is located... but what confuses me are the marks on the maps. The same symbols for buildings are in multiple places.

But, there's only one colony. Are these future planned building locations?

"Oh wow, these are existing buildings," I say to myself. "But... but... they are massive! And so many."

My fingers flick through the images and documents. Land scans, structural analysis, even several communications... all proving that the buildings are pre-existing structures.

The sounds of talking from outside are the only warning I get. I look around, panicking now, for a place to hide. The room is just one wall of computers and a single chair. Of course, there are no other doors. Of course, my luck decides to run out right now.

I'm trapped.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Six

#### VOLAN

There is chaos all around me. One moment my little halvi is by my side, and the next I see her retreating with her fellow beings. Good, at least she will be safe.

I grin. I'll let my little one run, for now. Soon I will chase her down.

But first, I will ensure that none will follow us. When I catch her, I intend to take my time with her.

There is nothing better than sating the bloodlust with a different kind of lust when your entire body is a thrum of energy, when every nerve is alive.

Harkcana push their way into the village, shoving aside tables filled with crafts and foods. I tilt my head, studying them, as they roar at the frightened humans. This doesn't appear to be a normal raid. They have plenty of opportunities to lash out with their weapons, but they don't. They intimidate rather than harm, which to some degree lends itself to my theories that other races aren't wholly consumed by darkness.

Several human males dash past me, drawing their own weapons. I watch as electricity arcs off the tips, sizzling in the air. They are fools for drawing such dangerous weapons so close to fleeing females, but it's clear that many feel desperate. The scent of fear is pungent as it fills the air around me.

I step back as the two forces clash. Occasionally, I sidestep so that a fleeing human may get past me, squealing all the way. So very few of these humans have the training to fight. A fissure of concern runs through me for Maya. Her friend said they needed my help. Is a male threatening them in some way—a harkcana or a human?

I yelp when a flash of gold lands only a short distance from me. It's there and gone again before I can draw my own weapon. I stare up at the sky in disbelief as a male drakoon flies off with a female in his arms. The last thing I expected to ever see was a drakoon working with a harkcana; they have a love-hate relationship—the drakoon hate how the harkcana love to raid their supplies. Though, given the way the drakoon frantically flies away, I suspect he simply saw an opportunity to snatch a female and took it.

Which reminds me why I came here... for a female. Not just any female. I want my halvi, Maya.

I watch as the battle starts to favor the humans. They simply have more warriors and better technology. The harkcana favor their battle axes and spears, many no longer powered by electricity.

It seems like Maya's friend was taken from her mate. The harkcana are here to recover what is theirs, rightfully so. Given the way the fiery female struggles with a nearby human male, casting longing looks towards the green brutes, this belief is cemented in my mind.

All this time, not a single being has paid attention to me. I've stood here, simply watching and observing. And I've learned so much. The thrill of battle runs through my body, tingling at my fingertips. I itch to join in, to fight. It's been so long. When was the last time I was permitted to join in a fight pit?

I draw a simple knife from a sheath at my waist and get to work. I slip stealthily

through the crowd, slicing and cutting down my foes. I am not a brutal male. If I can disarm my enemy without needless slaughter, I do so. A quick cut at a wrist, slicing through the muscles he uses to grip his weapons. He'll likely recover if his people treat him. A few I'm forced to kill, as they come close to raising their own weapons on me.

The thrill of the battle rushes through me. My blood pumps with it, the very lifeblood that makes my people seek out release in the fight pits.

"Finally!" I throw back my hood and laugh. Finally, I get to fight again. My father has forced me to deny my very nature for too long. I need to fight. I want to fight. The simple feeling of my muscles burning, my breaths short. I love how my blade meets my opponents, and how we practically dance around each other.

"We witness the prowess of these human warriors. I've been eagerly anticipating this day," I exclaim. I thought coming to the surface would be a death sentence, but I'm having the time of my life.

Only, there's one thing missing. One thing I need. I look over at the harkcana leader, who now stares at me as if I am a madman.

Given the pure joy that's running through my veins right now, perhaps I am.

"But now it's time for me to claim my mate," I tell him. Because there's no denying it. I feel a pull toward Maya that I haven't felt for any of the females I've ever met. I want her. She will be mine.

I wink at him, a harkcana expression I have learned from watching their species interact at the fight pits. I believe it means good luck. The male must not expect it from me, as he gazes back at me bewildered.

And with that, I chase after Maya.

She can run, but I will chase. She can hide, but I will find her.

I want this little female. For now, and forever.

And I always get what I want.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Seven

MAYA

Three guards stand before me, staring at me with fish faces—eyes wide, mouths in the shape of an ‘O’. None of us ever expected to find ourselves in a situation like this. I mean, it’s a small colony, who would have thought someone here was doing illicit activities?

Until a couple of days ago, I certainly didn’t.

“I can explain,” I stammer.

Doesn’t the hero always say that, right before they get captured and framed by the villain? Not the best start to this situation.

Unfortunately, I don’t recognize any of the guards. They are all younger than me, probably haven’t even reached twenty years of age yet.

One of the males has his hair spiked and the tips dyed a bright green. He points towards me with a finger and with a voice loaded with uncertainty, he says, “You aren’t supposed to be in here. I think we need to arrest you.”

I clutch my tablet closer to me as if I can use it as a shield. Still, given the way he seems unsure about the situation, maybe I can still take control here. As long as I don’t panic.

“Is that a question?” I ask green-tips. “You think you need to arrest me?”

He glances, unhelpfully, back at his companions.

“I’m just here to do some maintenance,” I further impress upon him. “Didn’t they tell you that I was coming today?”

Maybe if I buy myself some time. I just need a couple of hours to analyze the data; I’m sure there’s enough incriminating evidence in what I’ve collected to keep me out of Atraxis jail. Wait, do we even have a jail? Will Commander Davis be forced to throw me into, what, a bathroom or a closet?

“Maintenance?” The green-tipped boy squeaks. “You decided to do maintenance right when a bunch of aliens attack us. They’ve got swords!”

I raise my finger to say that I wasn’t aware of the aliens, but right as I do a scream cuts through the air. Yeah, that excuse isn’t going to cut it.

“I, ummm...” I stammer, trying to come up with any other reason why I might be in this room.

“No one’s allowed to enter this room,” the boy advances toward me, his face settling with determination. “Once that problem out there has been sorted, I’m sure they’ll get to you. Until then, just come along quietly... and give me that tablet.”

Panic hits. If it were just this one kid alone, I might be able to take him. But three against one, there’s no way. The three of them clearly exercise and train, hoping to one day become glorified Hunters. Meanwhile, I sit at a desk all day. I can handle being arrested, but to have my tablet taken away from me...

“Just stay away from me!” I point my finger at green-tips. “There’s no reason to

make this into a big deal.”

His eyes narrow, and I instantly realize it was the wrong thing to say. Oh, wait! Hiding! I could have just said I was hiding. I’m supposed to be smart, so why does my brain always think of the best response after the fact?

I smack my forehead, probably looking like a complete madwoman. Wait, maybe I can actually pretend to be driven insane by fear... I could claim I hid from the aliens in here.

Green-tips isn’t having it. He reaches for me, grabbing hold of my arm with a strong grip that I have no hopes of breaking. Unlike my friend Christina, I have never once taken a self-defense course. I should have accepted her offer...

“Hey! Let go!” I shout. I duck and squirm to avoid the second guard grabbing at me as I try desperately to clutch my precious tablet to my chest. Green-tips grabs hold of me around my waist, lifting me clear off my feet. I buck against him, trying to break free, to no avail.

I’m panicking. A scream is building in my throat as I frantically fight my captors.

Then the room is cast in shadows.

We all stop moving to stare at the new guy, standing in the doorway. He’s so large, his body blocks the weak sunlight. For a brief, very brief moment, he’s surrounded by a halo of light like a savior. Then his body, his very skin, flashes and the room is lit up with blinding light. Immediately the spell over all of us breaks.

Suddenly everyone is screaming. The guards are shouting to each other about who should try to stop the alien from entering. Me? I’m shouting because I apparently can. Like what else am I supposed to do in this situation?

Oh, I get it now why people always scream and run around like headless chickens. Apparently, I'm in the same crowd after all.

One moment I'm surrounded by my guards trying to arrest me, and the next moment the room erupts in chaos. The third guard, the guy furthest from me, looks at me with a white face before he falls unconscious. He didn't even need a beating; he just fainted!

The second guard rushes toward the alien, who promptly backhands him across the face. The young male flies through the air, hitting the wall with a heavy thud. He looks up at us with a dazed expression, and is clearly second-guessing rushing at this alien again.

The alien stalks towards green-tips, whose hold on me is now shaking.

"Don't hurt him!" I cry out.

Human and alien alike turn to me with shocked expressions. I'm equally as stunned at my outburst. Just who am I defending exactly? My fellow man, or this extraterrestrial who's appeared out of nowhere?

"Me or him?" Green-tips cries out, his eyes ping-ponging between us so fast that he must be making himself dizzy at this point.

"I don't know!" I squeal in reply.

At this point in time are they both my enemy or are they both my allies? Enemy of my enemy and all that. Even if we fight off the alien, the guards are going to report me and all my goals will come crashing down. The alien... who knows what he wants? Given the way they are attacking our colony right now, I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him. To be clear, that's not very far—I'm pretty sure I've



established by now that I've never excelled at sports.

The alien seems to recover his senses first. He grabs hold of green-tips and slams a hand against his neck. Green-tips' whole body convulses and then he drops to the floor like a dead weight.

Oh, no.

Is he dead?

I'm frozen to the spot, staring at the crumpled guards. I probably should be running, but of course my brain chooses now to power down. I'm like a computer - I work most of the time, but when you need to do something right now, I'm slow as heck.

Green-tips' chest rises and falls, and I find my own breath gushing out of me with relief. He's alive!

"Female?"

Pale blue eyes and a gray face fill my vision. I gasp and stumble away from the alien. At some point, he has knelt before me, and is now trying to get a good look at my face. His long black hair drapes over one shoulder, matching the light dusting of a beard on his cheeks.

"Female, are you hurt? Do you need medicine?"

"Medicine? You just attacked us! Why are you offering me medicine?" I laugh shrilly as my mind tries to process the contradictions of his words and his actions.

"These males were harming you. I heard you screaming," he replies. He holds up his hands in the Galactic Common sign of peace. Funny how so many species consider

holding hands out in front of them as a sign of trust. Makes me briefly wonder what a species with multiple tentacles does.

It clicks with me that he's not speaking English, or even Intergalactic Common. The translator that was surgically implanted behind my ear when I was a child is processing his words. It feels like it's been years since I heard the device overlay what I was hearing through my ears with the translated words. It's a pretty high-tech model, at least it was back in the day, and even somewhat simulates the husky and deep timbre of his voice.

I kind of want to scream and shout at him for busting in here, but he's not wrong. From an outsider's perspective, the four of us humans were making a fair bit of noise. If he thought he came in to help me, rescue me from some unpleasant and unthinkable situation...

"Thank you," I say.

The alien's eyes widen and he looks absolutely shocked that I might thank him. The lights on his body pulse, lighting up the area around us with a soft glow.

Oh, at first I thought he was wearing some cool futuristic sci-fi uniform with LED lights running through it all... but instead the lights look like they are coming from beneath his skin.

His very bare skin.

I tilt my head, considering this male before me properly. Even kneeling, his head is at the height of my own. I'm not exactly tall, but this guy must tower over me when standing. His skin is more gray than a human's, like someone desaturated the color out of a photograph. His aquamarine eyes watch me with an intensity that glows, literally. It nearly matches the constant pulsing and flashing of the lines along his

body. If they just glowed, I would have thought someone painted glow-stick paint on him. But no, they pulse in drifting waves down his neck, shoulders, and abs.

“Why are you naked?” I blurt out. My cheeks burn with embarrassment... I blink, realizing belatedly that my whole body is heating up in this guy’s presence.

The male tilts his head, then his lips peel back in a grin. My heart rate picks up. It’s because he scares me, it’s definitely not because he’s drop-dead gorgeous. His high cheekbones, and that flop of long, sleek black hair that falls over his face...he could rival a high-end fashion model.

“I am not,” he smirks at me. He waves a hand, encompassing his entire body, showing me that he does indeed still wear dark-colored pants and leather boots. Across his chest is a leather strap, which holds several small blades and pouches, and a larger strap belted low on his waist.

He wiggles his eyebrows at me, as if saying that he knows I was caught staring at his highly detailed wash-board abs and that V shape that leads your eye directly downwards...

I force my eyes back to his face. Now is not the time to be checking out a guy, not even a sexy alien guy. I have a job to do. Geez, I have a duty to every human in the colony. I need to figure out what the council is hiding, and expose each and every one of those dirty liars.

Now that I’m really studying him, is he the same male that Ariana spoke to in the marketplace? Did he follow me all the way out here?

I glance down at my tablet and the map displayed upon the screen, where one symbol is larger than any other—this here is my destination. It’s my fate.

I move to walk past him, but he just stands there staring down at me.

“Umm... I’m going to leave now,” I tell him. I bite the inside of my cheek as I try to find the courage to look up, and up, at his face. This close up he’s huge and intimidating, even if he did just rescue me.

Still, he doesn’t budge at all. He’s blocking the only way out.

I sigh. Aliens! There’s clearly some cultural misunderstanding going on. If he’s expecting me to pay him credits for coming to my aid, then he’s got another think coming.

Unlike Ariana, I’m broke.

“I’ve got lots of things to do, you know how it is,” I tell him as I edge my way around his body and make my way toward the door. I’m not going to wait around on him to decide what he wants to do with his life.

I’ve got places to be. In fact, I’m already doing the math.

“If I walk about three miles an hour, and the map implies this location is what, maybe fifteen to twenty miles away then I can make it there and back again in probably two days,” I say to myself, already absorbed in the data and statistics of my quest. I have a quest!

“Where are you going?” The alien calls out to me as I step out through the communication tower’s door. I fiddle with my communicator, which is honestly just a fancy watch. With a few clicks, I open the compass app, and spin on the spot as I try to gain my bearings. To him, I probably look like I’m doing some weird dance ritual.

“It’s a lovely day out today. You know, the sun’s out, there are only a couple of dark,

stormy clouds in the distance. Perfect day for non-existent aliens to attack the colony. I was just thinking of adding a walk in the creepy forest to the list,” I reply. I barely lift my eyes from my beloved tablet. As long as I have it, I’m fine. And I thankfully don’t need to worry about its battery dying since its case has several tiny, but powerful, solar panels built in.

I pat all my pockets. I have maybe sewn just a few extra ones into my skirt’s lining. In one, I have my small water bottle and water filtration straw. It weighs the fabric down heavily, but I don’t go anywhere without it. My life revolves around my bottle and my digital tablet—the only things I need to survive. Finally, my hand lands on the pocket holding a small slingshot. It’s not mine, meant as a gift for my friend Chrissy who’s always wanting to explore the wilds, but it seems I have more need of it right now.

I grin when my compass finally settles, and the companion app on my tablet starts planning out a route across the alien terrain. It’s not quite as straight as I had hoped, though. In fact, it twists and turns a lot around the mountain. That two-day jaunt might turn into three at this rate. Better get going. I’ll collect water and forage for food along the way. I’m sure I can figure out what’s safe to eat along the way, as long as I don’t touch the mushrooms. Mushrooms are universally considered dangerous, right?

Plus, yuck.

I spare a glance back at Eve’s Rest Village. If I had the opportunity, I’d go back for Stacy. She’s the youngest of my friends, barely even an adult. Thankfully she wasn’t due to meet us today at the marketplace, opting to go on some date with someone closer to her age. Of course, I had planned to spy on her, just to make sure that she was safe, at least before Ariana had shown up again...

Only a few days ago, life was somewhat simple. Keeping my friends close, should

anything happen to them, and just doing my routine coding. How did my life turn so hectic and dangerous, so fast?

But then again, maybe I shouldn't take Stacy with me. I'm about to set out on some quest across an alien wilderness. She doesn't need me dragging her into this mess, no matter how much I wish I had her support. The whole point of me doing this is to keep her safe.

Stacy will be better off staying at the colony. Once this is all over and done, I'll tell her of my adventure.

Firming my resolve, and gripping my tablet between white, shaking fingers, I start following the dotted GPS line.

This is my adventure.

Just watch, I'm going to be the heroine of this story.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Eight

#### VOLAN

I called this little human my mate. In the middle of the battle, surrounded by my enemies, bloodlust had ridden me hard. I'm familiar with life-and-death moments thanks to patrolling the kingdom's borders with other warriors, ensuring peace. I'm used to protecting those weaker than me...but this moment felt remarkably different. She was there. Not just another female, but her. An instinctual response, a snap decision, propelled me to chase after her. To claim her and declare to the world that she was mine and mine alone.

She isn't. But she could be, a little voice whispers in my mind. I'm a prince. I work hard for my people. I deserve this. I deserve her. It'd be easy to just tell her who I am, to have her fall at my feet and promise me her body and soul...

But then she'd just be like everyone else. I wouldn't know if she'd be with me because she wants me, or if it's because I'm a means to an end.

And so I follow the human in a thought-fueled daze as she chooses to run not towards her village but away from it. Everything about this female intrigues me and draws me in; her smell, her appearance, even her behavior. I find myself wanting to know more about her. No, I want to know everything about her.

It's clear Maya isn't accustomed to traveling outside the safety of her tribe's walls. Her long dress scrapes on the ground, catching impossibly at what seems every root and rock. Her feet slip in icy patches unmelted beneath the thick tree canopies. She

grumbles constantly.

I keep her in my sight, watching over her closely. It disturbs me how confidently she walks through the undergrowth, making so much noise, as if she is completely oblivious to the dangers that lurk on the surface. She doesn't carry provisions with her, and unless the box she carries is some sort of formidable weapon—it might be—she is entirely unprepared to defend herself.

Occasionally, Maya glances over her shoulder and shoots me a glare, but does little else. For each of my steps, she takes nearly three. There is little hope that my little human will ever be able to outrun me. Even if she did, I'd hunt her down endlessly until I had her back in my grasp.

Maya's dress once again snags on the undergrowth. She tugs at it with her hands and screams in frustration. I try to hold back my chuckle, but her roar of anger was perhaps the cutest thing I've ever seen. She truly appears like an angered halvi.

Of course, she hears my laughter, and she shoots me a glare that's as icy as our surroundings. Seeing it as the perfect opportunity to engage her in conversation, I jog to her side.

“Why are we running?” I ask her.

“Maybe I'm running from you!” Maya snaps at me. She tugs on her dress repeatedly, ripping the thick material. I sigh. If she continues like this, the material will be completely ruined. Fabric isn't the easiest to come by, even for my people, and it's best to reuse it whenever possible.

I kneel before her and slip a blade free from its sheath around my thigh. Maya sucks in a quiet breath between her lips, and her whole body goes still.



I hate how she does not trust me in this moment. Had I truly intended her harm, she would have no hope at defending herself. She is small, fragile, delicate...she needs a strong warrior to protect and care for her.

She needs me.

I don't find myself objecting to the idea. If I take her back to my home, then I will be able to care for her properly there. She will want for nothing. I want to learn just what makes her smile, all the while spending countless hours in her company.

But first, I have to actually get her back to my tiny kingdom, ideally without me throwing her over my shoulder. It's an appealing thought, but somehow I doubt this courageous female would appreciate the move.

Deep in thought, I slice through the material until it reaches her knees, then I carefully rip the fabric along the grain until it pulls free. The action causes my arms to encircle her, my fingers brushing against the smooth skin of her legs. My face is close to her hips, and her scent is so alluring...

Maya places her hands on my shoulders to steady herself.

"What are you?" she asks me, scowling down at me with a serious expression. For just a brief moment, she appears so vulnerable, like a youngling who's lost and searching for their home. There's a fear behind her eyes that I find myself wanting to dispel. I long to pull her close and tell her that she will be safe with me, that I will protect her even at the cost of my own life.

I place a hand over my beating heart and gasp. "How rude! You don't just go asking a male what species he is! You don't see me commenting on your deliciously soft skin, or your lack of a glow."

To emphasize my point, my fingers circle around her ankle and I run my hand up her leg, stroking up the length of her calf.

I look at Maya's face as she rolls her eyes. She kicks my hand away, not unkindly.

I stand up, dusting off my knees. With an overly exaggerated sigh, as if I am put out to discuss this information with her, I tell her, "I am a sulthari. My people live not far from here."

I enjoy the way her lips quirk at my antics. I'm a little surprised at just how much pleasure I feel when she smiles up at me.

"Tell me, little human, why is it you are unafraid of me, yet the rest of your people run from me?"

Maya accepts my offering of the cut hem of her dress. She frowns at it for a moment before wrapping it around her neck like a scarf and tying it off. She considers me for a long moment as she gathers the one thing she carried into the forest with her—a thin, rectangular device with a glowing screen.

"Perhaps they run because you and the green guys just stormed into our settlement? Or maybe it's that you kidnapped Ariana in the first place."

"I don't know this Ariana, and I certainly did not come here with the harkcana. In fact, if you recall, I was inside your village long before they arrived," I tell her honestly. If I can gain her trust, perhaps she will follow me into the tunnels beneath the surface without hesitation.

She narrows her eyes at me for a long moment. "Like I said, thank you for helping out with the guards, but I have things to do, places to be now, so if you don't mind..."

I do mind, but I don't let the words slip through my teeth. Maya will be mine, and I always get what I want. I'm not easily distracted once I've made up my mind.

I'm impressed that the female seems so determined to ignore me. The few females of my kingdom are overjoyed to be in my presence, whereas this female seems to not care at all for me. She pulls out her device and taps at it with delicate fingertips. The screen lights up with a faint glow.

For a brief moment my heart jolts, thinking she is flashing her luminae for me...but no, it's just a result of her technology. I've seen devices like this, but the portable ones are rare. My father barely ever lets them out of his sight, especially since they can control so much of our tiny kingdom with a few touches to their screens.

I step close to her, feeling the warmth of her body gently caressing my front. It would not be hard to take her in my arms right now...instead, I lean over her, peeking over her shoulder at whatever she is doing on her device. Given how she clutches it so tightly, it must hold the answer to the puzzle of my little halvi. Why isn't she afraid of me? Why is she choosing to run into the wilderness on her own?

My breath fans across the little female's neck, ruffling her soft hair. She jumps, practically throwing herself away from me. It's as if she's only just noticed my presence; she was so absorbed in her technology. Her eyes look at me wide, fearful, before she masks the expression with a glare.

"Do you mind?" she practically spits the words out at me. "I've got things to do. I really don't need you hanging around and slowing me down."

I snort. My halvi thinks that I will be the one to slow her down? When Maya puts her hands on her wide hips and glares at me fiercely, I can't hold my laughter back anymore. My head tilts as I laugh, and laugh some more.

With a huff, Maya pushes past me. She walks far more easily this time, right until she slides in the mud again.

I chuckle as I follow her. My halvi is stubborn and determined. I will enjoy learning just how far my human will bend, just how flexible she is as I...

I growl, adjusting my stiffening cock within my trousers so that it doesn't bulge out so visibly. You do not gain the trust of a female by walking around her with a proud erection, no matter how attractive either of you might be.

"You never explained why you personally are not afraid of me, little female," I call after her as I follow in her footsteps. I'm all too aware of how she doesn't mind her surroundings, instead focusing heavily on her device as she walks. It would be all too easy for a predator to stalk her...like I am now.

"Most humans have never met aliens, so they tend to be a bit of a scary first experience. Especially when they are waving weapons around and acting like barbarians," she gives me a pointed look that just leaves me smirking. She scowls down at her tablet for a moment, before dimming the screen and slipping it into the pocket of her skirt. Finally, she admits, "And you aren't the first alien I've met."

She gives me a slow look, her gaze caressing from my dark locks of hair down to my thick boots. Everywhere her eyes wander, my skin heats and my luminae flares. It's almost as if she's touching me with her fingers... "I'm not aware of your race though. For what it's worth, I'm glad my translator has your speech files though. Talking with you would be, well, pretty impossible otherwise. At least my parents didn't cheap out in that aspect."

Her lips twist in a rueful smile. Perhaps she is like me, never quite living up to her parents' expectations. The revelation has me pausing, considering her in a new light. She's more than just a simple female to possess. Suddenly, she's interesting to me in

a way that no one ever has been before.

I will never admit it to anyone, but I'm lonely. I lack a companion that I can talk freely with, one who understands me. Most of my people interact with me not for who I am, but for who I will be one day soon. Even Tanis is reserved around me when I truly wish he'd relax.

I desperately want to ask her more about her parents, but cycles of training have taught me that such a conversation would likely not go well between two complete strangers. There's a story there, one that I hope she will one day feel comfortable enough to reveal.

"Ah, so you are at least aware of other species," I reply, doing my best to direct our conversation to slightly safer topics.

Maya nods. "Before I left Earth, I was a tier five citizen. I've had a couple of chances to interact with different species. Nearly married one once." She gives me a brief glance before she continues talking. Her lips quirk. "You're not the scariest male I've ever seen."

I huff in disbelief, a jolt of frustration—no, jealousy running through my body. This female is absolutely confounding!

"Well, you should be scared of me," I tell her with all seriousness. Sure, I don't look like Tanis who towers over even me, and I lack his muscular build, but compared to her tiny frame I must appear impressive. Many fear me, even Tanis, yet she taunts me. Me! I'd say she's standing tall and proud, just she is still so much smaller than I am.

Maya gives me a secret smile, her eyes glittering. Then she turns, leaving me standing in absolute bewilderment.

“Maybe I am just acting friendly so you are unafraid of me,” I call after her. Immediately I curse at myself. Why did I say that? Why did I give her the impression she can’t trust me and my words. The whole point is to gain her trust, to take her home...

Why does this female make me feel like a youngling determined to impress her, to make her see me as strong and capable of protecting her? I am strong and hold a powerful position in sulthari court. She should be impressed. I shouldn’t need to try, I just am.

Maya glances at me, brow furrowed.

“I do not wish to scare you though,” I quickly assure her. “I am merely pointing out my better qualities. You should consider me an escort, a protector. After all, your friend asked me for help, so I will do so.”

Maya’s steps falter, and for a brief moment a flash of pain crosses her eyes. In a moment it’s gone, replaced with her stern resolve and determination.

“You’ve already helped me with those three guards, so thank you,” Maya replies stiffly. “I don’t expect you to accompany me any further. I’m sure you are busy yourself.”

I shrug, feeling the sting of how she doesn’t want me around. I am honestly enjoying her company, far more than I thought I would. Our conversations aren’t free-flowing or unguarded, but they are engaging. “Not busy enough to abandon your side in the middle of the wilderness. So what are we doing?”

“I am going for a walk,” Maya replies rather elusively, brushing me off. To emphasize her point, she changes direction slightly and sets off again with a firm step, this time avoiding slipping in the icy mud puddles.

Ah, but I won't be having that. I want her to tell me everything. I want her to open up to me, trust me, and give me all of herself.

"A walk usually implies a destination. So where are we headed?"

Maya gives me a long, considering glance. She doesn't have markings for me to gauge her emotions, but thankfully her face is equally expressive. Eventually, she gives a long, suffering sigh. She pulls her device out of her skirt pocket and flicks the screen to life. She holds it out to me, though the tightness of her grip implies she's not going to hand it over completely.

"This is the map of the area. I'm going to this building here," she taps at the location with a delicate finger and long fingernail.

I stare down at what she has shown me for a long moment. I know this location well; all my people do. It's probably the one reason that my people have maintained our power for so long on this blasted planet.

"Why do you want to go there?" I ask her, keeping my voice as even as possible. Curiosity burns at me how she came by this map, though I guess it was only a matter of time before the location was leaked to the surface dwellers; everyone panders for strength and control in this world, and my people are the same.

Maya bites her lip, her eyes flickering between her tablet and mine, indecisive. I'm a stranger to her, and she doesn't know if she can trust me. Wise, for not trusting a stranger... I'm more startled by how strongly I want her to trust me.

"I know this location very well. It's only accessible by a couple of select tunnels, and I'd guess that only a few know how to access it. Conveniently for you, I'm one of them."

I don't voice how only a few souls have permission to go anywhere near the location. It's heavily guarded. Only the highest ranked warriors, ones who have proven themselves to our people, have the privilege of patrolling the tunnels nearby for intruders. Only those who are infinitely trusted.

"Can you take me there?" She asks me, her voice hesitant as if she's afraid to hear the answer.

I hesitate. What purpose does this little female have going there? I bite my tongue, refusing to voice my myriad of questions. I rub my chest, fighting this strange stem of jealousy at the thought she does this for another. I'll get answers, eventually, I always do. With a female such as her, I'm sure I can find some creative ways to get her to scream and spill...and maybe even beg.

The little female steps back, eyes narrowing on me.

"I can," I tell her quickly, seeing her withdrawal. Because I need a female. Any female, really, but this one's presence screams at me until she's all I can notice. She's the one I want.

What are the chances of coming across a female willing to leave her territory, unescorted even? It'd hardly take any effort at all to guide her where I need her. I can take her home with me, stand her before my father and the council, and prove that I am ready to lead my people.

Maya will never reach her destination. Even if I wanted to take her there, it would be foolish. It would put her at risk, and make her people an enemy of mine. She will never step foot in that place.

I stare into Maya's eyes and smile. It feels forced.



“I can take you exactly where you need to be,” I tell her, my voice soft.

A look of relief crosses her face, before she smiles up at me. Her expression is stunning, brightening my day.

Her face dims, and quickly she returns to her determined scowl. She glares down at her portable technology device like it’s personally offended her.

As soon as her smile slips from her face, I find myself missing it. I long to see more of it, and I am a little shocked at my own determination to make her laugh again.

An uncomfortable and entirely unfamiliar emotion settles behind my breastbone. What have I possibly got to feel guilty about? I’m not lying to her, I tell myself. She wants to know about the underground kingdom—so I’ll be her personal guide. It feels wrong, even if what I do is in her best interest. In ours. She’s not happy here if she’s willing to run from safety into the wilderness. I’ll take her home with me, and I’ll keep her safe and spend my days pleasing her. She will want for nothing.

It’s just an added bonus that she’ll help me achieve everything that I’ve ever wanted. I needed to find a female that would return with me to my kingdom willingly. She’s practically asking me to take her there herself! This is a perfect arrangement. It’s not like she has to know about my father or my quest... All she needs to know is that I will watch over her, protect her from any danger...

I’ll lead her to my kingdom, and once I have her there, I’ll just keep her.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Nine

MAYA

This planet is one huge mystery, one that I am determined to solve. What are the chances, though, that my biggest source of information kept following me like some sort of lost puppy? More than that, he's actually agreed to lead me to where I need to go!

Am I going to use this to my advantage? You bet yourself I am!

Do I feel a little guilty about my plan, like I am using him? Sure, I do. But it's not like I am hiding my goal from him. It's not like we are trying to build some long-lasting relationship.

I just can't help but wonder what he wants from me in return. He's a complete and utter enigma. Especially since there is one absolutely massive gaping part of my knowledge about him that is really, really starting to bug me.

He's been following me for hours, chatting with me... and I have absolutely no idea what his name is!

How do you go about asking that? Do you just casually say, 'Oh by the way, after all these hours, I never actually asked you for your name'? Nope, I am not doing that. But... what choice do I have?

It's not like he carries around a name tag, and I certainly can't hack some server to

find out the information and save myself some face.

I come to a halt. My brain feels like it's going to explode. It's going round and round in circles trying to find ways to learn his name, only to get stuck on the fact that I'm so embarrassed to ask now. The tension buzzing inside of me grows with every second that passes.

The alien stops ahead of me, realizing that he's walked several paces away. Ever since he claimed to know an alternative way, a shorter way even, to my destination he's been leading the charge.

"Are you alright?" He asks me, looking back over his shoulder.

"Yes...No," I grind my teeth as I reply. I glare at the ground, unable to meet his eyes. My cheeks and neck feel hot as my embarrassment begins to slide through me.

I'm all too aware of him walking back to my side. There's something about him that calls to me, making me hyperaware of his presence, even from a distance. Probably because he's walking around in this chilly weather half-naked, like a complete and utter lunatic!

Of course, everything would be much easier if my body didn't react to him the way it does.

He steps close to me, coming to stand within my little bubble of personal space. He has this way of crowding close, setting my blood on fire... it's something I don't need right now.

Still, my body doesn't know that. Goosebumps erupt across my skin, my skin overly sensitive. His expression is so intent that I feel my core tighten. My breathing becomes heavy, and I do my best to not squirm beneath his inspection.

I fight the urge to say ‘my eyes are up here’. It’s not the first time I’ve caught a guy checking me out. As long as he looks but doesn’t touch, I don’t care what he does.

“What is the problem?” He asks. His hand rests casually on a large dagger sheathed at his hip, and his eyes flick from between me to scanning the surrounding trees. Even though he looks relaxed, I suspect he’s highly tense right now and ready to move at the slightest notice. That’s what a good hero would be like, at least. I’ve heard repeatedly how dangerous the creatures of Atraxis are, and I don’t doubt that his finely honed muscles are a result of living on the wild side a bit.

“I don’t know your name,” I mumble, my words so very quiet. Heat burns at my cheeks, prickling my skin. I wring my sweaty hands together, trying not to fidget under his inspection.

“What?” the alien asks, stepping closer.

“I don’t know your name,” my voice is barely a squeak. I can barely even hear myself talk.

My heart is pounding loud in my ears. Oh god, I can’t say this. I’ve totally set myself up for the most embarrassing moment in my life! My breath is stuttering from me in short bursts as panic begins to close in on me.

“Say again? I didn’t even know you humans could be this quiet.” His head tilts close to mine. His breath fans across my cheek, and I shiver at the contact.

“I don’t know your name!” I cry out, my control snapping. Like a rubber band stretched too far, my temper flings back violently in an attempt to mask my fear and panic.

The alien jumps back as if I’ve just attacked him. He looks at me with wide, shocked

eyes.

I did just shout at the top of my voice into his ear...

Suddenly, he throws his head back and laughs. More than laughs, he guffaws. Bent over at the hips, hands slapping knees as he gasps for breath.

He takes a long moment to calm himself. The whole time I stand before him, arms wrapped about myself, feeling absolutely miserable. I'm just thankful that my dark skin color doesn't show my blush much, otherwise, I'd be as red as a strawberry.

"I do not think I have ever had a female demand my name by shouting at me like that," he says as he wipes tears from his cheeks.

"Demand? I didn't demand it. It's just that I'm..." I heave a deep breath, trying to regain my composure and whatever is left of my dignity, "I just forgot it, is all."

"Do you easily forget things?"

"No! I have a great memory, and if it's that important I write it down on my tablet as well."

He looks at me with an assessing gaze. "Is that why you were so panicked? You thought you forgot my name?"

"I wasn't panicked... If you have to know, I was embarrassed, alright?"

"There's no need to fear, little Maya, you did not forget my name. I have not given it to you yet." His eyes turn warm, soft even as he looks at me. Of course, I want to just scream at him that I did not forget, but he's stuck on that point like I have some failing memory. I bite my tongue and turn from him. I'm sure I look like some

sulking child, but this sort of social interaction is beyond me. It's why I like computers so much - they are logical and without all the baggage of emotions.

He steps closer to me. I jump when his fingers curl around my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. A calloused thumb strokes the dip beneath my lip, and suddenly all my nerves are replaced with a different kind of tension. I'm hyper aware of how close he is, how his breath mingles with mine. His lips hover just above mine, looking remarkably pouty and soft. I wonder how they would feel pressed against mine. Would he kiss me softly, or with domineering passion?

"You can ask anything of me, little Maya," he says, his voice deep and husky. "I'm entirely yours to do with as you want."

My mouth feels dry. It's just nerves from him standing so close, I tell myself. His words just feel more intimate than they actually are - a fault of the translator, that's all.

My heart rate picks up, and my body stiffens... and why are my nipples tingling and growing hard?

I'm not attracted to this alien, am I?

Every part of my body aches.

"Volan," his voice is deep and husky.

It's enough of an interruption that my lust-fueled thoughts are thrown completely off track.

"Huh?"

“My name, little female, is Volan.”

“Volan?” I repeat, testing out the pronunciation.

This close up, I realize that he has very little white in his eyes. Instead of his pupils expanding and contracting like a human’s, his blue-colored iris have practically eclipsed his entire eye - and it’s beginning to glow.

I take a step back from him, shocked.

He’s an alien. I mean, that much is obvious. But it’s a clear wake-up call for me. How much do I know about him? Nothing. I can’t be fantasizing about him. If I’m honest to myself, I don’t even know how much I can trust him. He could just be like every other male in my life.

The light in Volan’s eyes immediately disappears, and a bored expression settles over his features. He looks upwards, notably studying the dark clouds that are gathering overhead. Not that long ago the sky was mostly clear, and now a gloom is settling on this land. A breeze blows past us and instead of refreshing, it cuts through my clothing and stabs at my skin with icy claws.

My heart rate skyrockets when he fiddles with the knot of his cloak near his neck. Somehow, it’s only just now occurred to me that I’ve followed this mysterious alien out into the middle of nowhere. I’m alone. I’m vulnerable. I’m an idiot.

What on Earth—on Atraxis, I mean—made me think this guy was trustworthy?

I gape at him when instead of throwing his cloak to the ground, he swings it about and throws it gracefully around my shoulders. His cloak came to his knees when he was wearing it, but on me the hem touches the ground.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I instinctively clutch the warm fabric about me.

I try my best to not stare at his rather exposed chest in front of me. His muscles are massive, flexing beneath his skin with each movement. It’s entirely too distracting. He’s too distracting.

“You are shivering,” Volan replies, one corner of his lip twitching as if he’s repressing the desire to smirk.

If he’s going to give me an excuse for my body’s reaction to him, I’m not going to deny the opportunity. I have no idea why I am responding the way I am. The flush of heat spreading through my body has got nothing to do with the heat in his gaze or how he makes me squirm.

“Thank you,” I let out a relieved breath. My reaction is entirely unexpected. Of course, I’ve experienced arousal before... just never with an alien. And definitely nothing this needy and desperate.

“We should continue the journey via the tunnels. They will lead to your destination, perhaps faster even. Plus, it will be much safer than staying out here on the surface, especially with this storm,” he says.

It’s a bit early for the season for a snowstorm, but I do not want to be caught out in the open if one happens. Getting wet in these cold temperatures is likely a death sentence.

“Oh,” is all I can manage to say, feeling equally awkward and embarrassed. It’s not like I wanted him to kiss me... I have a quest to focus on, after all. There’s no time for romance, I tell myself over and over again.

Still, as he starts walking ahead of me, leaving me to follow in his wake, I can’t help



but feel disappointed.

“Wait, what tunnels?”

### Chapter Ten

#### MAYA

The tunnels are dark.

They are also more cavernous than I expected. When Volan implied that this was the entrance to the building, I had expected stone floors and fluorescent lighting. Instead, I get rock walls, craggy crevices, and spiders.

“I think you’re going the wrong way,” I call out to Volan, who speed walks ahead of me. It seems he has no trouble seeing in the dark whatsoever. It’s certainly frustrating that each one of his steps seems to be at least two of mine. No, the male seems determined more than ever to race down these corridors towards our destination, not caring if I keep up.

Case in point, he’s already a pretty far distance ahead of me. As much as I hate to admit it, his presence in this darkness is soothing. Just a tiny bit, that is.

Trying to be discreet, I pull out my tablet and check the map. Sure enough, we are heading in the general direction of the building I marked earlier. I’ll have to check it often, I think to myself, as beneath the surface I have no sense of direction whatsoever. It’s not entirely reliable, but I quickly set my tablet to tracking mode. It’ll drain the battery much faster, but it’ll record each of my steps and determine the exact path that I have walked on. If Volan decides to abandon me, I’ll at least be able to make my way to freedom.

The thought of being trapped beneath the ground, in the darkness, slowly starving to death, makes my heart rate triple. For a moment I can swear blackness tinges my vision. Oh, that's right, because it's dark down here.

I shake my head, trying to get a grip on myself.

I've taken every necessary step I can right now.

"I'm prepared for this," I whisper to myself. "I've planned for absolutely every possible situation possible. No problem is going to sneak up on me."

Except for... maybe this one.

Just to emphasize how dark it is in here, I trip over an invisible rock. It was definitely not my own two feet. I swear I'm not that clumsy... I slam to my knees with a painful yelp, the jarring sensation traveling up my back. I grumble, slapping at the ground with my mounting frustration.

"Seriously?" I huff, glaring at the smooth floor beneath me. "I'm on some insane adventure into the middle of nowhere, probably surrounded by all manner of human-eating beasts, and I am felled by the first obstacle. What are the chances?"

Volan's legs fill my vision as he steps close. Hasn't this alien ever heard of personal space?

I'm forced to look up. He's tall by human standards. This close, I am forced to crane my neck. I definitely try to ignore the bulge in his pants and the way it seems to line up directly with my head.

My eyes meet his, and again I'm shocked at how it appears as if his pale blue eyes catch the light, appearing as if they are literally glowing. His gaze captures me. I feel

unable to glance away instead. There is this tension between us, like he wants something from me, and I can't quite identify what.

"Giving up already?" Volan asks me. His lips quirk at the corner, just a subtle twitch, as he laughs at my current state.

I glare up at him. It's not fair. Why does it have to be me that saves everyone from whatever conspiracy is going on? Of all people, I am the least likely to actually survive this adventure.

"I didn't expect it to be so dark in here," I tell him. I stand, brushing debris off my legs. "I kind of thought, given that you said this was supposed to be a building, there would be lights, you know?"

I grit my teeth. Who am I kidding? It wouldn't be so easy to just casually walk to my quest's destination. Maybe there aren't even buildings out here in the first place, and I'm just a fool for walking out into the wilderness alone, without a hunter, with only a strange alien to keep me company?

"You are wholly unsuited for this kind of lifestyle," he remarks with a nod of his head. "I am beginning to wonder how your species even survives on the surface. You are so small... and soft."

I ignore his comment. I am not soft. Sure, I might be a little pudgy...

"I'm just not used to such strenuous activity," I retort, my cheeks flaming with heat. I'm grateful that my dark skin hides my blush.

Volan's eyes drift over my brow, and I force my fingers to not wipe away the sweat gathered there. I am who I am, and should be proud of it, but still, I feel self-conscious of his inspection. Then his gaze dips slowly across my body, lingering on

my breasts and prominent hips. Suddenly his study of me feels less insulting and more invading and personal.

I bite the inside of my cheek, forcing myself to stand tall. I have no idea why it matters. Who cares what he thinks of me? He's only helping because Ariana asked him to, probably out of some sense of duty to protect females. It's not like I mean anything to him personally.

Volan raises a slow and taunting eyebrow at me. I'm more out of shape than I want to admit. This just goes rubbing salt in the wounds.

"Look, my job has me sitting all day long. It's hard enough to drag myself to the mess hall each evening for a meal as it is, let alone work out."

It's a pathetic excuse, I know, but it's all I've got. I'm one of the few programmers that were sent to Atraxis, and I've been working overtime to try and get all the systems up and running.

Irritation rises within me when Volan gives a small huff of amusement. He doesn't look down at me cruelly, but with soft eyes. Like he pities me, the thought rushes through my mind.

I bite my tongue, stopping myself from snapping at the one guy that's helping me. There's something about Volan that just gets on my nerves. I hate the way he pushes and prods me, getting in my space.

I especially hate the way that I am constantly aware of his presence.

"Let's just keep walking," I say. I take a deep breath, trying to dispel my mounting frustration. I'm in such a poor mood; everything about today, and my life lately, is going wrong. Why can't one thing work in my favor? Is it too much to ask?

Volan studies my face for a brief moment, his eyes flicking between mine, before he comments, “I’m becoming quite aware of how your species cannot see in the dark as well as mine.”

That’s all he says. No explanation why there are no lights. No sorry, I forgot to hit the switch because I’ve got some superhero vision.

I sigh deeply, and follow in his footsteps.

Unlike before where he scouted ahead, he walks slower and keeps pace with me.

With each moment that passes, I am able to see where I place each of my steps more easily. Now no invisible rocks can jump out at me... because rocks jump. My eyes widen as his very skin begins to glow a soft blue, forming long lines of banded light. I stare up at him in shock.

“Are you... are you just flashing like a Christmas tree?” I stumble over my words, knowing that is not the best way to ask someone about their body differences. Something about this guy has all logic flying out of my head. Still, lines and shapes are definitely beginning to become distinguishable across his body. He is one hundred percent glowing.

“I don’t know how you are doing this, but thank you.”

Volan looks over his shoulder at me, offering me an easygoing smile. It’s the kind of smile that nearly makes me trip on my own feet again. A hint of roguish personality with an equally charming smile...

He doesn’t even know just how good he looks right now.

“I assume you are referring to my luminae,” Volan replies. “My people have good

vision in low light, but these help significantly when exploring the uninhabited tunnels. Do not worry though, as very soon we'll enter one of the first buildings. You will be able to see better then."

From somewhere behind us comes a very distinct noise. The kind of creepy chittering that only an insect can make. Both Volan and I freeze. I am not relieved at all when his wide eyes, panicked, meet mine.

I shouldn't have said anything. Prepared for every situation, not to be caught unaware? I got to laugh at myself. It's like I have challenged fate, demanding it prove me wrong.

Apparently, monsters can sneak up on me.

### Chapter Eleven

MAYA

“What was that?” I ask. I step closer to Volan. I’m not one of those girly-girls who runs into the arms of the nearest man, screaming, but I’m also not afraid to use my allies if necessary.

Is that what I am doing? Using him? Is he just a means to an end?

I shake my head, dispelling the thoughts. I need to focus right now. I have a terrible feeling that I am about to encounter my first Atraxian monster, and something tells me it’s not going to be a cute and cuddly bunny.

Volan’s hand slams over my mouth. It’s a heated brand against my skin, with a strange almost suede-like texture that I hadn’t noticed before.

His eyes are wide in warning, indicating we shouldn’t make a single noise.

Great, not only are we being sneaked up on, but the creature is also scary enough to make this practically towering bodybuilder in front of me quake in his boots.

My hands travel to my pockets. Very slowly, I zip closed the one holding my tablet. If we have to run, I refuse to lose it. This way it won’t simply bounce out unnoticed.

I notice how Volan steps closer, his body hovering around mine with a protective stance. I swallow when I realize that he’s already got a knife gripped in his palm,



holding it carefully pointed away from us. The subtle noise of my swallow is loud in the tunnel, echoing off the walls. I can practically hear us breathing now that I focus on it. The very walls capture and reflect the smallest of sounds.

Is my heartbeat really that loud, thumping frantically in my chest?

The chittering noise comes again, this time far louder. I strain my ears, listening for any signs of the creature that hides in the darkness just out of sight.

I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from commanding Volan to brighten his body lights. I can only pray that he doesn't dim them if we encounter the beasts, else I'll be left in the dark. Oh no, what if it's the light attracting them...

My hand slides between us, reaching for the slingshot I've hidden away. I wasn't planning on revealing that I was armed to Volan, just in case I needed to take his surprise to my advantage, but this new threat warrants action.

Since he's so much taller than me, my fingers brush across the front of his trousers. His body jerks, but he doesn't move or make a sound. My breathing is already shallow, but it quickly turns into pants when I realize that it's not a weapon straining his pockets but his cock.

Actually, given the size of that thing, it might as well be a weapon. And why on Earth—sorry, why on Atraxis—is this guy hard right now?

There are so many things I want to ask him, but I can't. The frustration could practically make me scream.

His eyes drift to mine, focusing on the way I'm chewing on my lower lip. I scowl up at him as a charged tension seems to grow between us. His chest rises and falls, his breath brushing over me like a heated caress. Almost instinctively he crowds closer to

me, his hips pressing into my stomach.

I do my best to ignore the way my body heats at the contact. I have to say, I think I hate this guy. He's always pushing my buttons, always saying something that gets on my nerves... Now this! What woman wants to be pushed against the wall and ravished by someone so handsome, someone so...

My nostrils flare as I give him a death stare. This is all his fault. I'm just reacting to him like this from the tension—it's just the fear of being caught. I am not attracted to him at all.

The sound of tapping breaks me out of my possibly drug-induced revelry—because why else would I be thinking like this? The tap-tap-tap becomes many taps. Then the very air is becoming filled with the sickening sensation as the walls vibrate from what feels like thousands of small feet.

Volan grabs my arm, hard.

I yelp as I'm suddenly dragged forward, practically torn off my feet. Within seconds, realizing I can't possibly keep pace with his longer strides, Volan hefts me over his shoulder. The breath wheezes from my lungs, my stomach digging painfully into his shoulder as he flees into the darkness.

"If they catch us, stay behind me," he shouts over the increasing thunder.

I furiously try to shove myself upward, brushing my hair out of my eyes with my free hand. My vision swirls as tiles fly past us so fast that I cannot orient myself. That, with the lurching of my body as I hang upside down on his back...my stomach roils.

I am definitely not cut out for this.

My stubbornness to the rescue since I find it so hard to let go of ideas once they've become established. This is my adventure, and I will complete it one way or another.

Volan skids to a stop. I feel the crunch of my nose slamming against his solid back. Just to rub salt into the wounds, dust from our passing flies up into my face.

Volan quickly places me on my feet as I splutter and clutch at my nose. My eyes water, but thankfully it's not bleeding because a blood trail for a monster to follow us is the last thing we need.

"I wished to avoid this—they are ahead of us as well," Volan curses. He roughly, but not unkindly, pushes me against a small crevice in the rough rock wall. "Make yourself as small as possible. I will fight them off. Trust me!"

Before I have a chance to even say anything, a cockroach scuttles into the light. Only this thing is massive. It's the size of a dog. Its body is thick and shiny.

A squeal leaves my lips as it throws itself toward Volan with impossible speed.

He curses and slashes out at it with his knife, the shiny metal swinging through the air with a glinting arc.

The creature tumbles to the ground at his feet. Dead. Ooze dribbles from the slash across its segmented abdomen.

"Kill it!" I cry out, already watching Volan's foot slam down upon the creature's head. It shatters with a grisly squelch. My already queasy stomach heaves.

Completely ignoring the gore and ooze hanging off his pants leg, he's raising his dagger in front of him at the ready.

“Stay back,” Volan commands me with a deep boom. Gone is his carefree tone of voice. Gone is the relaxed demeanor. What stands before me is a fighter ready to face battle. A hardened warrior.

I turn my gaze back towards the tunnel we came from. My blood runs cold at the sight I see.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Twelve

#### MAYA

D ozens, perhaps hundreds of bugs fill the tunnel, stepping into our meager light. They crawl across the ground and cling to the walls as they advance upon us. Dark, shiny bodies that glint menacingly at us. Thousands of legs, each one covered in spikes. Huge pincers open and close, snapping in our direction with clear intention.

They are going to eat us.

The beasts don't hesitate. They rush towards us with one goal in mind: our deaths. They are incredibly fast, almost impossibly so.

I barely withhold my scream when one of the bugs flies directly at Volan, its translucent wings glittering. I didn't even know they had wings!

Volan roars, stepping forward to meet it. In a move equally as fast as it's surprising, he ducks to the side as the bug sails through the air past him. His arm slashes out, dagger sliding along its armored back with a metallic scraping sound. Its carapace appears to block his attack as effectively as armor.

My heart nearly explodes when the bug's many spindly legs catch his arm. He doesn't make a sound, but his expression quickly flashes to one of alarm and pain. With his free hand, he grabs hold of the bug, wrenching it from his skin. He tosses the creature away and it hits the rough stone wall with a crack.

I watch with fear clinging to my body as its legs frantically wave in the air. It opens its carapace, translucent wings emerging, as it attempts to right itself. I instinctively press myself closer to the wall. If he can't kill these things with a dagger, what good is my slingshot and a few pebbles going to do?

I'm not the kind of chick that can just race into battle. I'm useless.

Volan barks out a growl, or perhaps a curse word that doesn't translate, capturing my attention. My gaze spins back to him. Several bugs lie at his feet. While I've been focused on one in a complete daze, he's been battling for his life.

He flicks his dagger toward another bug, and liquid flings from him with the movement. Dark, ooze-like. No! Horror engulfs me as I realize that it's his blood. It coats his whole arm, flowing freely.

Volan stumbles backward as another bug slams into him, hooking its powerful legs into his trousers. Within moments it's climbing him. Its pincers wrap around his upper thigh, squeezing.

"I will not be bested by a scamper!" he roars at the cockroach. He stabs at it, over and over again, as he glares furiously down at the beast.

Nothing slows him down. Even though he faces a horde of these disgusting, terrifying beasts, he doesn't hesitate. He could outrun them, but he stays here for me.

He's a warrior, ready to fight to the death.

For me.

It's that chilling thought that strikes through me and makes me act.

I don't go looking to start fights, but if I want to live through this quest I have to act. I can't rely on others, not anymore. I have to do this. Wasn't that the whole point of this quest—that I took personal control of my destiny? I have to fight for what I believe in for once, rather than run and hide.

I clench my teeth and raise my chin. I will do this.

The cockroaches surround Volan, no doubt trying to bring him down. He's able to fight off the ones at his front, but so many of his enemies surround him that he can't keep track of all. Each time he spins, or tries to stab at one with his dagger, the ones at his back also attack. They stab at him with the tips of their legs or try to capture his legs within their pincers.

The bugs haven't noticed me. Yet. It's only a matter of time. I won't give them that opportunity.

My hands shake as I raise my slingshot in front of me. My knuckles are white as I clutch at it with bruising force. I'm shaking so bad that I can barely keep a grip on my slingshot. How am I even supposed to aim this thing?

I load the slingshot with a large pebble and pull the elastic back as far as my arm can drag it. I've only practiced on stationary targets, not moving ones, but I refuse to let myself dwell on that thought. Volan needs help. He needs me.

My fingers open, releasing the rock. I can't see it fly through in the low light, but I know when I hit my mark. The cockroach tumbles backward, literally knocked off its many feet and slides across the ground on its back.

Volan doesn't even hesitate to slam his booted foot down upon the creature.

One great thing about practicing so many times, testing this slingshot even though

I'm not its intended user, is that I am really proficient at loading it. Within split moments I've grabbed another rock, loaded it, and pulling back to fire. I target another roach that's trying to sneak up on Volan unaware. My attack hits its carapace, the rock itself splintering and sending shards in every direction. It knocks the creature back, though not off its feet. As it rounds upon me, I'm already launching another rock towards it. This time I hit it square in the face... well, right between its freaky pincers.

The creature squeals. A high-pitched whine fills the air, so loud that I almost drop my slingshot to cover my ears. I don't. I can't afford to drop my only weapon, despite discomfort. Look at Volan who's covered in blood, yet still fighting.

I shoot another rock, and another. I lose count of how many. I just step forward, gathering ammo, before loosing it before I've even had a chance to fully stand.

I'm distantly aware of Volan laughing. Of cheering for me. No one's ever cheered for me before. I've never actually stood up to anything or anyone before. Not like this.

I step forward, grinning, as the closest cockroach scampers backward. Oh, that's why he called them 'scampers'! It's a fitting name. I'll send them scampering back to where they came from, never to return.

I aim my shot, preparing to shoot the cockroach.

I'm suddenly lifted off my feet.

"You have won the battle, my little halvi," Volan purrs into my ear. He pulls me flush against him, his arms wrapping around me securely. I cry out my frustration as I lose my shot, my aim going wide and missing the infuriating bug entirely.

"Put me down," I weakly bat at his arms. It's only as my fist comes away sticky that



clarity begins to settle in. He's hurt.

My stomach roils at the thought. Blood. So much blood, everywhere. And bug guts and...

"I think not," he growls, hauling me closer. Suddenly the world is tipping around me. Volan throws me into the air—throws—before catching me in his arms bridal style.

I'd scream at him for manhandling me, but my lips are pressed tightly shut as I feel nausea rising.

"Do not fear, halvi. I will never drop you," he tells me as if he suspects my silence is out of fear.

"You! Why you..." Anger at this infuriating male, at everything, rises within me. How dare he treat me this way! How dare he pick me up like I weigh nothing. How dare he carry me about like I'm...like I'm precious.

He's hurt! He shouldn't be carrying me. No, I should be checking his injuries and treating them. I should be...caring for him.

Blackness tinges my vision. Oh dear, I think I actually like this guy. It's more than just attraction, I think I've genuinely caught feelings for him.

No. I have to tell him no.

I am in charge of my destiny. I can't fall in love. I can't do relationships, not again.

"Unless you'd rather wade through the corpses of your enemies," he remarks.

The scent of blood and other unidentifiable smells hits my nostrils as I suck in a

breath to tell him off. I groan. It's all a bit too much.

I press my face against his chest. He's warm, a little sticky from sweat. With my nose this closely smashed against his skin, all I can smell is him. He smells good. Perhaps a little too good.

I close my eyes, allowing my senses to be enveloped by him. Volan. I'm distantly aware of him carrying me somewhere, but for once I don't care where. Anywhere but here. Exhaustion and dizziness weigh me down.

For once, I just want to trust someone else to take care of me, to put me first.

So I do. I trust him.

### Chapter Thirteen

#### VOLAN

Maya shakes within my arms. She clings to me, burying her face into my neck. Any other time, I would enjoy how close she's pressing herself against me, but now concern for my little human overwhelms my instincts.

"Not long now," I tell her as I hurry through the winding tunnels, keenly aware of my precious cargo. Though she emerged from the battle unharmed, she trembles in my arms, her skin chilled and clammy. Her breath is coming in short, shallow gasps. When I pressed my fingers to her wrist, her pulse thrummed rapidly beneath my fingertips.

"You are in shock," I tell her. I'm not even sure she hears me. I've seen others go into shock before, usually after a grievous injury or losing a particularly hard battle. There are some who even experience it whenever they have to fight, though I'm sure many try to hide the fact that they are so weak.

When I look down at the small bundle in my arms, I realize she doesn't feel weak. Despite her vulnerabilities, she stood up to terrifying creatures. She defended me, even when I didn't ask for it. An insult...or an action from someone who cares.

"Don't worry, I will take care of you. You'll feel better soon," I tell her.

As we descend deeper into the earth, the air becomes more humid. Small plants, much like those on the surface, grow along the walls here, gathering in areas of

moisture and cracks between tiles. Normally, I enjoy the soft, welcoming light they emit, though now my concern is for Maya.

“Look how the plants shine when we draw near,” I murmur, keeping my voice low and steady. As we pass clusters and fronds of the plants, they glow brighter at our presence.

I glance down at Maya’s pale face, worry gnawing at my chest. She does not respond, limp in my arms, eyes glazed over and unfocused. When she begins to shiver violently, I clutch her closer to my chest to share my warmth.

I swallow hard, picking up my pace. With each step, my wounds ache, blood still dribbling down and spilling onto the ground. I revel in the pain, knowing that I am alive. I push through it, knowing that I will heal soon enough; none of my wounds are particularly bad or life-threatening.

I’ve been teasing and prodding Maya all day due to her delightful reactions, but have I finally pushed her beyond her limits?

Guilt weighs heavily on me for bringing her into these tunnels. I should have known better than to bring her into scamper’s territory. I barely paid them a consideration, distracted by my delightful companion instead. My carelessness—my selfishness—has put her in danger.

“We’re almost there,” I assure her. I no longer doubt the slight detour from our planned route. We both need time to heal and recover.

Then, I’ll do the right thing by her; I’ll take her to where she wants to go.

Soon, I spy what I am looking for—a simple sign hangs over a roughly carved doorway. The smooth walls of the tunnel fall away as I duck inside, and I’m careful

to keep her body away from the rough cavern walls that surround us.

The hot springs.

Steam rises in wispy tendrils from the heated pools of water, filling the cave with a damp fog and beading on my skin.

I don't pause, even though we are both still dressed. Carefully, I wade into the large pool. The scorching water embraces us and brushes over my wounds painfully, but I do not retreat. Hissing softly, I lower us both into the steaming bath, the water lapping hungrily at our bodies. I sink deeper into the hot water, until only my head is above the water, letting it soothe my aching muscles.

Maya lies limp at first as the hot water caresses her chilled limbs. But soon she begins to stir. Her eyelashes flutter, and she takes a slow, deep breath. Relief floods through me as life and awareness return to her face.

A profound satisfaction fills me when she doesn't leave my side, instead choosing to rest her weight upon my lap. I think of unpleasant thoughts, desperate for my body not to respond to her physical presence. She needs rest, I remind myself, not a rutting. Yet, her presence feels so right, like something I've been missing all my life. Now that my terror for her is abating, I am filled with an overwhelming need to know she is well. I need to inspect her body for the smallest of injuries, I need to soothe her aches and pains, I need to feel her alive...ideally beneath me.

Maya rests her small hand against my chest, her slight touch piercing through the veil of desire.

"You rescued me," she whispers. Her eyes jump between mine, searching. But for what? "You didn't have to but..."

“I will always protect you,” I tell her. A smile spreads across my lips as I remember how my little halvi had fought bravely, attacking the scampers with her ranged weapon with an aggressiveness I had not expected from her. “I believe I should be thanking you. It was not you who needed rescuing. You were fearless.”

Maya sucks in a breath, her face an expression of disbelief.

By the lights, she is gorgeous. I love each of her expressions; how she lights up when she talks, how she is always challenging me with a scowl and pouting lips. My gaze drifts to them. They are softly parted now, her shallow breaths disturbing a droplet of glistening water and causing it to shimmer. Heat thrums through my body as I long to slide my tongue along that seam, to delve into her mouth and...

Her mouth slams over mine.

I’m taken back for a moment. After everything she’s been through, I’ve been worried she’s been pushed too far.

My body reacts before I can even process it; my arms tighten around her slight form, holding her tightly against me. This feels right. She feels right.

I press my lips against hers, one of my hands curling around the back of her neck and threading through her hair to hold her in place. I capture her gasp, breathing her air in as my own.

My tongue slides into her mouth, spearing into her heated depth. She moans against me, her hands clutching at my shoulders.

With fumbling hands, I begin pawing at her strange clothing, trying to figure out the foreign ties. I long to feel her skin beneath mine, to feel her softness press against me. I feel like a youngling, completely untried.

Maya jerks away from me, putting distance between us. The anxiety on her face is clear, yet so is the desire. She wants me... she just thinks she can't have me. But why?

I blink as I process her retreat. I thought she wanted this, wanted me? Watching her swim such a short distance away from me is unexpectedly painful.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," she tells me. She looks at me, her eyes uncertain. It's as if she fears my reaction.

Disappointment tinges the mood, but more than that, a pain assaults my chest at the realization that she does not trust me. Despite the battle with the scampers, I have not earned her loyalty.

And honestly, would I even deserve it? I may be leading her exactly where she wants to go, but it's clear she doesn't know what to expect. She doesn't know the danger she walks to.

As I gaze at the female before me, I realize something. I want her more than anything I've ever wanted in my life. It's not just some sexual thing either. I want all of her; her body and her soul. I want to hear her speak each of her thoughts, radical and strange. I want to see her pout when she fails, her smile when she overcomes a problem, and I definitely want to see the sparkle in her eye when she is challenged.

I want everything she'll give me, and then some.

Too long have I been complacent in life, not fighting for what I really want. My little halvi is in trouble now.

I'm a prince, and I will take what I want.

She is mine.



### Chapter Fourteen

MAYA

Why am I kissing Volan? What has possibly overcome me? I don't have time to get involved with this guy, do I? I have a quest to complete and...

Volan smirks at me, his full lips twisting in a grin that takes my breath away. A mischievous glint—no, a glow—ignites within his eyes.

This guy is up to something. It doesn't take a genius to figure that out.

He stands up, water pooling from his body. I am entirely captivated by the way droplets curve across his muscular form, tracing each dip of his pecs and abs.

He's revealing himself to me in his full glory. His hands go to his hips, and if I am not mistaken, he actually puffs out his chest. He's practically posing for me, showing off his muscles right now like some teenager trying to impress a prospective girlfriend. All that's left is the bicep curl and... there he goes.

I press my hand over my lips as I watch him flex his arms in front of me. It's all I can do to not giggle. He's acting like a teenager. To be honest, I feel like one. I don't think a guy has ever actually acted like this in front of me, purposely trying to tease a grin to my face or impress me this way.

It makes me feel like I am the center of his world. It makes me feel...wanted.

“Impressive,” I tell him. “You are very... big.”

I slap my hand over my face. “I did not just say that! Not like that. I mean... I bet your muscles come in handy out here. Yes, that’s what I mean.”

Volan’s laughter drifts over me, sending a delicious shiver down my spine.

“No reason to be embarrassed,” he says with a smile. “I am very big.”

His fingers wrap around my wrists, tugging me toward him through the water. We’re both still fully dressed, the sodden fabric of my outfit feeling heavy and clinging. The weight of my slingshot and my thankfully waterproofed tablet weigh me down.

With infinitely gentle but persistent tugs, he pulls me close, until our bodies are practically grazing. One deep breath and my chest will touch his.

I should move away from him, put distance between us, yet a part of me wants to stay close to him. When was the last time I truly got held by someone who cared for me?

Does he actually care for me?

What is it about this guy that has me so on edge, so needy? The scientific part of my brain is already searching for answers. Perhaps his skin is putting out some sort of electrical response? A bit like how some animals can create bioluminescence through chemical reactions, or how some turtles can glow because of fluorescent proteins. Whatever it is, it’s affecting me whenever I am close by.

He turns abruptly and leaves me standing there, gaping at him.

Oh, dear. This guy is dancing around me, leaving me tied up and unable to focus. Of course, that thought just brings about visuals of Volan with some rope, and me at his

mercy...

“I have a job to do. I have a job to do,” I repeat quietly to myself, trying to restart my brain. It’s overloaded with hormones right now and clearly not performing its job. That’s all it is - hormones.

With distance between us, my mind is a bit clearer. Not looking at Volan’s naked form certainly helps, even if he’s splashing about in a way that attracts my eye. As much as I try, I can’t help glancing in his direction, at the play of muscles over smooth skin...

“You were hurt,” I remark. I push through the water to his side, snatching up his arm. I remember the scamper latching onto him, blood dripping. My fingers rub over unblemished skin. Volan shivers at my touch, the only sign that I’m affecting him.

“It seems impossible that you heal this quickly. Did you use any medicine?” I ask him.

When Ariana came back to the village injured, she applied some kind of gel to her wounds, healing them in miraculous time. The kind of speed that you can only expect from fantasy stories, not real life. Twice now I’ve witnessed the impossible.

“I did not,” Volan replies. “When you’ve used the medicine enough, it becomes a part of you. Only in extreme circumstances do I need more. That was but a small cut.”

I snort at his admission of a small cut. I’d hate to see what he classifies as extreme.

“Why? How long do humans take to heal?” He asks.

“A wound like that... weeks, I’d guess,” I reply absently.

“Then from this moment on, I shall keep you even closer to my side,” Volan rasps, his breath fanning over my cheek as he leans in closer. “I vow that nothing will harm you, little halvi. On this, you can trust me.”

I meet his luminous gaze, wanting to believe I can trust him fully. He’s been true to his word thus far, guiding me through the perils of this planet. I reluctantly acknowledge I have little choice but to rely on him out here. But can I trust him? How much do I know about him, or his people? Everything, and I mean everything, I know about this planet at the moment is a lie. I need to get to that building, I need to know what Earth’s government is searching for.

As much as I fear the answer, I think I already know. It’s been right under my nose the whole time. I just need to confirm it.

I pinch my nose. How the hell am I going to complete my quest when I keep getting sidetracked by this hunk? Even now, my fingers stroke along his forearm, caressing the prominent veins and taut muscles that flex under my half-distracted ministrations.

Having Volan around is supposed to make this easier, safer, not harder...

And I am certainly making him harder. The giant object glaring between us really makes that obvious.

I need to focus. I can’t be distracted like this!

If I get him out of my system, will things just go back to normal? The normal me; the quiet girl that no one pays attention to, that doesn’t go on crazy wilderness adventures and definitely doesn’t lust after some male.

It’s a hypothesis worth testing.

First quest: save the colony.

Second quest: seduce Volan the alien.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### VOLAN

I see the change overcome Maya. My little halvi firms her chin and looks me straight in the eye. Gone is the fear and hesitancy she normally shows.

A thrill runs along my spine. She looks at me as if I'm prey. I'll gladly have her chasing me down, even if I'm the one that will have her begging for mercy in the end.

Maya wades her way through the water toward me until she reaches my side. Water sloshes around my thighs as she stands on the rock ledge beside me. She tries to appear graceful, but the heavy weight of her sodden clothing makes her movements difficult for her. If anything, that vulnerability, that hint of her not being perfect, is what I find so endearing about her. She's real. She's true to herself. She does what she wants because she's honest with herself and others...

She places her hand firmly against my chest, right over my frantically beating heart.

"You saved me. Again," she says. Despite her spoken words, I get the strange sense that she's not entirely talking to me but to herself. "Until now, I think I've sort of treated you a bit like an enemy. At the very least, someone that I wasn't sure I could trust. Now, now I just think you are someone who drives me absolutely crazy."

I bow my head, leaning closer to her. My breath ghosts over her hair, stirring the hair at her temples. "Crazy in a good way, right?"

Maya snorts her chuckle. It's the most undignified noise I've ever heard from her; completely unguarded and purely her. It's adorable.

"How can I thank you?" she asks, her voice husky.

"Your words are enough," I tell her, frowning. I didn't fight the scampers because I hoped to simply strip her of her clothing. I want her to give herself freely to me, completely willing. I don't want her to be like the other females of my clan, so quick to seduce just to get some personal gains out of the act. I want Maya, completely. Never before have I had the desire for a female to give herself to me so willingly, so purely.

Maya's eyes flash up to mine, slightly widened. It's like she didn't quite expect me to say what I did.

"Volan..." She licks her lips, and the sight of that little pink tongue darting out has my cock hardening all over again. "Will you shut up for a moment? I'm trying to seduce you."

"I... what?" I grin at the idea. Maya's probably going about this in the worst possible way, but then again... isn't that just so uniquely her? She seems to overthink everything and fumbles her way through solutions. She claims to be so prepared for this "adventure" she's going on, even going so far as to bring her tiny weapon, and yet she was hardly mentally ready to face the first monster we came across.

Beneath her touch, my luminae light up for her. It pulses gently, matching the thudding rhythm drifting through me. Each light brush of her fingertips, as she trails them across my pecs and down the muscles of my stomach, drives me insane. It's as if I can feel her touch arc like lightning through my blood. It's as if my very blood is thickening...

Her fingers graze my waistband, and I jolt at the touch. She's so close to where I need her. I'm so close.

"Maya," I say, capturing her hands in mine. "If you continue, I'm not sure I can stop myself. I honestly do not think I'll be strong enough."

It's as much of a warning as I can give her. This female has me practically trembling with need before her, and she's barely even touched me!

Maya gazes at me with consideration. Her lips twitch, as if my warning is something she can so easily dismiss. She has no idea how desperate I am. I'm not a monster, but she makes me wonder.

"I trust you not to hurt me, Volan."

My head rolls back, and I groan at the ceiling above us. I don't have the strength to stop her. I don't have the desire to. Everything in me wants her, wants this moment. There's just that tiny bit of my soul that says she deserves more...

"Will you undress me?" she asks. I watch, mesmerized, as my cloak pools at her feet, revealing just how small her body is beneath. She tugs on her shirt, lifting it up her body to reveal the smooth skin of her stomach. Higher and higher she lifts it, revealing fabric cupping heavy breasts. The sight is enough to stop any doubts from my mind, it's enough to entirely stop any thoughts at all.

I grasp the fabric and tug it over her head, guiding her face and long curly hair safely through. I'm tempted to guide the fabric to catch upon her enclosed wrists, to hold her still while I please both of us, but I'm not quite sure how far Maya will let me go. Not yet. Her trust in me is not absolute. Not yet. There will come a day when she begs me to tie her down, when she begs for me and only me.



I toss her wet shirt aside, watching with a pleased warmth in my chest as her hands immediately strip her chest of the remaining clothing. Heavy breasts spring free from their restraints. Immediately her nipples are hardening, tight pebbles that beg to be played with. Without pausing, Maya slides the heavy weight of her skirt down her legs revealing a patch of dark hair between her legs. She laughs freely as her feet tangle up, having to lean on me for support to stop herself from falling into the water.

I can't stop the answering smile that tugs at my lips. When was the last time that I felt this honest with someone? When was the last time that I didn't care about who I was or how I presented myself to them? When was the last time I could just be me?

My fingers itch to grab her, to drag her from the water and feast upon her.

And then Maya lowers herself to her knees before me. Her body slides into the water, the darkness lapping perfectly at the undersides of her breasts. It's a sight that's both arousing and disconcerting.

I reach out to her, my hands wrapping around her upper arms as I drag her to her feet.

"Never kneel," I tell her with a firm command. "Not before me or any other male."

It might be a foolish thing to tell someone, especially since I am a prince. But I am so accustomed to others kneeling before me, to the groveling and the dishonesty. They always want something, always seeking me out because of my position. Never is it about who I am, the male inside. I just want someone, anyone, to stand at my level. I adore the way that Maya looks at me without fear, how she's unafraid to speak her mind. The thought of her on her knees placating herself sickens me.

Maya's startled gaze meets mine. Of course, she doesn't understand; she doesn't even know who I am. I should tell her...

I don't. I can't bring myself to do it. I just need her to want me for who I am, not for the benefits of my position. I want her to want me, just as she does in this one moment in time.

I kiss her firmly on her lips, greedily sucking in her small gasp. With precise movements, I guide her to the edge of the rock pool, lifting her until she's seated. A delighted thrill rolls through my body when she matches my ferocious kisses with her own, kissing me with equal passion. Her hands roam over my shoulders and squeeze my biceps. Her legs spread, allowing me to press ever closer to her.

"I want you," I groan as I suck air desperately into my burning lungs. The sweet smell of her arousal fills me, thickening my blood and driving my need higher.

My hand threads through her curls, wrapping around the silky strands. I grip her hair, tugging lightly to guide her to arch more and reveal the slender column of her neck to my caresses. Without hesitation, she opens up. She whimpers as I nip at her soft skin with sharp teeth, before smoothing the sting with a stroke of my tongue.

There's a pounding in my ears demanding that I take her now, to claim her and keep her entirely as my own. The need is so strong, so sudden, that I wonder if she's somehow influencing me. But no, not her. Maya isn't like the others. She's already shown how selfless and caring she is; venturing into the unknown just to try and prove her people are being lied to. She constantly risks herself, puts her own needs aside, for others.

It's time someone cared for her for once.

My lips brush over her taut nipple, my breath ghosting over it. Maya whimpers and squirms beneath me. Her fingers clutch at my hair, attempting to drag me in place.

"Please," she begs me.

Pure satisfaction fills me. I wanted her to beg, and she already is. I've barely started. She's perfect for me, filling every one of my needs. As I will fill hers.

I latch on and suck, hard. She cries out, her back arching. I'm merciless. My fingers find her other breast, plucking at the sensitive nub. I squeeze and pinch, enjoying the way that her soft skin molds into the shape of my hand.

With a pop, I release her from my mouth. I'm enjoying this all too much, but there's something I know we'll both enjoy more. I've been trained in the art of seducing females. I've had plenty of practice. It's never felt more important than it does right in this moment. My life has been leading up to this—to her.

My gaze meets Maya's as I begin skimming my lips down her stomach. My lips brush over dark curls. The scent of her arousal is strong here, mind-numbingly so. My mouth waters, and I struggle not to drink from her like a male dying of thirst.

"Is this what you want?" I ask, my voice deep.

I want her to want this. I want her to want me. I'm not above manipulation, making her think that this is what she needs. I'll do whatever it takes to convince her to stay with me, just like this.

"Yes," Maya replies, her chest heaving as she pants before me.

I take my time. I let my tongue lap at her lower lips. Slowly, maddeningly, I stroke it through her folds. Maya cries out, her whole body jolting beneath my touch like she has been touched by lightning. Her taste explodes upon my tongue. She's so sweet, like nectar from an unidentifiable flower. I could spend my life between her legs happily.

I allow my needs to take over. I grip her hips tightly, holding her in place, as I feast

upon her. My tongue laps and spears at her, taking what I want without mercy. She writhes and pants, begs. Her need just fuels me on. Her taste driving me mad.

Only a small part of sanity remains. I must prepare her. I am a large male. I've been told plenty of times. If it weren't for glances of other males in the fighting pits, I would think most females were lying simply to get into my good graces. Maya is so small. I may be willing to lie and cheat, even kill, but I will never, ever allow her to come to harm.

I brush a calloused finger through her folds, probing at her entrance. Maya stiffens momentarily, before she's arching toward it.

"Good girl," I breathe against her, as I push the single digit inside of her. Her warmth closes in around me. I can only imagine how amazing that will feel when it's my cock inside of her, pumping. She's so tight, though. I give her another finger, pressing it deep inside of her. Curling, I explore her walls until I find a spot that feels rougher than the rest. I rub it furiously, feeling the way her muscles coil tighter and tighter. Maya cries out, her whole body shaking. Then I can feel her tightening, her muscles clamping onto me. She screams out her pleasure.

I smirk as I press a kiss to her thigh. The world around us is lit up with my steady pulsing luminae.

She's brighter even so. She may not be a Sulthari, but with the way her cheeks pinken and her eyes sparkle, she may as well be. For a moment, I am completely enraptured. A warmth fills my body as I look down at the little female before me, body soft and vulnerable. No one's ever allowed themselves to relax like this in my presence before. No one has ever been this completely open to me.

Maya blinks up at me, eyes clearing.

“Is that it?” She mumbles, her eyes going wide as soon as the words slip from her mouth.

I laugh. She makes me laugh, the joy bubbling up from deep inside of me from a place I wasn’t sure even existed.

“Oh, my little halvi, we are just getting started.”

### Chapter Sixteen

MAYA

I weakly clutch at his arms as his body rises above me. His forearms come to rest on each side of my head, caging me in. Rather than feeling trapped, I feel protected. His body is warm, firm, and unrelenting.

I glance down between us. I blow out a slightly relieved breath when I realize he's not that different from a human male. He's got some bulges along the shaft that I imagine will fill me up, and there are ridges wrapping around him closer to his mushroom head. Oh, and he's much larger than anyone I've ever slept with. I'm suddenly so thankful he gave me oral first.

Already I feel more satisfied than I've been in a very long time. I needed this release more than I want to admit... but beneath that, there's this tug that says I need 'him.' Above me, Volan's paused. He stares down at me, unblinking. That familiar voice peeks through my shroud of pleasure, nagging, asking if he is already regretting this... if he realizes that I'm not good enough.

"Is that it?" I blurt out. I wince at how crass I am, like he didn't just give me the best oral of my life. How ungrateful I must sound.

"Oh, my little halvi, we are just getting started," Volan states, a smug smirk spreading across his lips. "Are you sure you want more, little one? Are you sure you can handle me?"

He presses his hips closer to mine but pauses once again.

Our eyes meet, his with an intense gaze, questioning. He's waiting for me, I realize. All this time, he's been considering my needs, not pushing me away. I give him a nod, relief and hope digging deep into my soul.

"Yes, please," I say as I lick my dry lips.

The tip of Volan's cock presses against my core. For a brief moment, I fear that I can't take him, the pressure growing, until he suddenly slips through my tight muscles. I moan as my core stretches to accommodate his girth. He's barely inside and yet I feel so full.

Volan's forehead presses against mine, his breathing labored. He's holding back, giving me time to adjust, I realize.

As soon as the pinch of pain disperses, I give my hips a gentle shift. Volan groans above me as he slides in ever so slightly, my body eagerly clenching around him. His muscles shake, sweat beading on my forehead.

He feels so... intense. But then again, everything about this male is one hundred percent, never half-assed.

I roll my hips again, hissing as he presses deeper. There's no sting, no pain this time, just blinding pleasure. I whimper, my fingers digging into his waist as I attempt to pull him closer.

Volan begins to flex his hips, a soft motion that has my insides lighting up. Each gentle thrust pushes him deeper. Each withdrawal has me at my edge, clinging to him. We're both panting by the time he fully sheathes himself inside of me.

“Maya,” he groans. One hand grips my chin and he kisses me with a bruising force. I meet him, reveling in the passion. He kisses me like he needs me for his very next breath. I’ve never felt so wanted before.

His hand slides to wrap around my neck, holding me in place. He squeezes gently, holding me in place with slight pressure without actually restricting me. I should panic. I should be afraid, yet my body thrills at his possessive hold. My core clamps down on him and I swear I nearly climax from that one touch.

Volan pulls back, his hips surging forward. My entire body bounces as he slams himself home. Again and again.

I meet his thrusts, our slick bodies sliding against each other. I’m aware of my cries echoing from the cave walls, and the sound is so erotic that my blood sizzles.

I’m clutching at him, my nails scoring his skin, as I writhe beneath him.

He’s relentless. Merciless. He pounds into me, each thrust jolting me until I’m seeing stars behind my eyelids.

I’m so close. I’m so very close.

What breaks me is the long groan that tumbles from Volan’s throat. He throws back his head, eyes closed in an expression of pure torture.

My entire body prickles as my climax starts to take over. My legs begin to shake, then my core tightens. Then suddenly every muscle is on fire, lightning shooting through my limbs. The cave could come tumbling down around us and I wouldn’t know. Every fiber of my being is focused on that connection between Volan and me.

He gives a hoarse shout, and then I feel his seed bursting from him. His heat bathes



my walls, gushing from him. It triggers another climax, my cries of pleasure ripped from breathless lips.

Spent, we collapse. Volan's arms wrap around me, and he somehow finds the energy to roll us so that I'm lying on top of him. My legs wrap around his as his no doubt float in the steamy water.

My entire body thrums. My clit pulses, and every subtle shift causes my core to clamp down and a fresh wave of pleasure to wash through me.

I close my eyes, listening to the sound of his beating heart.

For the first time in a long time, I realize that I feel relaxed. At the colony, Eve's Rest, I always felt on the edge. The need to prove myself was strong, especially for a female working in a male-centric role. Out here... it's just me and Volan. There are no expectations. It's just purely us.

I trust him more than I should, I realize. I barely know him. Yet he's proved that he's protective and caring—he's literally put himself in danger multiple times just to keep me safe.

And I do feel safe.

I drift off to sleep, my thoughts swirling, as I wonder if this is what it feels like to be truly loved.

Honestly... I kind of like it.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Seventeen

MAYA

I prop myself up, looking down at the gray-skinned alien that lies beneath me. His hand gently strokes soothing circles on my back, claws scraping with an erotic caress.

Realizing I am awake, he rolls us so that his body rises over mine. His hips nestle between mine, an iron bar pressing against my already slick core. His breath ghosts across my skin as he gazes softly down at me.

“Good morning,” I squeak, a shyness returning to me. Yesterday was... intense. He’s intense.

The bravery I’ve been displaying isn’t natural to me; it’s born from some desperation. I’m not one to usually take such huge leaps, such as running away from the safety of the colony. If I had another choice, I’d be curled up in front of a fire reading a good book. Instead, I’m here with this alien as he looms over me and makes me feel... what exactly? Safe? Cared for?

My heart flutters, that tiny buried place in my chest warming at the idea. Wanting this; someone who actually cares for me, puts me first. Walking around dark tunnels isn’t exactly how I imagined my life going, but it’s scary how quickly I could see myself doing it if it meant staying with Volan.

I can’t fall in love with the alien, I tell myself for what feels like the hundredth time. Because seriously, I think I’m developing emotions for Volan. I can’t. I refuse to.

Volan hums, dipping his head to brush a gentle kiss across my lips. It feels... reverent. This isn't some caught-up-in-passion moment, but something soft and tender. The way he hovers about, like he actually cares about me... well, it's been a while since someone cared that much.

I cannot fall in love with this alien, I repeat silently.

The male is annoying. He drives me utterly insane. Of course, he knows how to push each and every one of my buttons. And heaven help me, I think I actually like it... Because even when he pushes me, I have this distinct impression that he'll catch me when I fall. And no one's ever done that for me before.

Volan's ministrations move to my jaw, then to my neck. I moan at the feeling of his teeth scraping my sensitive flesh. My mind screams at me to put a stop to this before my emotions get too entwined, but my body... I'm plagued by visions of him biting me, marking me for all to see that I'm his...

I cannot fall in love with him!

My stomach chooses that moment to save me from myself. It rumbles so violently that the sound echoes off the cave walls. I'm pretty sure Volan felt that. I don't know if I should laugh or cry.

"Here I was thinking of feasting on your delicious cunt, and you are thinking about actually eating," he remarks. He laughs, actually laughs. His whole body bounces on top of mine as he throws his head back and guffaws.

I shove his shoulders, pushing him from me. He's so much larger than I that I'd have no hope actually moving him if he didn't want to let me escape. That very thought should make me afraid, yet somehow it doesn't.

He's protected me, putting his life at risk to do so, and he hasn't once done anything to betray me.

I trust him, I realize. I can trust Volan... Can't I?

I peek up at him through my eyelashes, watching the way he leans on one arm casually beside the thermal pool. He's the polar opposite of me; relaxed when I am tense, joyful when I want to scream at the world from frustration and anger.

With a playful pout, Volan eases away from me, fingers purposely stroking across my warm skin. As soon as his touch leaves me, though, I feel bereft and chilled, as if he was anchoring me in place.

"Will you allow me to feed you?" he asks, eyes not meeting mine.

My breath catches in my throat. For once he's not pushing me, not demanding that I keep up with him. Is he asking what I think he is? For some aliens, feeding a partner is considered an intimate act, one involving courting and mating. Despite what many think, just because a species has intergalactic flight capabilities, doesn't mean they evolved past some of their base needs. Just like human males taking females out on dinner dates, many cultures consider the presentation of food to be symbolic of the ability to provide and care.

Is Volan propositioning me? Is it because we had sex last night... or is it because he actually likes me? He did agree to help me before the sex. It's not like he just picked me up in his arms and carried me off like some damsel in distress.

"There is a Sobra farm nearby," Volan clears his throat when my shocked silence goes on too long. "We can get some food there, unless you have something stored in that skirt of yours. Your stomach rumbles, and mine is feeling rather empty as well."

“Oh,” disappointment washes through me at his quick change. For a brief moment, I had found myself... hoping. For what? A mating? A marriage? That’s ridiculous! I shake my head. I just got out of a nasty marriage, the last thing I want is to wind up in another one. I don’t even know this guy!

“Maya?”

“Food would be amazing,” I reply, embarrassment flushing through me when I realize that Volan’s staring at me, and I’ve just been pondering the really weird state of my love life. Or lack of it.

This girl needs coffee. All I seem capable of doing is arguing internally with myself.

“Come,” Volan offers me a hand, smiling down at me softly. Of course, his cock is on full display between us, and my eyes snap to it like a magnet. I have no idea how he fit inside me last night, and given the ache between my legs... he nearly didn’t.

I take his hand and allow him to pull me to my feet. Our bodies brush close, and his hand holds mine, not letting go. Tension builds between us as I stare up at him.

“Thanks,” I say, my breath coming out shaken, my pulse racing. Is it because he’s staring at me like he can’t wait to eat me...

No, it’s because I’m excited about this quest. The one to save my colony and my friends. The thing that I should be focusing on.

I’m honestly surprised that I’m actually doing this. Sure, there’s been a few slip-ups and a few unpleasant encounters so far... but look at me! I’m away from Eve’s Rest, actually on an adventure. I’m that quiet girl who never speaks up, and always follows rules and regulations.

It's a new day. After a night of good rest—though really, can we call it sleep given that Volan woke me up at some point again, and then me him—I'm surprisingly invigorated. I feel like a new woman. I was so afraid I was doing the wrong thing. I mean, I did literally just run off into the wilderness without telling anyone. Really unprepared for it... but I've got Volan. Who needs to know how to use fancy blaster guns when you've got a literal warrior by your side? I suddenly feel a whole lot more confident. I feel like I can take on the entire world.

“What's that smile for?” Volan asks, bumping against my shoulder gently as he pulls on his boots.

“We make a good team,” I tell him as I search the ground for my clothing. I scrunch my nose at the sodden fabric. It hasn't had a chance to dry in the humid air.

I slide my foot into my boot, turning up my lips as my toes press against the wet interior. As I place my foot down upon the floor, it sloshes.

I imagine us off on our adventure, attempting to sneak through tunnels quite dramatically. Only each step will be accompanied by a squelch, giving away our position. It's something out of a comedy, and right now it matches my heightened mood and desire to just... grin.

“I should be thanking you,” I tell him, a smile tugging at my lips again as I turn to face him.

“I was definitely not well last night. I realize that. Everything happened in such a blur... and I'm really thankful that you took care of me.”

My cheeks heat as I remember just how well he took care of me.

It wars directly with my thumping heart, as it realizes that he's the only person to

ever take care of me. I feel special, and I shouldn't.

"I don't blame you for dumping me into the hot springs," I try to clarify, pushing aside the dark thoughts. "I survived thanks to you."

But did everything survive? My hands drift to my pocket. With shaking fingers, I slide out my beloved tablet.

"Is it still working?" Volan asks, eyes watching me closely. "I didn't think about the water... I'm sorry."

I press down on the button, and the screen lights up. A sigh of relief escapes to see that it's still functioning. To lose it would feel like losing a limb. It's as much a part of me as my heart or soul.

"It works," I tell him, shoulders loosening. "Technically, the manufacturer claims it's waterproof to something like 100 feet in depth, but I've never been brave enough to actually test that."

Even on Earth when it was more easily replaced, I hadn't tested it. I'd been so afraid that my secret would have been discovered and that I would lose the one thing I hold so close to my heart. And now, on planet Atraxis... It's not like it can be easily repaired out here in the middle of nowhere.

"The devices are rare," Volan states. The way he glances at it only proves my suspicion that I'm not going to get a new one any time soon.

I follow him, shoes squelching and skirt sticking to my legs, as he leads me from the cavern we are in. Back to endless tunnels, rock pressing down on me from all sides.

"Back home, you could probably get a tablet like this from every corner shop," I tell

him. My tablet's not anything particularly fancy. It's actually kind of old. I've updated the RAM, replaced the hard drive with something bigger... but it's not like it's the latest model or anything. Not anymore.

He raises a brow, and I realize that despite my words, I'm clutching the metal rectangle to my chest like my life depends on it.

"It's got sentimental value," I explain to him as we walk. My throat feels tight, like the words are hard to voice. Even now, it feels hard to talk about it. "My mother gave it to me before she... passed."

Did I ever give myself time to grieve her loss, I wonder? I don't remember crying for her, at least not after her death. Things were too hectic, my life thrown into utter chaos.

At Volan's silence, I blurt out, "She had cancer."

My cheeks flare with heat, as I struggle to not feel so embarrassed. This is one of those awkward situations that I never know how much information is too much. Like does he even care about how she died? Whenever someone says they lost a loved one, others are curious, right? They just don't want to upset you by asking how they died. That would be insensitive, after all.

To be honest, I don't even know why I'm telling him. It's not like I've ever told anyone before, not even my friends back at Eve's Rest know. My past was always that—something I did my best to leave behind. It's just... it's always on my mind. The more I tried to forget about it, the worse it haunted me.

Am I a horrible person for not crying after my mother was gone? I watched over her for so long. I knew she was dying for a long time. Maybe that's why I never cried for her, I think; I had time to prepare for that moment.



“She was sick a long time,” I explain. My mind returns to all those nights that I would sit beside her, watching over her as she drifted in and out of sleep. “She read to me when I was a child, so it only made sense that I read to her as an adult. It was a passion we shared together.” It was a passion I kept alive after. The one thing connecting me to her.

“Losing a progenitor is a hard thing,” Volan muses. “I too lost my mother, but that was at my birth. I do not remember her at all.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, sharing a commiserating smile. The pain is gone, left behind by this hollow ache that you are missing something in your life. You never fully heal, but you get to a point where you can move on, given enough time. And even then, you still have moments when you just expect to see them out of the corner of your eye.

Given that we are both dressed again, Volan leads me to the entrance and back out into the tunnels, our conversation pausing only for us to slip through the crack in the cave wall.

“At least you have her gift to remember her by,” Volan comments, looking over his shoulder at me. “I am very glad it was not destroyed by the water.”

“It wasn’t a gift,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. I huff in annoyance. The desire to talk to him is overwhelming. It’s like when I’m around him, everything I’ve kept bottled up inside is suddenly flowing out. All those walls I’ve erected, and he just casually knocks them down.

Coming to a standstill, I glare at my boot, scuffing the small rocks on the floor as I try to get my racing mind under control. Why am I acting like this? I’m used to being anxious, that fluttering of my heart that has tingles running throughout my limbs, but this right now... I’m all over the place. Sad, angry, frustrated, overwhelmed... I’m a

jumble of emotions, and they are all desperate to escape. Why, of all things, do I want to talk to him about my past, about everything? Is it because we had sex? It was just sex! It didn't mean anything...

I look up at Volan, who's stopped only a few steps away. He watches me with a raised brow, his lips slightly curled. Everything about him looks so carefree. Something about him pushes and prods at me. He infuriates me. He draws me in like no one has ever done before.

"You can tell me if you want," Volan says, voice quiet. "You can trust me."

I'm so screwed, because the thing is... I really, really want to trust him.

Sometimes in life, we have to make a choice; to continue as we are, or to forge a new path. I'm unhappy—I have been for a long time, I realize—and I can continue this way, or I can take a leap and define a new me.

I'm scared, but fear doesn't need to stop me. It doesn't define me. I've been hurt in the past, but it isn't fair to treat Volan with the same suspicion.

"I do," I breathe, the sacred words a soft whisper from my trembling lips. "I trust you."

And as I stare up at the male standing before me, eyes and skin burning an iridescent glow, I realize that I've been waiting for him to enter my life for so, so long. He's my hope, shining bright.

I have to see this quest through. No matter what. But maybe, just maybe, Volan's my happy ever after.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:36 pm*

### Chapter Eighteen

VOLAN

“Y ou can trust me,” I tell the little human standing before me. Maya’s dark eyes stare up at me wide, blinking with disbelief and utter hope.

I have the urge to wrap her up in my arms, to hold her close and dispel the shadows that flitter across her face. My body, my very instincts, drive me to step closer to her and protect her from any dangers that might threaten her.

But does that include me? I haven’t exactly been truthful with her. She thinks I’m leading her somewhere specific, and little does she know that I have no intention of actually taking her there.

“I do,” she whispers, voice barely audible. She looks up at me with shining eyes, full of vulnerability.

“I trust you.”

Fuck. I bite back a flood of emotions. Giddiness that someone so pure, so perfect as her, would put her trust in me. Dismay... because everything she knows about me, our entire relationship, is a lie.

She still doesn’t know who I really am, that soon I’ll be returning to my duties of Prince... hopefully King of the Sulthari on planet Atraxis.

Honestly, I've been enjoying our interactions, perhaps far too much. She just sees me as 'me', a male whose immediate actions and words create an impression. There's no judgement, no assumptions, no deceit... well, apart from me.

She doesn't look at me with thinly veiled greed, plans running through her mind about rising in the ranks for personal or family gain. I don't need to worry about her whispering about me behind my back, telling the court - or darkness forbid - my father about any of my plans for our kingdom's future. My hopes and dreams are personal, not something that I want brought to the light and constantly critiqued - especially when I haven't had a chance to solidify them. Wanting to integrate other species into our kingdom is a grand ideal - but without putting safeguards in place, and having the time and resources to do so, could be disastrous for my people. It's been a long-held dream of mine to work with others, to share resources and actually thrive, rather than constantly fear an attack, warriors spending more time patrolling our borders, stepping further and further into dark and dangerous tunnels than spending time at home with their mates.

Or the dream of having a mate, one that actually cares about me as an individual...

"We are nearly at a place we can eat. Why not tell me over food?" I tell her.

"Oh, okay," Maya responds, looking both relieved and disappointed. And that expression, as if I've failed her somehow, eats me to the core.

I turn and briskly walk away. My feet stomp upon the rock floor, rather than my usual silent steps. The blood pumping furiously in my veins urges me to fight. To move. To do something, anything. The frustration I feel boils beneath the surface, my luminae glowing as I fight the urge to run. I tell myself it's because Maya needs the light to see by, not because of this tingling sourness that's pressing at my lungs and making it hard to breathe. It's got nothing at all to do with how I've lied to Maya... how I've treated her like so many people treat me—someone to be used and discarded, with

little consideration of my feelings.

It's okay to be excited about my future, I tell myself. I've worked so long for it. How many times have I walked alongside the warriors, guarding our people and home while we patrolled darkened corridors in search of threats? How many times have I joined campaigns, silently stalking beasts that prey on those both above and below the surface—including the tribes that have forgotten what honor means.

My people are warriors. We are knights, meant to lead others through the darkness and into the light...

Not leading defenseless, trusting humans into traps. Not tricking the very female that I want to take as a mate.

And I do, I really do. The more time I spend in Maya's presence, the more I find myself admiring her. The more I am seeing her as an individual, not just someone like all the others. Despite her very real and overwhelming fears, she charges into battle and difficult decisions alike fearlessly. She does so because she cares, deeply and honestly. And once she sets her mind to something, and sticks to it with a stubbornness that I can't help but find cute, especially when her lips turn down at the corners, begging to be kissed back into a smile.

She's a human. She's someone other than Sulthari... and yet, I'm becoming more than certain that she would make a fine Queen.

Every moment I am in her presence, my skin prickles. It's not just the electric currents running beneath the surface, lighting up my luminae. It's her. I'm hyper-aware of each breath she takes, the rustle of her clothing as she moves, her very scent driving me insane!

Whenever I've felt this frustrated, a sparring match has always helped take the edge

off... I walk backward, watching the female so carefully following behind me. She's so close, I could reach out and gather her in my arms. There are other ways to soothe the body, to expend the excess energy...

I turn to her, ready to grab Maya into my arms, just as her stomach growls. Her eyes humorously widen as her cheeks darken, just as they did when I pleased her over and over again last night.

As much as I long to take Maya to the floor, to drink my fill of her until my very soul has found solace, my protective instincts demand more. Feed. Care. Protect.

Claim.

I can't claim her until she knows about who I really am, but I also don't want her to know about that identity as I desperately want her to see the real me, to fall in love with me. And the longer I put it off... the harder it is to bring up something like that.

"We are nearly there," I tell her. I turn down passages, my eyes seeking the small details around us that indicate our location. A red vine with dark plump nodules rather than leaves, its roots twisting into nooks and crannies of the rock face as it spreads across the surface like a soft curtain of fabric. Several long, deep gouges furrowed into the soft rock, evidence of a beast that passed through the area long ago.

Thankfully, no disturbed dust upon the floor; meaning no Scampers have trampled through the area in their blind search for food. I will not be making that mistake again.

As we get closer to my kingdom, I start seeing the small pools of water scattered about. Maya does too, if her quiet gasp is anything to go by.

She pauses by one, gazing in at the small pool carved into a nook in the wall; one of

the first signs that intelligent beings have passed through the area. It won't be long before we are in the tunnels, when the entire underground changes as we step foot into my kingdom.

I've never been more torn; I want to present her to my father, to see how magnificent she is, and yet I also want to take her and just leave, to be alone together forever.

"It glows!" Maya states, leaning closer to the liquid in a way that its shine catches upon her face, her lips parted in wonder. Will she look at my home with the same delight?

I dip my hand into the small hole, allowing the coolness of the water to wash over my fingertips like a soothing caress. The glow brightens at my touch, and I swirl the liquid to bring out its full glory.

"Glowleaf," I explain to her. "My ancestors brought it with them from our home planet."

Maya leans closer, studying the glowing liquid. I raise an eyebrow when she pulls out her tablet, holding the device over the pool. A light flashes over the surface, tracing the surface in a clear line, like an electronic eye searching for danger.

"It's safe," I tell her. "There are pools like this one scattered throughout all the tunnels and caverns, particularly around my home. Whenever you see a pool like this, you should wash."

Maya raises a brow at me as she glances up. "You just want me to get naked again, don't you?"

I laugh. "Honestly? Yes. But glowleaf has both antibacterial and healing properties. It's extremely useful for when living in enclosed quarters like these caves and

tunnels. It's all too easy for disease and sickness to run rampant, and would destroy my people faster than any war would."

"Huh," Maya states, a line forming between her eyebrows as she considers my educational wisdom, some of her humor dulled as she realizes the implications. "It was pretty smart to bring it to Atraxis then, I guess. But how do you keep it alive without sunlight?"

I bite my tongue to tell her it was only by pure luck that it came to be here with us on the planet. The chances of a Sulthari having it on their person at the time... Since that fateful moment, no one travels without glowleaf. In a small concealed pocket of my belt, craftily stitched into the material, are a few tiny flakes of the dried plant. It's enough for emergencies. And that's ignoring the small pouch of powder more readily available in case of more serious injury. Powder that is likely to be more sludge now since we submerged into the hot pool fully dressed. Powder that spilled out into the water, healing wounds and aches, all while Maya was unaware of its benefits.

"The plant doesn't need sunlight. From what I understand, it feeds off of the nutrients in the water. As long as you provide it with fresh water or top up the minerals and nutrients... It works wonders in the bathing areas."

Maya turns to face me fully, her lips pressed into a tight line. She blinks once, a slow and measured move, and then asks, "Are you saying that you all pee in the bath?"

I laugh. It comes from deep within me, the joy of being around this female highlights my day and makes me seek out her company. It's impossible to get her off my mind, even when I should be focused on other things. It's honestly scary and exhilarating how quickly Maya has become the center of my world.

"No!" I choke out the words, nearly doubled over as I gasp for breath. "It's good for your skin. For easing sore muscles."



Maya crosses her arms over her chest, gazing at me with a less than trusting expression. “Sure, whatever you say.”

“I mean it!” I cackle, defending myself and my people’s cultural practices, all while knowing that there’s nothing I can ever say again to convince her otherwise. “Besides, you bathed with me not long ago and you seemed to enjoy it.”

Maya squeaks, eyes opening wide as she realizes the implications... that I definitely did not pee in the hot pools. Of course, the flush on her cheeks could very well be because she enjoyed what we did too.

A grin cracks my face. “Oh, my little Maya, you enjoy being naughty, don’t you?”

Her entire face blushes. She looks up at me with those panicked eyes, like she feels trapped and unsure of what to do, but stares me down with the courage of a predator. “My little halvi... are you wanting to get clean right now? Because I have to tell you, if we return to the hot pools, you won’t be getting clean. Naked? Yes. Clean...”

She pants, breaths coming shallow as her arousal perfumes the air. It’s enough to make me want to throw her over my shoulder, to rush through the darkened tunnels and hide her in a place she’ll never escape from. To keep her forever, to spend my time claiming her as my one and only.

“Food,” Maya squeaks out, choosing instead to duck under my arm and make a hasty retreat. “I think we need to keep our strength up. That would be the smart thing to do right about now. Not to go falling in...”

“Falling in?” I ask as her words trail off.

“Falling into bed with each other.” She finishes.

I scowl at her, at her abrupt answer. I can't help but believe that was not what she had initially intended to say. But with the way she hastily walks down the tunnel, it's clear she's not ready to talk... yet. She's full of mysteries, this one. Like why she felt the need to run from the safety of her village alone, and how she ended up with a map to one particular building - the very one that my people guard the secrecy of with their lives.

Each of my steps is quiet as I follow her. I stalk her like a predator would prey. Because she's mine. I always get what I want, and I want her. Answers, body, and soul.

### Chapter Nineteen

MAYA

“These red plants are markers,” Volan points to a red-colored plant growing on a wall. Sure enough, beneath the tiny succulent-like leaves, there are marks etched into the rock wall. At first, I thought it was just part of the rock itself, but now that I inspect them it’s clear that tools have been used. Of course, I don’t recognize the writing at all.

“Any time you see the plant, it means there is something of interest here; a room that grows food, or a bathing pool, that sort of thing. If you travel for a while without seeing any, backtrack. It means you are no longer in the patrolled areas.”

Oh. We must be near his home. He did mention that it was near my destination. A strong desire to see where this male grew up, to meet his friends and family, suddenly hits me. I push it aside. It’s not like we’re a couple. We just had some good sex, and he’s just helping me out. That’s all. Still, for a moment, I squeeze his hand just a bit tighter. I came to this planet wanting a fresh start, and despite my relationship with James, I never truly lost that naive, childish goal. I want a home. I want to feel like I belong, and more importantly, I want that person who will return my love and loyalty—someone who puts me first.

“Let’s go inside and feed you. You do need your strength, after all,” Volan says, wiggling his eyebrows at me. Despite myself, despite the somber quest that I am on, I laugh. Being around him makes me... happy. And that’s dangerous because happiness leads to mistaken emotions, such as love. I can’t fall in love with the alien. As much

as I want to, a little voice inside whispers.

We emerge into a large cavern, dotted with plenty of bioluminescent plants that bathe the entire area in a soft blue glow. A channel of water has been carved in a near-perfect line from one rock wall to another—though I have no idea how they managed to figure out that sort of plumbing down here, especially given that I haven't exactly seen evidence of any advanced mining equipment around.

Unlike the other caverns we've passed, the ceiling is low. From almost every inch of the ceiling, vines dangle down in clusters.

I step further into the room, my curiosity driving me forward. I'm safe here. I know, almost without a doubt, that Volan won't let anything happen to me.

I trust him, implicitly.

I shake away the thoughts, the implications, as I stare at the gourd-like fruit that hangs heavily, weighing down the fleshy vines.

I shudder, my mind immediately associating these vines with bug eggs.

"This is sopra fruit," Volan explains, stepping past me to pluck a few of the potato-sized balls from their stems. He presents them to me, and it takes all my considerable willpower not to recoil as he thrusts them at my face.

Their fruit's skin is green, and not in a pleasant way. Eggs. If these are alien insect eggs.

"Oh, please tell me the scampers didn't make these," I beg him. My stomach fights between hunger and nausea, and I'm not entirely sure which one will win. I'm pretty sure I want to draw the line at eating bug eggs though. Chickens and birds are fine,

but bugs? Yuck.

“It’s fruit. It grows from the plant,” Volan says slowly, as if I’m a child that needs the basic concepts taught to them. I glare at him when I notice the teasing glint in his eye and the tiny curve of his lips.

“It thrives in these caves. The flesh of the fruit is quite nutritious.”

He deftly slices open one of the fruits, revealing yellow flesh. It has a strange cross-like section of flesh, interspersed with what looks like seeds deep inside. And the flesh is slick, slimy even.

“Eat the flesh. The skin is quite bitter,” he instructs. He pops one in his mouth, not at all disturbed. Then he has the freaking audacity to moan!

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” I say, turning up my lip as I stare down at the object he’s placed in the palm of my hand. It’s cool to the touch, and really, really doesn’t look appetizing in the least.

In the end, hunger wins out. I need to keep up my strength, I rationalize, as I force myself to take a bite out of the potential alien insect bug fruit.

My eyes widen as the fruit hits my tongue. It’s not gross. It’s actually delicious. A bit like a lychee in texture, the flesh sweet rather than whatever I had been imagining. The seeds inside pop, delicious juice exploding, just like eating a pomegranate. The ugliest fruit in the universe somehow tastes amazing.

“Dispose of the skins there,” Volan points to a hole dug into the rock floor near the corner of the room. “One of the farmers routinely comes and disposes of it properly.”

As we sit down to eat our fill of the fruit, me devouring them as fast as I can peel

them, I glance around the room. The area looks primitive—all carved rock walls, not even tiles. Yet, clearly they've used advanced machinery to carve out the plumbing. Volan's people even know about diseases and bacteria, and the way he talks is of someone far more intelligent than I admit I've been giving him credit for. He's not some barbarian alien simply running around swinging a sword every opportunity he gets.

My breath gushes out of me when I meet his gaze. He picks at his food, savoring each bite, while I rush mine. He's slow, methodical and carefree. I'm all rushed, desperate, and twisted out of shape.

"You do not need to tell me, if you do not wish to," Volan states, voice soft. It doesn't hold any of his usual taunting, or even his warm humor. The male sitting before me is calm, and appears entirely ready to listen to whatever tale I am about to unfold.

Am I seriously going to tell him? I haven't spoken to anyone about this, not even my friends. All this time, they've thought me some brilliant scientist, some genius capable of coding high-end programs and inventing miraculous things. Little do they realize that I'm a complete and utter fraud.

I open my mouth, and then close it again.

"I have no idea where to start," I whisper. The enormity of my history spans out before me. Chapters of events, years of my life, all tangled up with different people and different circumstances. Everything that's led me to this moment.

"You said your device was not a gift," Volan prompts.

It's a good enough place to start, I realize. I don't have time to share every memory with him, even if I want to tell him my life story, and hear his in return.

“The thing is, my mum knew she was dying,” I tell him, my voice coming out stronger than I expected. “We tried to save her for years, but her disease... there was no cure. All we could do in the end was make her comfortable.”

It’s the way Volan reaches out, grasping my hand, that makes my eyes prickle. He’s paying attention to me, really listening. I don’t feel judged right now. I feel... safe. Safe enough to finally tell my story.

“All her treatments cost a lot of money,” I explain. “At first, we could afford it. My mother came from a prominent family and was the sole heir to a large fortune. No one even questioned the idea of spending money on her treatments. But over time, she didn’t get better, and the costs started to pile up.”

I sniff, thinking back to all the ways we had started to cut costs elsewhere. It was little things at first, like when my worn school dresses had been altered to fit me, just to squeeze another year out of their value, rather than buy new ones.

“I said my tablet wasn’t a gift, because, well, it wasn’t,” I tell Volan. “When I couldn’t afford to buy the textbooks, my mother encouraged me to get the digital versions. Even if it meant contacting the original author to beg for the files or rent them from the school’s library. She insisted, so much, that I continue my studies. At first I thought she just wanted me to have a normal life after she... When she got really sick though, she told me it was because she wanted me to have the life she never got. To be able to decide what I wanted to do, not to blindly follow other people’s demands.”

The tablet she gave me wasn’t a gift, it was a fail-safe; a way for me to take control of my destiny, the means to establish myself as a working-class individual if the need arose.

She never admitted it, but I strongly suspected that my mother and father had an

arranged marriage. If not by the textbook definition, then at least one that was strongly encouraged. She was from a wealthy family, an only child, and he was from an up-and-coming merchant family, making waves among the socialites. Their marriage made sense; with his business experience, he took over my grandfather's business, and my mother was well-cared for. A merger of two high-ranked families rather than an all-out stock war.

“When my mother finally passed... everything sort of crumbled around me. We could barely afford her funeral. We'd lost nearly everything, and if I'm honest, I didn't care. Still don't. If it gave me the chance to be with her, even for a few more days, I'd have given away every dollar without a second thought. But my father... I think over the years he'd kind of gotten over it all. Maybe he'd grieved before she died, knowing what was coming. Maybe he was just trying to salvage what he could after...”

Volan's hand squeezes mine, and I grip his in return like a lifeline as my fingers tremble. I'm doing my best to breathe normally, but each word feels like it's being ripped from my soul in a breathless rush. So many memories, so many emotions, and they are all so vivid! Did I repress all of them?

“If we were to keep our tier in society, we needed cash and fast. My father thought it prudent to arrange my future in my stead. Maybe he was looking out for me, but it felt like a means to an end. He took away my choice entirely.”

“What do you mean?” Volan asks. For the first time I've started talking, he looks angry. Not at me, but for me.

I blurt out the words, unable to stop them or the flood of anger and misery from escaping. “One day I discovered that he signed me up to the Mating Program. He didn't ask if I wanted to get married! No, he just went ahead and picked out my alien husband! All that was left was to sign the documents to make it official. He never



asked my opinion. He just didn't care what I wanted."

Tears burn my eyes. The desire to just curl up and cry nearly overwhelming.

"When I found out what he had planned, I confronted him. There were things I wanted to do in life. I hadn't spent years in college studying cybersecurity to simply just throw it all away to marry some old guy that I didn't like. But my father refused to listen to reason," I say.

For several years my father had become distant, a man I saw but hardly spoke to. I kept telling myself it was because he couldn't see my mother the way she was; a shell of herself. But then the heated arguments came... I might not have liked my father much but I'd never feared him... until that day. I can still feel the grip he used on me as he dragged me, forcibly, to my bedroom. The sound of the door closing, and the security locks throughout our house being engaged. Meant to keep others out... they kept me in.

"He expected me to just fall in line. He took away all my choice, my freedom, and didn't care about me at all. I decided then and there that I had enough."

"What did you do?" Volan asks. His hand wraps around my bicep. I stiffen, the ghost of my father's grip still holding me tight. But Volan's hands are warm, and his fingers don't squeeze but stroke me so very gently. Comforting, not restricting.

"It wasn't the smartest of moves to be honest," I reply, "but I made a run for it. I took what I learned in college, and I applied it. For the first time ever, rather than trying to fortify security code, I hacked it. I escaped."

I escaped my house in the dark of night, sneaking past the electronic and physical security alike. I'd been prepared, having already hacked the transport system to get tickets to a train across the country. And when I ran out of money, I found myself

creating a job on board a starship heading out into the universe, no return trip. Because there was no going back for me, nothing to keep me tethered to Earth. I deserved a new life, even if it was all built up on lies and false information inserted into databases.

“I refused to be used by my father for monetary gain,” I sneer. He does not get to sell me like cattle, just to be bred by the highest bidder. I am worth more than that!

I am worth more than that—words that I repeat to myself every single day. They kept me warm on the spaceship to Atraxis when I felt like I had abandoned everything behind. They kept me going when I was matched with a shitty husband, one who refused to even touch me. And they will keep me fighting for the right thing even when everyone else around me falls.

“Yes, Maya,” Volan says softly as he gazes down at me with a look I can’t quite make out, “You are worth everything.”

For the first time since my mother’s death, I cry. Really cry. And through it all, Volan holds me, his hands a comforting caress.

There’s no denying it anymore; I’m in love with Volan.

### Chapter Twenty

#### VOLAN

Guilt is a sensation I am wholly unfamiliar with. Yet it burns through my veins like liquid fire, scorching me from within as I watch Maya's excitement grow with each step we take toward our destination. Her eyes shine with determination, her fingers clutching that beloved device of hers as it guides our way.

"Talking to you was a major weight off of my shoulders. Thank you. I should have gotten therapy years ago," Maya laughs, tucking a curl of hair behind her ears. The way she glances at me from beneath her lashes, smiling gratefully...

She trusts me so completely that it makes my chest ache.

My steps clomp all the harder onto the rocks beneath my shoes, crumbling them into dust. Each step is almost painful, as if I am fighting my very muscles. My brain and body are at war with themselves, instincts demanding I care for Maya, while desire reminds me how close I am to my lifetime goal.

"Are we close?" Maya asks, her voice breathless with anticipation.

The weight of her story only makes this decision harder. Up ahead, the path splits; one direction leads directly to my kingdom, and the other to the location her map had marked.

"Soon," I reply to her question, undecided. Since when have I ever faltered on a

simple choice? For a ruler, this kind of indecision can lead to deaths and destruction... and yet for the first time in my life, Maya has me re-thinking everything.

“In all honesty,” Maya makes small talk as we travel, “when I set out on this quest... I admit that I was afraid. A strong part of me suspected that I wouldn’t be coming back.”

My steps falter as I listen to her so casually discuss how she expected to die. She knew the risks of leaving her village, and yet she still took them. She knew she wouldn’t likely ever see her village, her colony, ever again.

“Why?” I ask. “What was so important about coming here?”

“In my case, I don’t have a choice. I came to this planet for a new life. A fair life. One of my own making. If my people want to know what’s here, then it’s for a reason. I refuse to be used again.”

I breathe deep, letting my luminae flare bright. My fingers tremble as I stare at the junction before us.

A decision has to be made.

I can lead Maya to safety, present her to my father and people, claim her as my own... but wouldn’t I be just as bad as her people, the ones she has come to despise? Would she eventually run from me? Even though I’d chase her down—she would never escape me—it would tear me up inside to know she didn’t want to be with me as much as I crave every moment to be in her presence.

I want her to run to me, not from me.

The other option is to place her at great risk. To give her all the answers she needs and wants... and then watch her walk away. Because, knowing her, she won't want to stay. Not after she knows the truth about me, about my people.

One of us is going to be destroyed, body and soul, and I have to decide if it's me or her.

"Is this it?" Maya asks, coming to stand beside me. She squints down the two tunnels, eyeing the blackness with anticipation. Not a hint of fear or anxiety on her face.

Because she trusts me. To protect her, to guide her, to do the right thing by her.

And all this time, I've lied to her. I've hidden my identity from her, I've kept her in the dark about who my people are and the threat they pose to her own...

Maya gazes up at me as I stare down at her. She's no longer the scared female I first encountered, frozen in terror at the marketplace. With each passing day, I've noticed her growing stronger, more capable.

"Are we here, Volan?" Maya prompts at my silence. She reaches out and slips her small hand into my hand, entwining our fingers, our very souls.

Just like that, I know that I have to keep my promise to her.

It's the most logical option, after all. I can take her to where she wants to go, then we can visit my kingdom and father. The two aren't mutually exclusive. This decision has nothing to do with the fact that Maya deserves this and that I want to be the one to see to her needs, to make her happy.

"We are near my home," I tell her, voice gruff. I nod down the tunnel that I know like the lines on my palm.

How many times have I patrolled here, watching for intruders trying to steal what my people guard so zealously? And now, I bring one to our most sacred place... Am I betraying my people with this one act? All because I need a female to parade before my father?

I guide Maya the last stretch, tugging her along. I grip her fingers tightly, almost fearful that she'll wrench them from me.

Because she will, once she knows...

It doesn't take long for us to come to a standstill. The door before us is both inconspicuous and out of place—the metal is scratched, and it's so rusted that it blends in with its surroundings. In the dim light, most would walk right past it without noticing. A perfect way to hide our secrets from prying eyes. At least the ones that manage to sneak past our patrols.

"Is that a door?" Maya asks. "I guess I had expected something... more."

"Nervous?" I ask her, raising my brow. We've come all this way, and now suddenly she's back to looking anxious. Nowhere near as anxious as I am though, as I realize that I'm going to have to talk to her. I'll have to explain everything. Starting with what this place truly means to my people. The words lodge in my throat, choking me with their weight.

Maya approaches the door, pressing her hands against the cold metal surface. I watch as she pushes with all her might, trying to force it open. It doesn't budge.

My chest tightens as I observe her determination, her stubborn refusal to accept defeat. Even now, when her quest has led her to a literal dead end, she persists.

"Would you like some help?" I ask, desperately trying and failing to keep the smirk

from my face.

Of course, Maya glares at me. Her eyes accuse me of so many things, such as why I deem it necessary to ask her in the first place right through to implying she is incapable on her own.

“It might be easier if you help push, rather than just stand there, yes,” Maya replies with gritted teeth, still shoving her body weight against the unyielding metal.

“Why. Won’t. It. Budge?” She heaves, putting more of her body’s weight behind her efforts, her feet sliding across the dusty floor. With a growl she kicks at it. “It’s rusted shut!”

I chuckle, still amusedly watching her. The sound drifts over her in a way that makes her shiver—though whether from desire or annoyance, I can’t tell. Her wicked eyes, always challenging, flick to mine; but I don’t miss the way her cheeks darken as she becomes embarrassed.

“Allow me,” I tell her, pulling her aside with gentle hands, squeezing her arms with reassurance. “It’s pull, not push.”

Maya stares at me as I open the door with ease. It glides smoothly on its hinges, with barely any resistance whatsoever. There’s no groan of metal, no breaking through rust, and definitely no drag marks on the ground to indicate the door’s presence. My father would be furious if he knew that I was entering this room without his explicit permission. But then, my father would be furious about many things I’ve done recently.

“Oh for crying out loud!” Maya mutters. “I am a highly trained engineer. I design and build awesome tools and entire computer systems! How do you make everything look so easy? All I seem to ever do is look like a bumbling fool.”

“I adore everything about you, halvi.” I tell her. But ever one to see her twitch, to encourage that look of defiance, I add, “Just don’t trip on the step.”

I step through the doorway to the sound of Maya’s groan. The sound of frustration sends a thrill through me, reminding me of the noises she made when my body was hovering over hers, of every time I pushed deep inside of her.

“You drive me insane,” Maya mutters, lingering in the doorway. I don’t think she expects me to hear her, especially when she adds, “In all the right ways. Like seriously, I don’t know if I should slap that smirk off your face or strip you right here and now.”

That smirk grows bigger, splitting entirely across my face despite my efforts to contain it.

My little halvi is stronger than she thinks, and every time she stands up for herself, she gains confidence.

I step further into the room, leading the way. Suddenly, clinical white light flares around us as the panels on the ceiling begin to glow.

Maya gasps, eyes ping-ponging around the room as she takes it in.

Unlike the natural rock tunnel, this place is completely artificial. The floor is covered in dark tiles that don’t absorb light, smooth and buffed to an unnatural shine.

She takes in the wall of glass beakers and test tubes, the cluttered tables beneath them, the darkened monitors on the far wall.

Her confusion is palpable.



“Welcome to your destination,” I tell her, voice tight.

There’s no going back, I realize, for either of us. I have to tell Maya everything... including how she is now a risk to my people.

“But where is here? Or more importantly, what is here?” Her eyes search mine, demanding answers I’m reluctant to give.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what comes next.

“This is where my people make our medicine,” I tell her. “This lab is a secret place. Only a few people know its location.”

“Medicine?” Maya’s brow furrows as she processes this information. She looks around the room with new interest, trying to make sense of what she’s seeing. “But... but it’s a room in the middle of nowhere!”

“We’ve taken great efforts to destroy the man-made tunnels, to make the route we walked appear natural. All to avoid it being discovered.” I explain to her.

“Please explain something to me,” I say, turning to level my gaze at her. My heart beats furiously in my chest, and for the first time in my life I don’t care if my luminae is pulsing dramatically. “How did you have a detailed map to this lab? Very few know its location. Not even among my own people. And none of your people should at all.”

As gentle as I want to be with her with my line of questioning, I have to know the answers. The safety of my people, of potentially every single life on this planet, depends upon what she tells me. She doesn’t realize it, but if this information gets out, we could be facing mass murder or even extinction.

And I'm entirely responsible for what happens from here on out. I have to protect my people, my world, whether I like it or not. Love means nothing over duty.

I see the sudden realization in her eyes—the awareness that she's in way over her head. Her desperation has led to foolishness. She's followed a mysterious alien into the middle of nowhere. That she's alone with me, and no one even knows where she is.

Her earlier words ring true—she definitely won't be returning to her colony.

I hate myself in this moment. I hate that I've made her afraid, when all I've wanted is to protect her.

When did my quest become so twisted? When did I become the very thing I despise—a male who manipulates others for his own gain?

“I can trust you, right?” Maya asks, eyes wide. Genuine fear sliding across her face. “It's not like we're enemies or anything... right?”

I stare down at my mate, so much unsaid between us, knowing that I am the same as every villain in her life.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:37 pm*

### Chapter Twenty-One

MAYA

The skin on my neck prickles at Volan's sudden change of demeanor. He's demanding. He's suspicious.

And I'm suddenly very much aware that I've left the safety of Eve's Rest to go off with a mysterious alien that could very easily kill me if he wished to. No one even knows I'm here.

For someone so smart, I can sure be an idiot.

"I can trust you, right?" I ask, my body suddenly trembling before him. "It's not like we're enemies or anything... right?"

Right?

I trust Volan, don't I?

I'm going to have to trust him.

I don't have a choice. Have I ever? All my life has been one desperate move after another. Have I ever had the opportunity to actually decide anything for myself, to control my own fate?

I hate it. I haven't trusted someone this thoroughly for a long time. Volan could hurt

me, seriously. Not just physically either. The problem is that over the last few days, I've come to actually like the guy. And the problem with that is that it means I actually have started to care what he thinks.

I want him to like me.

I don't have any choice but to trust him.

But maybe he deserves my trust too. He's answered every one of my questions, often letting me ramble and talk, content to just listen. He has guided me somewhat safely here and even protected me from danger... twice. It's my own experiences and hangups that cause me to not trust men. I'm always seeing the worst in men, going so far as to find reasons not to trust them.

But he's not a man. At least, not a human man. He's definitely male—last night proved that.

Volan deserves more from me.

"It's a long story," I tell him. "I don't even know where to begin, to be honest."

"We have time, halvi," Volan replies. He has a pretty good poker face, but the guy can't seem to help the way his eyes soften whenever he looks at me. I could be wrong, but I'm guessing that his species uses luminae to communicate emotions more than they do facial expressions. Or maybe I'm just that good at reading him.

Still, it seems the very fact that I'm willing to talk to him is enough to release some of the energy within him. His shoulders relax ever so slightly, like he had been holding his breath and suddenly found a reason to let it out.

Did he expect me to lie to him, just as much as I expected him to trick me? All of my

reservations... they aren't his fault. They are simply a product of my life experiences.

An excuse is on the tip of my tongue. An excuse to just walk away from him and block him out from my life, like I do so many people. Yet, he's just as nervous as I am about my response. It's like he actually cares. It's like he thinks that I am worth waiting for. It's that reason alone that gives me the strength to finally talk.

"When my friend, Ariana, went missing from the colony, everyone thought she was dead. Caught and eaten by some wild beast, they said. It didn't help that Eve went missing several months before this, either."

I shake my head at the memories that rush through my mind. She'd been gone for weeks.

"Wait, two females went missing, and not a single male went searching for them?" Volan asks, his once expressionless face turning aghast. "What about your warriors, or hunters?"

He looks about ready to flee the room. To start a manhunt, I realize. Unlike the humans who couldn't be bothered to get off their asses and search for people they claimed as friends, this alien is ready to drop everything for people he never met.

His reaction only furthers the belief I have in him. I can trust Volan.

"Ariana was supposed to marry this guy called Walter. Instead of being worried out of his mind, he insisted she was dead. In fact, he immediately tried to seize all her assets for himself."

I grit my teeth, remembering how cold Walter Sullivan had acted after it was discovered that Ariana was missing.

“I’m pretty sure he only arranged a search party after a lot of people threw a fuss. He basically did it to save face with the colony residents, not because he cared for her at all.”

Of course, when he asked for volunteers for a search party, a whole host of people suddenly were willing. Not a single one of those people cared about Ariana. They only wanted the money Walter offered as a reward, or a chance to rub shoulders with one of the rich of the colony.

“So, I did some...uhhh... not so legal research into him,” I look up at Volan waiting for the moment that he realizes I’ve committed a crime. I wait for him to draw back in disgust and judge me as some sort of criminal. Life is harsh in this world and the smallest infraction can lead to disastrous consequences.

But Volan doesn’t reject me. Instead, he motions for me to continue talking.

Honestly, it feels good to tell someone. The only other person I had to talk to about this was Stacy, and she’s barely an adult—nowhere near ready for this kind of situation.

“Walter’s been hiding things from us, like how Ariana was rich. He’d led her to believe she was so poor she was unable to even afford food! The number of times I had made some lame excuses to visit her, taking food with me just so she had something to eat...”

Ariana is a good person. She’s loving and kind and generous. And maybe a little wild and stubborn, but that’s part of her charm. She’s the kind of girl who’d stick up for you no matter what. She’d go to war just to protect you.

She’s the kind of woman I wish I was like—strong, resourceful, and independent. Capable.

I breathe deep, feeling that constant anger inside of me flaring to life.

“Walter was trying to marry her for her money. He didn’t care about her at all; he just wanted her assets.”

She deserved better. We all deserve better. No one should be forced to marry someone they don’t want.

I should have spoken out against Walter when he was pressuring Ariana to marry him.

I should have done something. Anything.

“I can’t let it happen again,” I vow. “Whatever it takes. I won’t let it happen again.”

I won’t let these sorts of injustices happen anymore. Someone has to stand up for what’s right in this crazy universe. If no one else will do it, then it’ll have to be me.

“When I was researching Walter, I realized he was up to something. So I hacked his communication logs. He’d been manipulating and blackmailing council members.”

It had been ridiculously easy to find the relevant communication logs and realize something was going on outside of public eyesight. Aren’t villains supposed to hide this sort of stuff better?

Walter got cocky, and it’ll be his undoing.

“As a community, colonization should be our top priority. You know, survive the coming years without starving, that sort of thing. Yet, that didn’t seem to be Walter’s focus.”

I heave a sigh, frustration seeking a way out of my body through my rapid breathing. I want to jump to my feet and pace, to just... hit something. Actually, make that someone; Walter's face would be a pretty ideal target right about now.

“On the day we met, I took my chance while everyone was distracted. I hacked the colony databases right at the source, getting access to the most restricted of content. Top-tier classified stuff. All these diagrams and land surveys... things that Walter shouldn't have access to, let alone be interested in. I need to know why these places are so important to him. It's the evidence I need to bring him to justice.”

“That's how I ended up here, Volan. Honestly, as far as most of us at the colony know, this place doesn't exist. Most of us just want a chance at living and a proper future, one that we make for ourselves. We didn't even know you were here. With proper introductions though, we'd probably rejoice in having your people as neighbors.”

Whatever tension Volan was holding dissipates. His shoulders slump, and for the first time he sucks in a deep, cleansing breath. His luminae glows between us, the erratic pulsing slowing to a steady light. It's soothing, a night light chasing away my darkest fears.

“Is that what you want?” Volan asks, stepping closer. Heat radiates from his body, and I find myself gravitating toward him. I press my face against his firm pecs, breathing in the spicy scent that's all Volan. Its warmth fills my nostrils and floods my lungs. A comfort in this crazy, pain-filled world. He's proven to be someone I can rely on, to truly trust.

I gaze up at Volan, wishing he had the answers to all my questions. Of course, that would be too much to hope for. A bit like wishing for a guy that wants to both cook and clean while you put your feet up to watch vids. This close to Volan, I have to really crane my neck. I can't help but wonder if he gets a sore neck looking down at



me all the time? No wonder he calls me little.

“You aren’t supposed to exist, Volan.”

It feels like an end all statement, one that should provoke gasps and disbelief. Instead, Volan’s shoulders shake. His lips press into thin lines, and his cheek hollows as he sucks at them. He tries so hard, but after a moment he snorts with laughter.

“Volan!” I playfully smack him lightly on the shoulder. With my strength, it’s more of a tap than anything. Still, just like that, any lingering tension between us disappears. Somehow, again, he’s made this whole situation seem more manageable and less overwhelming. Despite the situation, he’s able to make me laugh. He pulls me from the pit of despair that seems to have become my life lately.

“Last I checked, I am very much alive and existing,” he replies. His arms wrap around me, pulling me flush against his body. He grinds his hips against me, and there’s no mistaking the rigid bar that presses into my stomach. He whispers heated words into my ear, “And I am very willing to prove that if you need to.”

“But seriously,” I tell him, “galactic laws state that a government can’t colonize a planet if it’s already occupied by sentient life... but Earth knew. Walter’s communications made that clear. So why did Earth lie?”

“There are quite a lot of aliens living on this planet,” Volan admits, a growing crease forming between his brows. “Some friendly, and some it’d be best for you to avoid.”

I nod, just accepting what he says as truth. I wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of aliens. Somehow almost every other species has evolved to be bigger, more dangerous, and definitely more predatory. I mean, come on—we lack claws, sharp teeth, talons, poison, thick skin... Without our tools and weapons, we are defenseless. And aliens have invented their own weapons too, just to one-up us again.

“All we know is that Walter was very interested in the locations on the map, and it’s led us here.”

“Everyone wants the medicine,” Volan growls, his lips peeling back to reveal sharp teeth. He casts a frustrated gaze over the room. With his expression, I wouldn’t be surprised if he went on a rampage, destroying all the medical equipment around us. “It’s led to so much pain and suffering over the years. Some just want to save their loved ones... others want the power it provides. It’s why my people hid this lab in the first place. It’s why we limit who gets it and how much.”

“And the other locations, because I can only assume they are labs?” I ask. “Did you hide them too?”

Volan turns and scowls at me, his expression thunderous. “I only know of this one lab.”

The implications are clear and don’t need to be spoken aloud.

Ever since Earth discovered the existence of aliens, in a most dramatic way, war has threatened us. Some humans refuse to accept aliens among us, and there’s a constant threat on the surface from rebel and terrorist groups. Then there are species willing to prey upon us for our resources. We joined the Galactic Federation for safety, only to find that they too have their own villains to contend with. With this medicine, it’ll change everything. No one has this level of healing ability... yet. Super soldiers are a thing. The most elite soldiers use mechanized armor to use any advantage they can get—and that includes protecting them from wounds that could fester in unsanitary and dangerous environments. If they could be healed near instantaneously... If a soldier can just get back up from the point of death and continue fighting... If it really makes someone indestructible... what happens when governments get their hands on something so powerful?

Fear washes through me. War throughout the entire universe might just get that much more violent. Nowhere will be safe, especially if the wrong people get their hands on this near-mythical technology. And who's to stop the good guys if they decide to use it against us smaller folk?

It's been a long time since I felt safe.

No, that's not quite right. I glance up at Volan. He makes me feel safe. After all the pain men have put me through, I didn't think I could trust any male again, and then Volan proved that belief wrong. In just the space of a few days, he's broken me down, torn apart all my beliefs and preconceptions, and left them shattered at my feet. And yet, despite feeling so vulnerable and naked in front of him... I don't feel like he's going to destroy me. It's like he's taken all the bad things from me—the hate, the anger, and pain—and has given me the space to feel good again.

I feel like, with him by my side, I can heal again.

Which is so ironic, given that I'm literally holding some miracle medicine in my hands.

“Walter isn't just working for himself, Volan. If what I uncovered is true, he's here on behalf of Earth's military.” I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling cold. “I fear that war is coming.”

### Chapter Twenty-Two

VOLAN

War is coming.

Maya's observation and fear strike me hard. How am I supposed to protect my people if war is brought to our doorstep?

My people barely survived the last one.

I gaze down at the small human in my arms. Maya is telling the truth. I believe her explicitly. Also, she's terrible at hiding secrets—every emotion, every thought she has is projected onto her face.

She can't return to her people. Even if this is the evidence she needs against this despicable male, Walter... it's the evidence that will damn my people, my planet, maybe even the galaxy.

I need to take her to my kingdom. I still need to flaunt her in front of my father to gain my rightful place on the throne, but more importantly, I need to warn my people. If we are to expect war, preparations must be made. Warriors need to train, defenses need to be built...

We need to guard the lab. We need to scout out the other locations and protect those too.

We are Sulthari, warriors meant to guide others through hard times. It's our destiny, our very purpose in life. Our very luminae remind us of the fact daily - that we are meant to be others' guiding light, especially in the darkest of moments.

Guilt tightens my chest as I stare down at my little halvi. Maya won't want to come to my kingdom. She expects to return to her own people... She's given me something truly precious: her trust. Even when she trusts no one else.

I kept saying I wanted to keep her, imagining at the time all the simple carnal pleasures we could enjoy together once we were home, but I never thought about how my decision would impact her. The fate of her entire colony rests in her hands, and I'm taking away her choice and ability to save them. With my actions, I am condemning her people.

Is this the fate of a ruler? Is this why my father is so feared, and why over the years he has become a shell of himself—a male that avoids all connections with others, even his own son? As a prince, I take, take, take. I am just like my own father, and I never realized the parallel until today.

I've taken Maya's hope, her love, her trust... and I've taken her free will.

I've made her a slave.

I'm no better than the very aliens my people fought against. The very reason my people came to be on this planet. The very reason we now live in darkness.

Maya is my mate.

I need to tell her. She needs to know how I feel. I should tell her everything; who I am, what I need her to do... but the words won't come forth.

Because if I tell her, she will hate me. She will reject me and leave me in these darkened tunnels alone... and I'm not sure I'll find the strength to go on without her by my side. I can't lose Maya now. I need this female more than I need to live.

I just want one more day with her. A chance to see her smile again, to hear her laugh. Is that too much to ask? One day to enjoy her company before I reveal it all?

"Volan, are you okay?"

Maya asks. Her hand caresses my arm, soothing.

She trusts me...

If I am to be worthy of that trust, then I must earn it. I may have lost my honor, but I can restore it. If Maya has taught me one thing, it's that we define ourselves in the moments of our desperation.

I'll give her everything she has ever asked for, everything that she deserves. I'll show her my kingdom. I'll make her my Queen, and then, I'll order my armies to free her beloved people from their corrupt leaders. I'll see to it that this little female who has been so poorly treated throughout her life will become the most respected on Atraxis. No one will ever wrong her again, otherwise they will face me personally.

"Can you do something for me?" she asks.

"Anything," I reply without hesitation. I'd give her the entire planet if I could.

"Kiss me."

"Kiss you?" I blink down at her. I had expected her to ask me to wage war or to personally seek out her enemies... Instead, her cheeks have the faintest color to them,

barely perceptible on her dark skin.

“Just once, I want to feel lo—cared for. I trust you Volan. Please, take care of me,” her plea is whispered, her voice husky.

“You are,” I tell her. My lips press against hers. Not hard and demanding, but soft. I have a tendency to push people around me to their limits, and Maya has met hers today. She’s far stronger than I ever imagined. I couldn’t admire her more. So when she asks for me to show how much she means to me, her request couldn’t be easier to fulfill.

She means more than life.

She moans as my tongue grazes her teeth. It’s nearly my undoing. I’m always hard around her. Always needy. Her little pants and gasps threaten to take me over that edge of pleasure. But not without hers first. She will always come first.

“I’m going to take such good care of you,” I groan into the warmth of her mouth. I take her kisses from her, demand everything from her...

My lips move from hers to her neck. I nip at her with sharp teeth, enjoying the way she gasps. She’s completely willing and trusting in my arms, tilting her head back to reveal her slender neck. So vulnerable. All mine to protect and savor. Mine to pleasure.

My hand wraps around her breast, squeezing. I want to tear the fabric away, but some level of sanity remains. I can’t parade her through my city later naked. I refuse to allow another male to gaze upon her soft flesh, coveting what is mine. If she were in my chambers, it would be a different matter though—her clothing would be rags already.

Maya must sense my urgency, or feel it herself, as she's quick to peel her clothing off. I pause long enough for the fabric to be removed, before I'm latching onto her perky nipple. It's already a hard little bead, just begging for attention.

She whimpers, her hands threading through my hair as I feast upon her.

"Yes, Volan," she mutters as my other hand plucks at the other lonely bud. Her scent floods the room, ripe with her arousal. I breathe it deep into my lungs, imprinting it to memory. This is what she asked for. This is what she deserves—her every pleasure given to her. I won't stop for anything. Not even when she begs. By the time I am done with her, she will be the most thoroughly loved female in the universe.

My teeth graze down her stomach, nipping at the soft flesh. I glance up at her when she raises herself onto elbows. Her wide eyes are heated. They flutter when my heated breath ghosts over her lower lips. Beneath my hands, her thighs quiver. She's so very close already.

I gaze down at her slickness with pride. She's ready for me. I've made her feel this way. Me.

I dip my finger into her, catching her arousal and bringing it to my lips. Her sweetness explodes upon my tongue. I could feast upon her for the rest of my life and never grow thirsty.

"I'm ready," Maya declares. Her hips buck beneath me, unfulfilled need running through her veins.

"I plan to take my time with you," I tell her. Her eyes glare at me in return, which only brings an answering smirk to my lips.

Maya's fingers grip my hair, tugging painfully at my scalp. It only heightens my own



pleasure, my desire to pin her down and have my way with her.

“Oh, my little halvi, you thought you were in control, did you?”

I run my tongue through her folds, giving her clit a light suck. Maya arches beneath me so violently that I am nearly thrown off. Her climax washes over her. A breathless cry echoes around us as her legs quiver, squeezing against my ribs. She practically sobs her pleasure.

I grin up at her. Next time she explodes, it'll be around my finger. And maybe I'll have her mouth wrapped around my cock, sucking me dry. Only once she's begging me, will I give her what she truly needs. Of course, she'll be on her hands and knees. Maybe later on her back too.

“Oh, dear sweet Maya. I've only just begun.”

### Chapter Twenty-Three

MAYA

My body is thrumming already; the wash of my climax hasn't done anything to take the edge off my need. It's probably got to do with the way that Volan looms over me, pinning me in place. His body is immovable—sharp muscle, chiseled to perfection. Intimidating. Dangerous. Lethal.

A thrill goes through me at the threat that Volan radiates as he stares down at me with hungry eyes. He's beyond human, beyond anything I have imagined possible. It wouldn't take much for him to destroy me. With barely any effort, he could take everything from me, he could use me however he saw fit... and of course, my body responds to that image.

I want to be used.

My empty sex clamps down, dripping with my need. I whimper as I claw at my alien lover, whispering pleas.

Volan nips my thighs with sharp teeth. The feeling of them scraping, never breaking the skin but oh so close to sensitive and intimate areas...

"Place your feet over my shoulders," he tells me, already guiding my legs into position.

His head dips between my thighs again. He doesn't give me any chance to recover,

any chance to prepare myself. His tongue slides through my slick folds, and the noise he makes... it sounds like he's a starving man, and he's just tasted food for the first time. Desperate bliss. Each slurp, each moan, is obscene. And it all adds to the growing tension that's building inside my body. Within moments, he has me writhing on the floor beneath him, begging.

His fingers press into me, spearing me, and I pant as they slide in and out smoothly. I'm so wet for him, my body desperate to be filled. My channel grips him, but it's not enough.

Volan chuckles, eyes flaring as he watches my hips buck beneath his attention.

"I could keep this up all day, my little halvi."

I whimper. I want him to. But I also wouldn't survive it. Already I'm coiling, a pit growing in my stomach desperately as every muscle grows tighter and tighter.

He shifts until his body's hovering over mine, his fingers still pumping and stroking and touching that place. His mouth descends, latching onto my nipple.

I'm close. I'm so close.

And then the bastard pulls away.

I could sob. I could scream and hit him and beg.

Before I get the chance though, he's lining up his cock to my entrance and pressing forward. There's a moment of tension as my body tries to adjust to his size—that moment when the air stands still and neither of us breathes.

Then he breaks through, pushing deep. He spears into me with a harsh growl on his

lips.

I don't even get a chance to breathe as he pulls back, what little oxygen in my body whooshing out of me as he slams back home. Deep, touching places that shouldn't possibly be reached.

Again.

And again.

He's got no restraint as his hips grind against mine, and I have no control as I cling to him, gasping and crying out.

And all the while, he stares down at me, eyes brightly searing into me with a heat I've never seen before. He looks at me like I am the very air that he breathes, that our shouts don't deplete the oxygen in our bodies. He looks at me as if...

As if I'm loved.

I explode.

A part of me knows that I'm screaming, but it sounds so far away. His own guttural roar echoing and mixing with mine.

Wave after wave of pure lightning flows through my body. My body seizes, arching, gyrating. All to get more, more of him.

I can't get enough of him.

Because he offers me unparalleled pleasure. And if his expression is anything to go by as he looks down at me, he can't get enough of me.

And I want that. I desperately wish to belong, to be loved, to be cared for.

With trembling fingers, I reach up and cup his face. His heated breath washes over my skin, and it nearly breaks me when he turns to press a gentle kiss to my palm.

He holds himself up above me so as not to crush me... but what weight is on me, my breasts pressed tightly against his chest, feels nice.

Volan's strong. He's got muscles for days. Bulging, toned, and chiseled. He's dangerous and wild as he stares down at me. For once, he's not smirking, but instead looking at me with a dazzling smile. One that says he's good and he knows it... and to be fair, he deserves it after that performance.

His luminae glows between us, reminding me that he's not entirely human. Once, I would have hated that aspect of him... but I want him. I can't help but wonder if we had met at a different time and place in our lives, would we still find our way to each other's sides?

I want to think that we would have.

Because I one hundred percent have fallen in love with my alien... and this time, I accept my heart's decision fully.

Things are finally, finally, going my way... and I couldn't be happier.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### VOLAN

“M aya?” I call as I slip back into the room on silent feet. I push the door behind me closed, ensuring that our voices won’t echo down the tunnels. Across the room, Maya is still curled up asleep where I left her, wrapped up in my cloak. She’s not cold, not if the fully clothed leg thrust from beneath the material or the flushed cheeks mean anything; she just wanted to cling to something.

A shame it wasn’t me. It should have been me. Preferably while she was still naked. But I had plenty to do, and took the opportunity while she rested.

I could have taken her with me this morning, but I wanted her to rest. After I was done with her last night, she was utterly exhausted. I’m honestly surprised that I’m even up and about, feeling as invigorated as I do—yet she makes me feel more alive than I have ever felt before.

If she’s sleeping this late, then I’ve pushed her too hard, I realize. I marched her across the Atraxis surface, and then through tunnels non-stop. I barely paused for a rest after the scampers found us, fearing more tracking us. On top of that, she’s reassessed her entire past, forced to truly consider who she is and what her priorities are in life. The emotional turmoil she’s been experiencing... it’s enough to make even a warrior falter.

I faltered.

I keep failing her. I should have told Maya last night, but instead, I let my desire for her sweep me up. It really wasn't hard to do so when she was begging me so sweetly to kiss her.

I no longer have a choice. Time is running out, especially now that I've set things in motion. I must wake her and explain who I truly am. I'll ask her to meet my father, my people, and I'll reveal my whole plan.

Yet even as I kneel beside her, my hand hovering over her shoulder, I find myself unable to wake her.

Will she still want me after I reveal everything? Will she turn to look at me with greed in her eyes, not love, once she knows that I am a prince? What if she decides that she doesn't want me, my omissions too great a blow to her trust? Or what if she wants to return to the surface, to her own people, rather than live with my own?

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I'll figure it out. If I have to live on the surface just to be with her, I'll gladly do it. Besides, didn't I want my people to embrace the light once again—literally? For so long now, we've been living in the dark. Maya is our future. She's my future.

I have no doubt that in time she'll come to care for my people. As long as they are given the chance. As long as she gives me the chance.

The more I think about my new plan, the more I find myself determined. I will convince her to stay with me. I will take my rightful place as king, and I will save our people.

I run my hand over her shoulder, gently shaking her to consciousness. If I touch her any more than necessary, I risk everything. I'll all too easily fall back beneath the covers with her, the temptation to stroke her soft skin overwhelming.

She blinks up at me groggily. The soft smile she gives me is nearly my undoing. She reaches for me... and I thrust the food that I've gathered while she slept into her hands.

"I brought you food," I tell her, hastily making a retreat a few steps away. I pull another sobra bulb from a pouch, turning my focus entirely on the act of peeling it and shoving it into my mouth. Its juices taste like ash, nothing at all like Maya's sweetness. I find no pleasure in eating the fruit.

Maya, on the other hand, clearly enjoys it, moaning as she takes a bite. Her eyes meet mine, challenging and suggestive.

"You know, I was thinking," Maya states, pausing as she takes another bite of her fruit. Her lips glisten wetly with the juices, and I can barely stop myself from crawling over to her to sample the flavor. Would it taste better than mine? Probably.

"You are always thinking, halvi," I force myself to reply. If there's one thing that I've learned about Maya, it is that her mind is brilliant. Give her a problem, and she doesn't let go; too stubborn to give up. Her persistence is an inner strength that so many lack, even the strongest of warriors. Combined with her selflessness, she'd make a formidable queen.

"How did your people even make the medicine?" Maya asks. "Entire races have been trying to make a miracle cure like this for, well, thousands of years. Everything I've seen of your world... right now, we're hidden underground in a small lab that doesn't even look remotely big enough to research something like this."

And just like that, my pleasant thoughts flee.

I stare resolutely at the ground, trying to gather my distracted thoughts. This is not a topic that any of my people enjoy talking about. It's definitely not one that I want to



share with her... though I must.

“I do not want you to think lesser of me,” I tell her, voice quiet. If she was anyone else, I would never make this omission. I would never reveal this weakness to anyone other than her. All my life I have been trying to prove my worth... and I’m finding that the only person who I want to truly see me now is Maya. The rest can be damned. As long as I have her.

“I doubt that’s possible,” she responds. Her expression turns disappointed as she continues, “I know this place is a secret, Volan. If you don’t want to, or can’t tell me, then it’s okay...”

“I want to,” I reply, quite abruptly. I heave a sigh as I run a hand through my hair. Is this how Maya felt when I interrogated her so briskly, demanding answers? The realization just adds to the weight in my stomach, the guilt growing ever more.

I’m starting to realize that I might never measure up, that I am truly not ready to lead my people as a king. How could I when I don’t even consider Maya’s goals? I’m always so focused on what I want, that I never consider others’ needs and wants.

“Many years ago, a facility was established here. My people were... involved. The original owners needed to keep the location discreet and secure—thus they chose to build everything underground to avoid unwanted detection. The entire area is riddled with naturally formed tunnels and caverns. The building must have been easy, just reinforce some areas, smooth the walls...”

“They were researching how to bioengineer the medicine,” Maya makes the assumption. “It makes sense that such research would need to be secured. Medical companies go to lengths to protect their intellectual property.”

I simply nod, unable to say anything more. I should, but the words get caught up in

my throat.

I suddenly realize that I've never truly feared rejection, until now. Not even all those times that I petitioned my father to let me take the throne mattered as much as this moment does. To be honest, I've never even had a reason to fear the rejection. Back then, I saw the throne as something I was simply entitled to, not something that I should earn.

My father may have been right; maybe I truly am not ready for leading our people.

How can they trust me, when I can't even bring myself to tell my own mate the truth? I haven't truly earned her trust—not with how I've lied and misled her. It makes my reveal all the more difficult, given how tightly she clings to the concept and belief of trust.

The thing is, I'm certain if Maya knew the full truth, she'd turn away from me in disgust.

"My people were hired by the owners as security," I try to explain to her. Somehow, my voice comes out even—not at all like the trembling that I feel inside. "We are warriors and fighters, first and foremost."

"I see that!" Maya smiles at me, completely oblivious to my turmoil. "I've never felt safer than in your presence."

I flinch.

"You don't understand," I tell her with choked words. How can I explain to her the complexities of why every tribe on this planet hates my people, the sulthari? Why we hide in the shadows from everyone, including ourselves?

“We were hired to fight off any intruders, to keep things running smoothly and in order.” To keep people in line, I think bitterly.

“So you’ll get in trouble for bringing me here?” she asks, eyebrows creasing together.

I groan, as I sink my head into my hands and rub at tired eyes. In all my life I have never had to consider my words more carefully. I’ve always just sort of blurted out what I want, and things just came my way. I realize now that it’s not going to work like that anymore.

Was it ever? Once I took the throne, I couldn’t just do as I wanted. There are consequences to my actions, and I’m starting to truly realize that now.

“We don’t need to be intruders,” Maya suddenly states, determination filling her eyes. “My people came here for a new start at life, not to cause trouble. What if you come back to Eve’s Rest with me? We could reveal Walter’s plans, his machinations, to everyone. Once the council sees that you are a good guy and that you’re on the side of justice, I’m sure they’ll trust you. In fact, they’ll want to work with your people. Sure, maybe we’ll have to sign a few non-disclosure agreements with your employers, but who hasn’t signed a few in their lifetime?”

Her laughter fills the air, and with it comes a surge of hope. That maybe, just maybe, her people will overlook my people’s past mistakes and instead focus on what can be built together. They need protection—that much is clear given that they’ve just been attacked by a singular tribe of Harckana—and the sulthari can provide that. We have the experience fighting them off on a regular basis, after all.

“You’d do this for me?” I ask. “You’d ask your people to make an alliance with mine? We could trade goods regularly. We wouldn’t have to hide to survive. We could do so much more. You and I…”

Before I even realize it, I've crawled my way to her side and grabbed her hand in mine. I hold on to her like a lifeline. This is everything I have ever wanted. She's offering the very thing that I have dreamt all my life!

"Maya..." I say, leaning toward her. I gaze into her eyes, searching their depths. She's so hopeful, just like I am. She'll forgive me, right? Together, we'll find solutions and carve out a future—one where we both benefit. I'll protect her people, save them even, and she'll be my queen, never wanting for anything. I'll dedicate my life to making her happy, blessed to see her smile and laugh each and every day.

"Yes?" Maya asks, voice breathy.

"There's something I've been wanting to discuss with you," I tell her. "I want to be completely honest with you. After spending the last few days with you, I've realized you mean a lot to me and..."

I have to tell her everything, and I'm determined more than ever now.

"Maya, I'm not?—"

I never get to tell her that I'm not who she thinks I am.

Behind us, the door to the lab smashes open, pushed violently open, slamming against the wall with a thud that echoes through the room and down the tunnels.

Immediately, I'm standing in front of Maya, weapons drawn. My trusty daggers held in my palm, the leather-wrapped hilts are a familiar and welcome presence beneath my grip.

I knew we'd have company, but not like this. Not right now. This is an intruder. A threat. Absolutely nothing I have strived for in my life will be worth it if I don't have

Maya by my side, safe and protected. I firm my jaw. I refuse to lose her. Nothing, and I swear nothing, will hurt Maya ever again. I will protect her with my life. On this, I vow.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

MAYA

“M aya...”

I hold my breath as Volan leans closer to me. His pale blue eyes search mine, flickering between them as if he’s gathering courage. For once, my fierce warrior looks uncertain, vulnerable even. Honestly, I get it. This moment feels huge between us. My heart pounds so hard I swear he must hear it. I grip my skirt to hide my shaking fingers.

“Yes?” I manage to whisper, my voice barely audible.

Is he going to ask me to be his mate? I’ve spent my whole life keeping people at arm’s length, never allowing myself to be vulnerable after being betrayed by my father. But with Volan... I want to trust him. I do trust him.

“Maya, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Volan says, his voice deep and husky. He pauses, drawing in a steadying breath. “I want to be completely honest with you. After spending the last few days with you, I’ve realized you mean a lot to me and...”

My breath catches. This is it. After everything we’ve been through together—the scampers, the hot springs, the shared intimacies both physical and emotional—he’s finally going to ask me. A part of me can’t believe I’m here, in this moment, actually wanting an alien to claim me. He’s given me hope, a reason to believe in the future. I

can actually see myself happy, rather than this desperate and scared person I've become.

All because of him. Volan isn't just any male. He's proven himself over and over again.

"Maya, I'm not?—"

The heavy door to the room suddenly swings open, slamming against the wall with a loud bang. Within moments, Volan's standing in front of me, knife in hand, his body a shield between me and whoever just interrupted us.

I scramble to my feet, though far less gracefully than Volan. His massive cloak that I'd been using as a blanket tangles around my legs, and I nearly trip.

Peering around Volan's broad back, I spot two aliens in the doorway. More aliens. Because apparently Atraxis is crawling with them despite what Earth told us. One is covered in blue iridescent scales that catch the light, while the other is a massive green giant that reminds me of the harkcana that attacked the colony.

Neither looks all that impressed to see us.

"You!" Volan exclaims, pointing his dagger at them. He shifts his stance wider, clearly trying to hide me from view.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Endearing as his protectiveness is, I'm not some delicate flower who needs constant shielding. Haven't I proven I can hold my own by now?

"Ohhh, I remember you!" The green alien replies, sounding delighted. He nudges his companion excitedly oblivious to how close he comes to impaling himself on the blue

male's spikes. "Hey, Melvall, this is Vulgar, the one I told you about."

Vulgar? I bite my lip to keep from laughing. The expression on Volan's face is priceless.

"Volan," he corrects, his lip curling with distaste.

"Are you sure?" The green alien asks, looking genuinely confused.

"What?" Volan sounds completely baffled. "Am I sure? About what? My own name?! Of course, I'm bloody well sure!"

"Zoran, I'm pretty sure he's not called Vulgar," the blue alien—Melvall—says with a shake of his head.

"I mean, maybe his parental unit disliked him. I could see it happening!" Zoran defends, his green cheeks darkening. "Are you certain your name isn't Vulgar?"

"My name is Volan. Volan," my sulthari repeats slowly, as if talking to a child.

I watch this exchange with growing disbelief. Are they seriously arguing about Volan's name? We're in a secret underground lab, just discovered by two strangers, and they're debating whether his parents were in their right minds when they named him. Worse, Zoran doesn't seem to be taunting Volan; he genuinely seems quite confused. There's no point arguing; it's like playing a game of chess with a bird - it's just going to walk around knocking everything over, shitting on every argument Volan makes. From now on, we shall call him Vulgar, whether he likes it or not.

"What are you doing here?" Volan demands, finally getting to the point.

The green one—Zoran—looks at his feet, shuffling them. The picture of a child



caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“We have agreed to not talk about that moment,” Melvall sighs, patting Zoran on the back. For someone who appears slender next to the bulky green alien, he sends Zoran stumbling with that casual touch. Mental note: don’t underestimate the blue one.

“It’s not my fault! They had a Tangler!” Zoran exclaims. “I didn’t sign up for that sort of challenge. That’s just ridiculous.”

Volan sucks in a breath, which immediately puts me on alert. Anything that makes Volan nervous is something I definitely should be worried about.

I slip out from behind Volan’s protective stance, ignoring his disapproving glare. “What’s a tangler?” I ask, stepping up beside him.

Zoran’s eyes light up at my question.

“A tangler is a massive beast,” he explains, gesturing widely with his hands. “It lives almost exclusively underground. It’s got these long tentacles that snake out through the tunnels searching for prey. It lies in wait until you are most vulnerable, and then bam it’ll catch you and drag you to its waiting mouth, which is filled with thousands of teeth and...”

“And they are rare,” Volan interrupts, shooting Zoran a look. I appreciate the intervention; my imagination was already conjuring up nightmare fuel. “There’s only one that I know of, and last I heard from our scouts it’s closer to the Drakoon settlement than here. Thankfully if you know what to look for, which I do, it’s easily avoided.”

I exhale slowly, leaning against Volan despite myself. The warmth of his body against mine is reassuring, and I catch his chest puffing out slightly at my show of

trust. Men—well, males—really are all the same across species, aren't they?

“You didn't actually answer my question,” Volan says, turning his attention back to the two aliens. “Why are you here?”

“Medicine, why else?” Melvall replies with a casual shrug.

“I thought this was a secret place,” I say, giving Volan a pointed look. “Or is this like one of those places where every kid swears it's secluded and elusive, despite the entire town calling it make-out point?”

Volan opens his mouth to respond, then closes it. Clearly, dealing with the intruders takes priority, but I still can't help that little voice in my head that points out that Volan didn't immediately deny my accusation. It's something that we will apparently need to discuss later.

“How long have you been stealing from us?” he asks the pair.

“Stealing?” Melvall's spiked brow ridge arches upward. “It's not like you made it.”

I scowl. No, because Volan's employers made it. Taking something that isn't yours is still stealing...

“It doesn't matter!” Volan replies, frustration raising his voice. “The lab is inside Sulthari territory, therefore it is ours.”

Melvall snorts. “Next thing you know, he's going to start telling us all about the agreement our ancestors made, like we are younglings hearing of it for the first time.”

“The treaty is important!” Volan growls, taking a step forward.

I grab Volan's arm, halting him in his tracks. The last thing we need is a fight right now. These aliens outnumber us, and even though I've got my slingshot, I'm pretty sure I'll be useless in this kind of fight. Disgusting, creepy, and non-sentient bugs will not strategize a battle like these guys will.

I'm starting to get the feeling there's a lot more history between these species than Volan has let on—has he kept something from me? That little voice, that doubt, is starting to really sing inside now, really catching my attention.

"Oh please, your people forced the 'treaty' on us," Melvall replies bitterly, crossing his arms across his chest. The sharp fins along his elbows glitter dangerously in the low light.

Is this male's entire body built for warfare? Yeah, we definitely want to avoid a fight if we can.

"If it wasn't for the sulthari, none of your people would have found their way to the surface," Volan snaps back.

I watch the argument unfold, trying to piece together the fragments of information. There's clearly some conflict between their species—something major that's potentially shaped the entire dynamic of this planet. Something no one bothered to tell the human colonists about when they sent us here.

So why didn't Volan tell me? He's had plenty of chances.

Volan runs a hand over his face, looking exhausted. For the first time, I notice the tired lines around his eyes, the slight droop of his shoulders. He's carrying a burden I don't fully understand.

"Is that what your people have told you, Prince Volan? Because the harkcana tell of a

different tale,” Zoran states casually, like he’s discussing the weather.

Wait. What?

“Prince?” The word escapes me in a small gasp.

Time seems to freeze as Volan slowly turns to face me, his luminous eyes flashing brilliantly. The floor beneath my feet feels unsteady, like the solid rock has suddenly turned to sand.

“Prince?” I repeat, my voice stronger this time, demanding an answer.

The guilt that crosses Volan’s face is unmistakable.

“You’re a prince,” I say flatly, backing away from him. It’s not a question anymore. The truth is written all over his face, in the guilty pulse of his luminae.

Not some random warrior who happened to cross my path in the marketplace. Not just any sulthari male looking for adventure. A prince. The betrayal cuts deep, reopening wounds I thought had begun to heal.

The trust I’d so carefully built with Volan—that I’d fought my own fears and past traumas to offer him—begins to crack. All this time, he’s kept this from me. Let me believe he was someone else. Someone I could trust as an equal.

I’d opened up to him, told him things I’d never told anyone. I’d shared my body with him, my fears, my quest. And he couldn’t even tell me who he really was?

I feel like such a fool. Again. How many times will I let myself be betrayed before I learn? My father. James. Walter. And now Volan. Always men hiding their true intentions, always using me for their own purposes.

No one ever cares about me!

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling suddenly cold. I'd thought Volan was different. I'd started to believe that maybe, just maybe, I could trust someone again.

I should have known better.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

MAYA

“M aya, I can explain...” Volan says, taking a step towards me. He’s staring down at me with wide eyes, panicked.

My gaze jumps between his eyes, searching. Zoran’s wrong. It can’t be true; Volan’s just another guy like me. He’s not anyone special. He certainly isn’t some prince. He would have told me if he was...

And he definitely wouldn’t keep a secret like this from me, not after everything we’ve been through.

But as I stare up at him, his expression all but confirms it.

“Just give me a moment to deal with them, and I’ll explain everything. Please, Maya.”

I back away until my back hits the wall. If I make a run for it now, will I get away, or will Volan chase me?

Of course, that thought sends an unexpected pulse through my body. Bad Maya!

The reality staring me in the face is far more bitter. It all makes sense now—his unexplained absence this morning when I briefly woke up, the way he was so eager to bring me to this lab, how he somehow knew exactly where we were going without

consulting my map. His movements too confident, his knowledge too precise.

I press a hand against my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart. Everyone's been lying to me, keeping me in the dark. The council at Eve's Rest... and now Volan.

He lied to me.

"Right then," Melvall claps his hands. "You've clearly got some talking to do. We'll just be over here..."

Volan's hand snags the male's collar as he tries to step past towards the medical equipment. Still, Volan's eyes don't leave mine.

I tear my gaze away, unable to meet that stare.

Volan growls, a sound that I'm becoming all too familiar with, as he turns towards Melvall. "Look, you can't just take the medicine whenever you want. It takes time to make it. We are doing our best to ensure that those who really need it get it first."

"By making males fight to the death for your entertainment in the fight pits?" Melvall sneers.

My eyes widen. Despite the chaos of thoughts flying through my head, I don't miss that little detail. Disbelief courses through me. Surely not... but Volan doesn't deny it. The look he casts my way... it's pure frustration.

He didn't want me to know. It's confirmed that he's been keeping things from me.

The full weight of his betrayal crashes over me. All this time, I've been traveling with a prince? Someone with that much power and status didn't think to mention it even once? And the fight pits... forcing others to battle for medicine? How many other

secrets has he been keeping from me? He knew exactly where we were headed all along, leading me to this precise location with such confidence, such certainty.

He can't... I trust him.

Trusted...

I'm so conflicted. More so, I'm so overwhelmed. It's like every problem is being thrown at me at once, rather than one at a time. There's so much more going on here than I can wrap my head around. First, these aliens aren't supposed to exist on planet Atraxis, and then suddenly there are thousands of them? Not only that, but evidence suggests they've been living here for... generations? They've even got treaties between them! On top of all that, I'm somehow wrapped up in some situation involving galaxy-influencing medicine.

The implications hit me hard enough to make me dizzy. There's only one reason I can think that Volan didn't want me to know; we've all heard stories of how some of the more brutal races in the universe abduct human women just to offer them up as prizes for warriors. Worse is how they claim they are protecting the women, but if that was so, they wouldn't keep them prisoners. Those women would find their way home.

Does that mean I'm never going to go home again? Will I ever see my friends again? What about Stacey; she's too young to leave all on her own? I won't even know what happened to Ariana...

I knew I shouldn't have trusted him.

Volan was literally leading me to my doom. He lied to me. I trusted him, and he betrayed me.

Heat prickles my eyelids as tears come, unbidden. I blink rapidly, pushing them



away. I refuse to cry. I've cried enough. I'm stronger than this. I didn't allow my father's abuse, fighting every step of the way to a better future on Atraxis. I didn't accept Walter's claim of Ariana's death; I fought for what was right.

And I'll keep fighting.

I'll find allies where I can find them, and if not, then I'll do it on my own. I'm a survivor. I'll rewrite the end of my story if I have to.

"I didn't get a chance to introduce myself before," Zoran comments as he walks up to my side. He just casually leans against the wall with a hip as if there aren't two increasingly aggressive aliens arguing out in front of us. With his tattoos and relaxed attitude, he honestly gives me surfer-bro kind of vibes; taking life as it comes, and never worrying about the details. "My name is Zoran."

"Hi," I mutter back, not really in the mood for inane discussions right now. My eyes are locked on Volan as he rounds on Melvall, furious about his little secret being revealed. Melvall, meanwhile, seems oblivious to this slip-up and is ranting about how the medicine should be traded freely among all the tribes.

"You humans mostly look alike to me," Zoran admits, smiling at me sheepishly. Because, you know, he's totally had a lot of opportunities to see us up close. Humans are still new to the Galactic Federation, and not all that many have traveled off-world as of yet. Unless he's some sort of space-traveler and explored Earth, though that's usually an expensive lifestyle that very few can afford. Given that he's dressed in worn leathers, I doubt he could afford it.

But I was wrong about Volan, wasn't I? The guy turned out to be a prince. A freaking prince!

"I don't suppose you are familiar with the human female named Eve?" He asks. "She

comes from your tribe. She's really friendly. I'd like to say that we've become close friends really."

"I... what?"

There was only one lady named Eve on our starship. She's dead. She had been sent down to the planet to pick out the site where we would build our colony and went missing in the wilderness. She was one of the reasons why we knew about such dangerous beasts on Atraxis, and the reason why we built our colony walls. Heck, our colony is literally named after her and the sacrifice she made for us.

How do I know? I spent weeks mourning the loss of my friend. It's probably why I was so frantic when Ariana went missing too, fearing a repeat of all that pain.

"She promised that one day she'll introduce me to some females looking for mates," Zoran drones on, though I have to admit I barely hear his words. The guy's obviously angling to see if I am mated and attached to anyone... like Volan. I grit my teeth. Like hell I can even deal with that whole situation at the moment.

No, my mind is fixating on one point: Eve's alive.

"What the hell?" I exclaim beneath my breath. "All my girlfriends are out getting laid and matched up with dream guys, and I'm left at home thinking they are dead?"

First Eve decides to up and abandon us, and now Ariana comes waltzing back from the wilderness with a mate in tow as well? This is not what friends are supposed to do! For a start, they are supposed to take me with them!

This is so messed up. I bet neither of them had to face off against huge ass mutant cockroaches or deal with treasonous, lying males. I swear, if they are lounging about drinking cocktails without me, I will make them suffer my wrath. Hell has no mercy

like a woman scorned.

“Honestly, the economics make sense if you think about it. The harkcana and drakoon give me their foods, and I’ll take your cloth and medicine, and then we’ll all be better off,” Melvall argues, waving his spiky arms around in the air.

“And what do you propose you give any of us in return? Or do you just take it all for yourself?” Volan crosses his arms over his chest, glaring back at the male.

“What the hell has my life become?” I mutter. How did I find myself on a strange planet, surrounded by strange alien males who seem more interested in debating economics than the fact that war is looming and quests have to be resolved.

Or that my heart is breaking apart, and I’m so desperately trying to hold it together without anyone noticing.

“Look at him. Volan lied to me, and he doesn’t even seem to be all that fazed about it!”

I glance at the only male who seems to be paying me any attention. Zoran is looking at me with wide eyes, and I realize that I’m making almost as much of a scene as the two other males.

“Well, clearly I’m going to trade with everyone!” Melvall replies, looking affronted, voice echoing around the room.

“He’s not mentioning the dozen of pelts I’ve brought him that he’s refusing to trade to anyone,” Zoran comments, giving me a conspiratorial grin.

“Stop bringing me pelts!” Melvall points at Zoran, not missing a beat. He spins to face us. “Also, why do you keep bringing me pelts? You’d think ten would be more

than enough, but no...”

“Pelts? Why would anyone want pelts?” Volan asks, frowning perhaps as much as I am.

“Because winter is coming! Unlike you Sulthari, hiding beneath the ground, it’s going to get cold. Trust me, he’ll be thanking me for the extra insulation,” Zoran waves toward Melvall, singling him out in the conversation. Then he says in a low voice, much like how he spoke to me, as if the male isn’t there listening in, “Did you know he is insane enough to swim when the water ices over?”

Is everyone here buddies? Like they act as if they’ve never met each other, but they are so quick to banter and toss insults...

“You are all insane!” I exclaim. “And I don’t have time for this. Seriously. I have to get back home. I have to...”

Do what?

It suddenly occurs to me that I can’t trust anyone. Not a single person.

I have to tell everyone about this place, about Walter and the corrupted council members... but how? Who will listen to me and not just think me some raving lunatic?

I could go to Commander Davis, the man responsible for our security, but how can I be certain he won’t just arrest me on sight? He ordered our colony’s walls to be built—evidence suggests he knows something about the supposedly non-existent aliens living on Atraxis. Besides, I somewhat was just caught in a restricted area and complicit in beating up some guards.

And then I ran off into the wilderness, with a prince...

“Oh, this is such a mess,” I rub my face. I feel so worn out. I hadn’t even realized how exhausted, both mentally and physically I was until I opened up to Volan. Tears prickle, but I refuse to cry again. Not for him. Not for any male. Time and time again they’ve used me and abused me.

I’d planned to go on this adventure alone, and I will end it on my own. After all, I’m always alone. It’s not safe to rely on anyone else. Not even my friends, apparently. Definitely not lovers.

I nod to myself, determination settling in. Now is the time to figure out my next steps. I’ve got the data I need. I’ll sort through it on the trip home, taking the travel time to figure out exactly how I’ll approach the colony and what I’ll say to them. My argument will be bulletproof. In one fell swoop, I’ll take down each of our corrupt leaders.

I turn to leave, just in time to see several glowing bodies burst into the room. Grey-skinned Sulthari dash inside. They quickly block the exit and fan out to surround us. They aren’t playing around; these are trained warriors. Their weapons glow too, crackling with energy that looks all too reminiscent of lightning. If I’m lucky, one hit will only stun me, perhaps knock me unconscious. However, given that the lightning is attached to long swords and spears... I’m guessing the point of them is to very much kill.

Great. Just great. I come to an alien planet for a fresh start, and instead of getting the standard welcome basket, I get alien cockroaches, betrayal, and now a bunch of glowing warriors with pointy sticks. Maybe next time I’ll just ask for a gift card instead.

To think I was worried about getting arrested when I returned to the colony. Right

now, I should be worried about getting killed.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

MAYA

The five sulthari warriors surround us. There's nothing else you could call them really—dressed to the nines in a mixture of metal and leather armor, wielding very deadly weapons, and looking even more serious... It's not like they are going to some fancy-dress office party that I missed the memo for.

“Stand down,” Volan commands. The words echo off metal walls, firm and unyielding. The first warrior hesitates, spear wavering. Multiple luminae pulse rapidly, betraying everyone's uncertainty.

Volan's lips stretch in an attempt at a reassuring smile, though tension lingers in the way his shoulders remain stiff.

“Honestly, Tanis, there is no need for this,” Volan says. “These are my guests. There's no need for weapons.”

One of the warriors—Tanis, apparently—shoots Volan an uncertain look, his eyes flickering between each of the males that have positioned themselves in front of me like living shields. Finally, his gaze settles on me, and he blinks as if seeing me for the first time.

“We received your message this morning, as requested,” Tanis confirms, his voice careful. “The King has been informed of your return and awaits you.”

The blood drains from my face. Message? This morning? My stomach twists into knots. The pieces suddenly click into place—this morning when I woke briefly to find him gone—he must have sent word ahead.

Every confident step through these tunnels, every moment he seemed to know exactly where we we're going, and now the convenient appearance of these warriors—he was leading me straight into a trap.

“You...you did this?” I whisper, the betrayal stealing my breath. “You sent for them while I was sleeping?”

Volan's luminae flickers, and for a moment, I see something that looks like guilt cross his face before he masks it.

“Everything we shared,” I choke out, “all the things I told you—was any of it real? Or was it all just to get me to follow you here? Why?!”

“You are all to be escorted to meet with the king,” Tanis declares, lowering his weapon completely. He's clearly uncomfortable with this display of emotion.

“Why are we going to see your king?” I demand, confusion and hurt mingling in my voice. “I need to get back to my colony! I have to warn them about what Walter is doing!”

Volan stares at me for a long moment before a sigh slips through. “It's complicated, Maya.”

“No, it's really not.” I laugh bitterly. “I trusted you to help me get home. You promised me.”

Volan flinches. Actually flinches.



“Wait a moment!” I spin to face Tanis. “Are you seriously just going to take us to your king like we’re some sort of... prisoners?”

“You are not being arrested,” Volan says firmly, stepping between me and Tanis. “You are my honored guests. There’s simply a... protocol that must be followed when someone unauthorized enters the lab. Once we’ve spoken to the King, he’ll see that us being here is just a misunderstanding—easily cleared up.”

“Protocol?” I shake my head in disbelief. “You brought me here.” I jab a finger into Volan’s chest, fury fueling each of my movements. “And now I’m being treated like I’ve done something wrong! I need to go home!”

I mean, Melvall and Zoran were kind of trying to steal the medicine... But I shouldn’t be arrested. It’s not fair.

Volan stares at me with an unreadable expression, a maddening, emotionless mask. When he acts like this, how can I even tell what’s a truth or a lie? I so desperately wish to believe him, but I can’t. Not when he doesn’t let me leave. Not when he led me straight into this situation.

He doesn’t even defend me.

He never cared for me at all.

“Volan, please,” I beg. He knows how important this is to me. He knows just how badly I need to return home. He owes me this. “I can’t be arrested. I have a quest to complete. I have a colony to save.”

You know, that’s pretty important compared to a dinner date with some pompous royal, I think to myself, wisely keeping my mouth shut for once.

“Maya, I’m just trying to do what’s best for everyone,” Volan tells me.

“Like hell you know what’s the best for me!” I snap. I shake my head as I back away from him, coming to stand beside the two equally crazy other males being arrested. “I trusted you!”

It’s ironic that I now trust two virtual strangers over Volan, and yet here we are.

Volan turns away from me. He refuses to meet my eye. He won’t even glance in my direction! It feels like he’s physically struck me. A part of me hoped and prayed that he did care, that he would keep trying. Instead, he’s all too easily moving on.

I suck in a breath, anger coursing through me. Volan was the one that led me here. There was no way I could know. But he knew. I’m not being overly dramatic here; the pain is genuine. He knows how bad he’s hurt me.

“Does this mean I’ll get to fight in the pits again? Given another chance, I think I can win this time.” Zoran leans his head down towards me, flashing his teeth in a hopeful smile. “Will you cheer for me, little human?”

“Fighting in the pits shouldn’t be fun,” Melvall replies with a shake of his head. “Why did I listen to you when you insisted we come here?”

“Technically, you were the one that insisted on coming here to this particular room,” Zoran replies, tossing a lock of black hair over his shoulder with a dramatic flair. For all appearances in the moment he looks like a drama queen being put out, and not at all like he’s talking about throwing himself into a deadly fight. “We need more medicine, you said. I kept telling you that I’m happy to fight for it, but no, you insisted there was an easier way. Look at us now—we’re going back to the pits! I could have saved us the walk.”

The warriors approach us, some with weapons still at the ready. I do my best to stand tall, and definitely not quake in front of them. Let's face it, having a dude twice your size towering over you with a weapon large enough to turn you into a skewered kebab would make anyone nervous.

Me? I'm simply frozen to the spot.

Whenever it counts, I always freeze, I realize. I could have done more when my father pressured me to marry, asked for help from others, but I slunk off to hide instead. When Ariana went missing, I hid behind code and programming rather than go out and search for her. For the first time in my life I have acted, and honestly... In hindsight, I was so not ready for this adventure.

I'm still that shy girl, controlled entirely by my fear.

"I'm sorry," Tanis tells me as he approaches, "This is standard protocol for any found in the restricted areas."

Melvall and Zoran hiss their displeasure—what, are they both part snake now?—as the male binds my wrist with a rope. I stare down at my bindings, blinking back frustrated tears from my eyes.

At least Tanis has the decency to look apologetic. He's just following orders, I can't blame him. As far as he's concerned, I'm the criminal here.

I can blame Volan though. This is all his fault, after all.

"Restricted area?" Melvall scoffs, dancing lightly out of the way of the oncoming warrior. The male gives him a desperate look, like he really doesn't want to be caught up in this drama. Don't blame him. "It's not like you had signs up saying 'don't come down here'."

I nod in agreement. If there had been signs... I probably would have still come this way, after all I had a quest to complete. But at least I wouldn't have been blindly walking into this trap. I mean, assuming I could even read them that is.

Still, if there were signs, maybe I wouldn't have needed to follow the back-stabbing, betraying prince to my doom like some helpless damsel.

Zoran steps up beside me, and at first I think it's to offer me some emotional support. Instead he holds his hands out to the closest approaching warrior, giving him a grin that borders on suspicious. Okay, more than that - he's flashing pointy teeth like he's begging the warrior to even attempt tying him up.

The warrior watches him closely, as if he's expecting an attack at any moment. We all do.

At least someone here is sane. Zoran's far too excited about the prospects of being marched off to the fight pits... oh jeez, maybe he's just got a kink about being tied up?

I need a plan. I can't go to the fight pits. I can't become a prisoner, and I definitely refuse to become some broodmare for some alien. I need a solution on how to get out of this mess and back to the colony. I start to list out all my needs, practically graphing everything out in my mind. I need to get back to the colony. I need to oust Walter, and any other corrupt individual.

My mind is working a million miles an hour right now. Maybe it's fear that's making it feel all jittery, jumping from one idea to another. It's a very real possibility, after all. But I'm long accustomed to not feeling safe, and I know how to push through those nerves.

I look down at my wrists. Tanis has barely even tied a knot. I wouldn't even need to

try hard to free myself. In fact, I could probably just slip it off like some sort of fabric bangle. Could I just run...? Not that I would get far with five—six, including Volan—big alien warriors quite capable of outrunning me.

I'm going to need allies.

Someone who can help me distract these warriors so that I can make my escape. But then what? Let's face it, I'm not equipped to run around the Atraxis wilds. Those stories the hunters told us, the ones I thought were to scare us into compliance like little kids, well it turns out that they were totally not exaggerated at all. I definitely need a warrior on my side if I'm going to survive reaching the colony again in one piece.

It might be a little heartless and untrue, but I can totally work the way they treat females as “vulnerable” and “defenseless” into my advantage.

Something tells me Melvall and Zoran will both be down to helping me out. They'll likely jump at the quest of freeing some poor, defenseless and vulnerable females at the colony from oppressive overlords—little do they know just how much human females can kick ass. Just wait till they meet my friend Chrissy. She trains practically every single moment, all so that she might one day become one of our town guards.

What I'm really relying on is that most people haven't considered that there is another power player here; the king. I just have to convince him that my colony is worth saving. You know, without killing half of the residents, or putting the rest into some sort of slavery situation.

No biggie.

With my head held high, I follow a warrior through the doorway and down the corridor we came. Melvall and Zoran follow close behind. I keep my head down,

playing my role of a weak and defenseless female. Meanwhile Zoran seems more interested in trying to start up a conversation with anyone, and I mean anyone. This guy must be an extrovert. Only an extrovert will think it's a fun past-time to chat to his guard.

I gasp when, at my side, Melvall suddenly stumbles forward. One of the guards has pushed him.

“You will treat them as honored guests,” Volan snaps, shoving himself between the guard and Melvall.

Oh, sure, he'll defend them but not me. Though I have to wonder if it's all part of some act—like the portrayal of a caring prince, and not a soul-sucking heart-stealing male.

Melvall mutters beneath his breath, lamenting his relationship with Zoran.

“Bad day?” I ask my fellow captive, giving him a soft, commiserating smile.

“Have you met many of these males yet, human?” Melvall asks with a sigh. “They cause more trouble than they are worth sometimes.”

“I...”

“Do not fret,” Melvall sighs heavily. “It is a bad day, yes, but one I hope we all survive.”

“You hope?” I ask as I stumble to a stop. That really doesn't sound encouraging...

Behind me Tanis nearly walks into my back. He grunts. “Please keep moving, female. It's best if we don't keep the king waiting. He'll not be pleased to know

where we found you.”

“I only led Maya there to seek shelter from the scampers!” Volan replies, his voice a growl. His eyes meet mine with an intensity that makes me look away. There’s something in his gaze—regret, perhaps—that I can’t bear to see right now.

A couple of the warriors stifle laughter, as if those horrifying bugs were something to be terrified of. Have they not seen them?!

For a prince, they sure don’t seem particularly reverent toward him. Maybe he’s from a big family, the very last in line out of like a dozen princes? Or he’s a brat, and the guards are tired of dealing with him—it certainly fits his current reputation.

“You’d dare risk even the slightest of threats to a vulnerable female?” Volan roars, marching towards the warriors with his chest puffed out. The lights on his body pulse furiously, giving him a strange appearance of stop and start motion. Wisely their jests quickly quiet, some even looking ashamed at their behavior.

The fact that the warriors listen to Volan is proof enough that he’s brought them—and the threat they bring with them—down upon us. He has the power to command my release, and yet he doesn’t...

“Let’s just get this over with,” I snap, losing patience.

I feel so lonely all of a sudden.

I have absolutely no idea who I can trust, and I really desperately want a friend I can rely on right about now. Absolutely none of my plans or ideas are of any use right now—I’m useless.

I hate this feeling that’s weighing down on my chest, like the ceiling is closing in on

me. A quick glance confirms just solid rock above me... Solid rock that can crush and destroy me in a heartbeat. I'd prepared for weeks for an adventure. I carried everything I thought I'd need on my person every single day. You'd not believe the number of pockets I'd sewn into my skirt... which always begs the question why it didn't come with them in the first place?! Men's clothing always has a dozen usable pockets, yet women are just expected to carry everything in their hands? Given we are the fairer sex expected to generally look after a miniature human too... we need our hands free, so it makes sense we have the most pockets, right?

My hand slips inside my pocket, brushing against the solid form of my tablet. It's a familiar weight, but not as comforting as it used to be. In the colony it gave me some freedom—I could hack my way through security locks if I really needed to get someplace, like conveniently escaping a room. But here?

I'm so alone.

Apparently, there's no better way to make one feel small than show them a view of an entire city. The first thing I notice is the noise. As we draw closer to our destination a dull roar fills the air; the kind of noise you get from hundreds, if not thousands, of people speaking at once.

Then Tanis is pushing open a door, and the world completely changes, revealing an impressively large cavern. The ceiling just lifts up and away. What were once a few small glowing crystals lighting our path suddenly become massive clusters suspended from the rock; dim light turns almost blinding now that my eyes have adjusted to the dark.

There are aliens everywhere. I was shocked to see so many harkcana attacking our town... but I had absolutely no clue there were this many aliens living on Atraxis. Greens, blues, reds... My eyes catch glimpses of long tails and fur and feathery wings.



I stand and gape, completely overwhelmed. I've met aliens before... but I've never been surrounded by so many at once. When my father used to host events, it was always a few guest aliens amongst hundreds of humans. This time, I'm the odd one out.

"Keep moving," Volan barks from behind me, making me jump. "Tanis, guide us directly to the throne room. I want to get Maya into a secure place immediately."

Volan's hand falls on my shoulder, forcing me to walk at a brisk pace. A part of me is grateful for his guidance; without it, I would still be staring in absolute awe and disbelief.

Hundreds of eyes turn towards our party, all manner of faces unrepentantly staring—and they are all looking directly at me. As we move along, pushing through the crowds, my skin itches at the attention I'm given. Every single being surrounding me is a male. I can't see a single female here.

Everyone around me is dressed with a variety of armors—or sometimes the lack thereof, which they are quick to display. It's rather intimidating when many smile with sharp teeth as they wield rather forbidding weapons. I'm like half their size, with a tiny slingshot.

There's no way I can fight my way out of this one.

"Little female, how about you and I leave this place together," one male calls out. He gives me a cheeky grin with sharp teeth to go alongside his cheesy pickup line.

On Earth it might have worked, but here, feeling so isolated and vulnerable, has me quickly backing up.

A hand wraps around my waist, drawing me closer to a warm body. I glance up to

realize I've stepped closer to Volan.

A part of me hates how I seek his comforting presence. I'm strong on my own.

I can... I can do this. Right?

"I don't need your protection," I snap, pulling away from his grasp. He grits his teeth, but doesn't say anything as we move forward through the crowd.

"I never meant to hurt you," Volan eventually tells me. The sincerity in his voice almost makes me believe him—almost.

"I don't think I can forgive you for this," I reply, keeping my voice low.

"I made you a promise, Maya; I won't let anything happen to you." He speaks softly, so much that I barely hear him over the buzz of excited talking surrounding us. He says it like his promise means something, like he hasn't hurt me enough already.

Why do his words sound so ominous?

"I hope that includes us too," Melvall mutters, stepping a bit closer. "It's not like we were doing anything wrong."

"Other than just casually liberating some medicine like you own it?" Volan asks, with a quirked eyebrow. The humor in his voice sounds forced, not at all like his usual casual response.

"There's plenty of beings that need it. There's younglings that get hurt all the time... granted a few scraped knees, but infection is always a worry. And that's ignoring how you males keep rushing at each other with blades. Do you know how hard it is to keep you all alive when you only have so much product to go around?"

“Wait... are you mad that people are trying to kill each other or that you’ve run out of inventory?” I ask, chuckling breathlessly at the absurd idea.

“Can it be both?” Melvall asks with a somewhat guilty expression. He sighs. “I don’t charge the younglings at least. They always get priority no matter what. Besides, if they are too young, they won’t understand the concept of trade at all. Seriously, I once had one try to trade me a rock. A rock! Sure, it was all sparkly, but it was still a rock.”

I roll my eyes. The way that Melvall keeps glancing at me, a forceful smile stretching across his face, I strongly suspect this story is to distract me from this situation. Too bad I’m an anxious mess, and nothing at all will distract me from this disaster.

“I plan to ask the King for his help,” I admit. “I have to get back home. Staying here is not an option.”

“He won’t help you,” Volan snaps. He sighs heavily, dragging a hand through his hair. “My father is not interested in any above-world situation, other than dealing with those who encroach upon our territory.”

“You sulthari aren’t exactly known for being hospitable to guests,” Melvall agrees. He waves to the males around us—the myriad of half-clad warriors who stop to gaze at us as we pass. “I mean, you literally shove them into an arena to battle just to earn the right to trade with you.”

Volan grits his teeth. “My people are warriors foremost. We respect those who can fight. We are not barbarians cutting down every imagined foe.”

“Let’s just say we’ve all heard the stories about what happens to those who... displease you sulthari warriors.” The way Melvall’s spikes flatten against his body, the tension in his shoulders, the subtle way he keeps glancing at the

guards—everything about his demeanor screams danger. He's terrified, though trying not to show it.

“And those who can't?” I ask, pointedly looking up at Volan. “What happens to those of us who can't fight?”

It's become apparent that I'm not equipped for this, both physically and mentally. It's not like I've ever heard the saying ‘don't bring a slingshot to a sword fight.’ Is this why Volan's so quick to hand us over, because I can't fight? Am I weak in his eyes? Does he have some warrior-woman on the side? I never thought to ask. I was so wrapped up in his embrace. He made me feel strong and capable...

I turn my head away from him, blinking furiously at the burning sensation in my eyes. He set this all up. He brought me here on purpose. Even if I can see hints of regret in his eyes now, it doesn't change what he did. I'm absolutely heartbroken that I let myself trust him. Worse, I fell for him, practically throwing my heart at him with a declaration of love.

As a group we come to a standstill in front of two impressively large metal doors. They look reminiscent of vault doors, like what you might see being used at a bank or other secure location. I'm not even sure our starship had doors this thick and imposing to be honest, not even to the airlocks. Because you know... they shouldn't look like a bad idea to open mid-flight through the vacuum of space.

Volan moves closer to me, his voice so low only I can hear it. “I promise I'll explain everything later. Just... trust me one more time. Please.”

I almost laugh. Trust him? After this?

I stare at the massive doors before me as they open wide, the inside darkness beckoning, ready to swallow me whole. I'm walking into a mad king's lair, one who

apparently has the tendency to make people disappear... and Volan's the one who brought me here.

And he asks me to trust him?

How can I trust anyone, ever again?

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

VOLAN

I hiss at one of my King's personal guards as he pushes me to my knees, slamming against the tiled floor. Nearby, Melvall and Zoran are thrown to the floor, though due to their restraints, they are unable to brace themselves and sprawl out at the impact.

Nothing stops my growl when Maya kneels on the ground beside me. She should not be touching the dirty floor! She deserves better than this treatment. If I had my way, she would be sitting on the throne.

I cast a glance up at Tanis, whose hand is resting on Maya's shoulder. My instincts scream at me to demand he remove his touch from her, to keep his distance... but somehow my rational mind still functions enough to realize that he's standing guard over her. It doesn't take a genius to realize how much Maya means to me, especially when she's covered in my scent. Even Tanis figured it out. He's the closest I have to a friend, the only other person I've consistently been around for my entire life.

How is it that I've never truly seen him before? All these years, he's stood by my side, protecting me, advising me in his quiet way. I've taken him for granted, treated him as simply another warrior meant to do my bidding. But he's been more than that—a steady presence I've relied upon without ever acknowledging.

Swallowing my anger, I give Tanis a slight nod of approval and thanks. His eyes widen, not used to receiving the praise, but he stands a bit taller. It shames me that I've never thanked him before for his efforts. Especially since, no matter what

happens here today, I can trust him to do right by Maya.

“Volan,” my father drawls slowly, “I see you have returned.”

His voice is devoid of excitement, pride, or even happiness. My heart aches as I realize that all I have ever wanted was his approval, for him to love me as a father should love his son. It’s never going to happen. He’s never going to love me.

For solars I have wished for him to find joy in the company of my presence... or at the very least, to act like a father should and to help me achieve my dreams. Instead of being excited that I have successfully completed my Challenge, or proud of how I will now become king of our people, he treats me like a threat.

Because I am one, I realize, all too belatedly.

He’s never intended to give me the throne. It’s truly why he gave me such a difficult task. All this time I thought he wanted to prove that I wrongly placed my trust in the outsiders. It was never about him doubting whether I was ready to rule. Nor was it ever about me proving my strength and capabilities.

No; he purposely set me up to fail. It’s about him and his wants. It’s always been about him. The predatory grin on the king’s face confirms my worst fears.

“I have returned, your majesty. I am ready to take my rightful place as King of our people as you have promised,” I say, my voice echoing around the large room. I purposely remind all present of the King’s vow, because once made, it is unbreakable.

Whispers reach my ears. My people hear me, and they know the truth. By law, my father must step down as ruler; I was given my Challenge, and I have successfully completed it.

I send my gaze around the room, meeting the eyes of courtiers who've long stayed quiet. Just what threat does my father hold over them, keeping them purposely hiding in the dark?

Fury roars through my body at their behavior. My father has not done right by our people. A ruler, a true ruler, should put his people first. He is supposed to be leading us towards the light and hope, and instead, he's purposely kept us in the dark all this time. Each of his decisions, his laws, were all about isolating us further from those we could be allied with. All for what? So he can maintain his tight hold on power?

The very fact that he sits so high above us on his throne, forcing us to kneel before him, isn't a choice. For years he's stripped away our freedoms, one by one... making my people become the very thing we once despised and rebelled against - slavers.

The very beings that brought us here. The very beings that imprisoned us in this hell. The very beings we rose up against... and we have become the same monsters.

Melvall was right, under my father's rule, we brutally use others just for pure entertainment. We force them into desperate situations, like fighting impossible odds just to access life-saving medicine... rather than simply help them.

My stomach sinks, a sickening feeling spreading through me. All the raids I've gone on, all those people I killed or brought back as prisoners for the fight pits—were they to defend another tribe, or were they really just to destroy a tribe gaining in strength, one that could overpower ours?

Surrounding the king are his personal guards, warriors promoted through great deeds. Only, I haven't seen any of them join the hunters in years, searching out food. I haven't seen them patrol the fighting pits, facing enraged males in their primes. The very males we forced to fight just so they could save their families and loved ones. The personal guards' metal armor glitters, unlike the weaker leather of my fellow



warriors, even though we are the ones who face battle and harm on a daily basis.

Though I have to wonder, if they were to draw their weapons... have they maintained them? Are they as sharp as those of us who have to risk our lives daily, or have they let them rust and become dull?

“It is true,” the King says. “You have succeeded in your quest to bring a human female before me.”

Beside me, Maya breathes in deeply. I grit my teeth as shame and guilt flood through me once again. She’s here because of me. And this talk? It’s literally rubbing salt into her wounded heart. I know how badly I’ve betrayed her.

Was it worth it?

I glance at Maya from the corner of my eye. She doesn’t have our luminae to physically show her pain. No, she keeps it strongly hidden inside in a place that no one else will ever see it. But I know her.

If given another chance, I would have never led her below the surface. I would have asked her to stay somewhere safe. Her happiness means more to me than anything, even my own life. I would have done her quest myself; finding a way to save her people without risking her.

I would have even walked away from my own people.

The thought hits me so hard, so suddenly, that I barely catch myself from falling.

For her, I’d give it all up. All my dreams of becoming King. It means nothing, without her by my side. I would not make a good leader—but she would.

Even as I think this, I know that Maya would not want me to abandon my people.

With her soft heart, she would call me a fool for leaving behind those who aren't strong enough to fight for themselves. My people venerate strength—because, in an ideal world, it lets us raise those weaker than ourselves up so that they too may reach their dreams. That's the true meaning of strength; not to take, but to give.

“I will get you home,” I tell her softly, words only meant for her. “I will help you free your friends.”

Her large eyes turn to me, searching mine through a sheen of liquid tears. Disbelief wars in them... but so does hope. She desperately wants someone to trust. She deserves it, and more.

“I promise you,” I state as firmly as I can. Sincerity bleeds through me, my luminae flashing with my intense declaration. “On my life, Maya, I promise that I will give you your happy ever after.”

“Tell me, Volan, how did you convince the female to follow you here?” The King asks. He leans forward, a cruel smile twisting his lips that catches my attention. “After all, you were the one that said it was an impossible task, and yet here you both are.”

I glare at him as he pulls his cloak further around him, hiding any and all his real emotions. I'm not even sure he can feel anymore, truth be told.

The male sitting before me, wrapped in shadows, is an imposter. You could claim some cyborg has replaced him, and I would believe it. He's not my King, not anymore. He doesn't deserve the title. And he definitely cannot call himself my father.

I raise my face and look around the room, meeting many of the courtiers' eyes. Their luminae remain hidden, just like my father's; all too afraid to express themselves. But like Maya, I see them, perhaps for the first time ever. I can see the tightness at the corners of eyes, the stiffness of shoulders, and the way they huddle together as if seeking protection.

"I offered to escort her as a pretense. I led her here to the kingdom through deception. She had no idea our people, our beautiful city, was even here. She had no concept of the dangers she even faced. She was naive, foolish even."

My heart lacerates at the words I say, at the pain I further cause Maya. Protecting females, providing for them, is a vital tenant taught to even the youngest of younglings—a sacred vow that we all take. It's time I revealed all.

"I offer myself up for judgment to our people," I declare, my voice unwavering as I call out. It rebounds off the cavern's walls, echoing in the silence. "Let our people decide if I am worthy to lead them. Let them see how far I am willing to go to protect them—and whether I even deserve to."

I won't be judged by the King anymore. I refuse to.

It's up to our people to decide if I have broken a sacred oath; putting a female in danger, all out of my desperation to make changes to our lives. It's up to them to decide my fate. Do they hate me for my deeds? I'm realizing that I no longer really care what others think of me. My own opinion of me is what I should consider. Standing firm in my faith and beliefs, not bending to another's will just to try and please them. Yet I am already guilty, in the King's eyes and Maya's. And in my own.

"I tricked her," I tell the crowd. "I tricked her into following me to this place, all under the guise of helping her save her own people. I never had any intentions of returning her home."

My heart squeezes as the truth unfolds within me, as I speak my shame. I accept it. I have to. Because if I refuse to recognize my own faults, how can I ever become better? We all trip in the darkness sometimes, but we must get up and keep moving towards the light.

My gaze lands on Maya's tear-stricken face; her disbelief and heartbreak evident. I set out on a quest to save my people, and destroyed myself in the process. I destroyed her - my shining beacon of pure hope and radiant beauty.

I tear my eyes away from hers, her pain searing into my very soul.

"Quite the deceitful ploy, but an effective one," the king states. His glowing eyes pierce me, considering. It's like he's seeing me in a new light, and it burns me.

"I do not deserve her," I state. "I never did."

"I'm sure that there are many warriors here who would be happy to take her as a mate, even as deformed as she is without luminae. Who knows, maybe she'll even be able to give me a daughter?"

"Like hell!" I shout, struggling to my feet. Tanis' hand lands on my shoulder, the pressure slamming my knees to the floor once again. His grip is painful and firm, but not enough to break bones. Still, it's a stark reminder of that fine line I am very, very close to crossing.

"She should be returned to her people! They have need of her."

"You just said you had no intention to return her," the King replies.

"I..." My thoughts flicker through my mind, trying to determine how I will deal with this situation.

With sudden clarity, I understand what matters most. My dream of becoming king seems hollow compared to Maya's safety and happiness. I've spent my life seeking power, believing it would give my existence meaning. But meaning has found me in her eyes, in her courage, in her unwavering determination to help others even at cost to herself.

Unlike my own kind who hide in darkness, content to remain stagnant, Maya's people want to grow, to learn, to live better lives. They may be physically weaker, but their spirits—their desire to improve—make them worthy of protection and aid. And they actually welcome the help, unlike my own people who resist change at every turn.

You can't help those who don't want to be helped. This truth strikes me like a physical blow. I've spent years trying to drag my people toward the light when they cling to shadows. But Maya and her colony—they're reaching for something better. They deserve my support more than those who refuse to see beyond their fears.

My people can be damned. Let them follow one corrupted by his own greed and fears if that is what they want to do. I have strayed for too long in the dark, and I refuse to continue doing so. I will do the right thing, for once. I will see Maya achieve her dreams.

The King stands, gazing down at me like I am some wild beast he cannot predict. I feel like one. I'm definitely not one that will cower beneath him, or blindly follow his rules anymore just because it might upset him.

"Maya is my queen!" I declare, my voice ringing throughout the room. "I love her!"

Deadly silence descends around us. No one dares make a noise, to bring attention to themselves.

I glance at Maya, seeing her eyes widen, lips parting in surprise. For a brief moment, the pain and betrayal in her gaze gives way to something else—a flicker of hope, of wonder. Has she never truly believed my feelings for her were real? Have I been so caught in my own desires that I never properly told her how deeply she’s affected me?

The realization that I’ve never truly spoken these words to her—not clearly, not honestly, not without some ulterior motive shadowing my actions—fills me with regret. I should have told her every day since I met her. I should have shown her with actions untainted by deception.

The King looks like he’s swallowed something sour, sickened at what he’s just heard. Perhaps because I denied him for the first time ever. Or perhaps it’s because I gave Maya the title that only a King themselves can bestow—I’ve directly challenged him to his throne, effectively declaring myself King, even without his granted grace.

“She is an outsider,” the King spits, his face contorting with rage. “Not good enough for the likes of you.”

“But good enough for you?” I sneer. I shrug off Tanis’ grip, rising to my feet. “You’d force a female against her will, but not let her mate the male that loves her? I’d die for her!”

The king waves his hand in our direction. “She’s clearly corrupted you. Tainted your mind somehow. Prior to this, you were never disrespectful. These outsiders must have some secret power we are not prepared for.”

I scoff, staring up at the male that rejects everything he doesn’t understand. Rather than embrace what makes each of us unique, finding ways to benefit us all, he punishes any for standing out... against him.

Whispers. More whispers. Always this insidious noise, a hiss of secrets and lies. The noise drives me mad, the low voices always in the background. But these are from those who have spent countless hours in my father's presence. They've likely learned that it's not safe to speak their minds without punishment.

I look to Maya, drawing strength from her example. Since the moment I met her, she's been terrified—I could smell her fear, see it in every tense line of her body. Yet she never stops moving forward. She faced scampers with nothing but a rock and a puny slingshot. She confronted me despite my greater strength. She pushes through her fear because what matters to her—her friends, her colony, the truth—is more important than her comfort or safety.

That's what I want for my people. Not this cowering, this whispering, this hiding in shadows. I want them to stand tall, to face their fears, to fight for what matters even when their knees shake and their hearts pound. Maya has shown me what courage and strength truly is—not the absence of fear, but the determination to move despite it.

"Maya's given me the strength to stand tall," I declare, my voice carrying through the chamber. "She's shown me that you can be afraid and still be brave. That you can be small and still be powerful. She's opened my eyes to the way we live; all the injustice of who we've become!"

"By your own words, she has tainted you." The King cries, hurriedly coming to his feet. "We cannot allow one as dangerous as her to stay in our midst," the King declares. "She'll bring doom upon us all!"

"No! She's spent her life giving others the strength they need when they falter. She's sacrificed herself for others. She will make a fine queen! One better than we deserve," I shout.

“She’s an outsider that convinced you to take her to our most sacred zone! She could have poisoned us all, destroying our medicine supplies!” The king shakes his head, an expression of sadness crossing his face. “She must be dealt with. For the safety of our kingdom. Take her to the pits, where all will be able to see this threat snuffed out.”

His words freeze me to the bone. The chill of darkness has nothing on what I experience with his decree.

“No!” I shout, reaching for my own weapon. A blade that I handed over when we were found at the medical lab. A blade I thought I would no longer have need of. “You can’t do this! She’s done nothing wrong!”

Several guards step forward, blocking my approach. They are quick to protect their king. Yet, very few courtiers make a move to stop me. Is it because of loyalty to me, or to my father?

The king steps down from his throne, his cloak wrapping around him like a shroud.

“I love you son,” he says, his voice devoid of any actual emotion, as he approaches me. “I will personally deal with this threat to you. Maybe once you heal, and are free of these delusions of outsiders, we can re-discuss you becoming king.”

“What?” I gape, disbelief bubbling up out of me. “Who cares about that!? I won’t let you touch her!”

Fury burns through me, pumping through my blood. The need to do something, anything...

I lash out. With no way to convince my father otherwise, I’ve become desperate. My very instincts scream that I must protect Maya, even if it’s against my father.



The King recoils, his expression horror-stricken.

Two of the King's personal guards dash forward, roughly seizing my arms and holding me in place despite my attempts to wrestle free. I fight them with all my strength, my claws scratching across someone's skin before my hands are pinned behind my back. More guards surround me, hands reaching to restrain me. I roar, kicking out, even at the risk of losing my footing.

"For your sake, we will deal with this quickly," he tells me. He turns to place orders, addressing those around us, ignoring my struggles. "Bring them to the pits. May the tangler devour them quickly."

Somewhere, beyond the sea of bodies, I hear Maya scream.

This can't be how this goes. I was supposed to be King, to lead our people to a better future. I was supposed to help Maya achieve her dreams. That was my destiny. Not this!

"Please no," I scream, my throat raw with fear. My struggles become frantic as I desperately fight, pleading with the universe for some small form of mercy. Take me instead. Anything but this. Anything but her.

"Maya!"

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

MAYA

The metal cell door slams shut behind me with a finality that makes my teeth rattle. I jump to my feet, spinning to yank the bars, yet they don't budge. Not even a millimeter. Of course.

"Please, I didn't do anything!" I exclaim, hating how desperate I sound.

On the side of freedom, the King's dispassionate face stares back at me. His expression is carved from the same stone as these walls, cold and unyielding.

I huff out a slow breath, trying to steady my racing heart. Panicking isn't going to solve anything right now. It never does. Think, Maya, think.

"Seriously? You're going to just throw me in the pits? For existing?" I snark. I don't expect him to honestly answer me, let alone change his mind. I'm beyond help now, so what does it matter if I speak my mind? No one is around to tell me that I'm being an idiot or saying the wrong thing. I mean... if my destiny is to die, how much worse can it get? Dead is dead.

"I'd rather not," the king replies, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "But it seems that I have no choice."

"Yeah, I'd rather you didn't either," I snort, a mixture of laughter and disbelief. "So why are you doing this? Don't you care about your son at all?"

“Of course I do!” The king snaps. “But the idiot youngling’s got it into his head that you outsiders can be trusted.”

“I can be!” I snap, anger flaring. “I came to you for help. I came to work with you, not against you. I never meant Volan harm. I love him. I...”

I trust him.

A sob builds up in my chest, but I swallow it. Hard. The taste of unshed tears burns the back of my throat.

“I trusted him,” I tell the king. “He was the one that betrayed me. I did nothing wrong.”

My words ring hollow even to my own ears. You trusted a hot alien you’d known for three days. What could possibly go wrong?

The King paces in front of my cell, his boots scraping against the rough stone floor.

“Every outsider betrays us,” he replies, shaking his head as if he’s the one saddened by all this. He waves a hand in the air, encompassing all the cells around us. “Haven’t you seen what they’ve done?”

“What have they done?” I ask, genuinely curious despite the circumstances.

“This entire place was built by them,” the king growls. His fingers tighten with his fury, but still, I refuse to cry out. His steps falter and slow as his eyes take on a distant cast, like he’s slipping into his own memories. “The outsiders brought us here and made us fight, every single day and night. Over and over. So many dead. My mother, she...”

What the hell is he going on about? I glance around at the prison cells—identical to the one I’m in—surrounding us. The same cells he’s using to hold captives before sending them to their deaths. Isn’t that what he’s doing to all these aliens?

“Do you know what it’s like, holding your mother in your arms as she dies? I was so young, too young. They didn’t care.”

His voice cracks, and for a moment, I see a flash of the scared child beneath the tyrannical king.

It still doesn’t excuse his actions.

“So you lost someone you cared about? Big deal, we all have!” I snap, patience growing thin. The guy clearly doesn’t seem sane. It hurts to lose someone you care about—let’s face it, my entire quest has been about stopping that from happening. But at the end of the day, I am responsible for my own happiness and actions. Volan taught me that.

Eyes burn as my thoughts turn to Volan—the male is the very reason I am here, trapped in a cell, rather than helping my people. My fingers grip the cold metal bars until my knuckles turn white. In the distance, I can hear muffled roars and cheers. The arena. A shiver runs down my spine.

“What you are doing right now is losing a son. If you hurt me, he’ll never forgive you.” Because he claims to love me.

I don’t know if I believe him... it’s so hard to after everything he kept from me, but a part of me desperately wants to.

“I’m saving him!” The king shouts, his voice cracking. “I know your kind. If you gain control over him, all is lost. You’ll turn him into a slave just like I was. You’ll

hurt him, make him bleed, until he can handle no more. Then you'll use that vile substance on him and make him fight again."

"Like you are doing to others?" I ask, eyebrow raised.

The King stops his tirade, staring at me with an open mouth. Has no one ever questioned him? Has no one ever told him no? The silence stretches between us, broken only by distant sounds echoing down stone corridors. A roar, presumably from the arena, makes me flinch. My heart skips a beat, knowing that will soon be me in there with whatever is making that terrifying noise.

"Why does everything come back to that stupid medicine?" I growl, rubbing my eyelids. That prickling, hot feeling of tears threatening to spill is a distraction. Crying won't help now. It never does.

"I don't want your medicine," I tell him as I slump against the bars, suddenly exhausted. The metal is cold against my forehead. "I never did. I'm like you. I just wanted to save my friends. We want the same things."

"Everyone wants the medicine. Each day I watch them fight to the death just for a small handful."

I see the fear in his eyes. His brow is deeply lined, and the skin beneath his eyes sunken from lack of sleep. His face is gaunt, like he's barely eating. He reminds me of my father in those last weeks before I fled—paranoid, desperate, and completely unreachable.

He's so, so very scared.

"You are right," I tell him, softening my voice. "My leaders know about the medicine. I believe they have come to this planet for it."

Because as much as my words add to his paranoia, they are the truth. If being honest might save someone's life, even if it's not mine, then I need to speak up. I won't go another day quietly hiding behind a screen, running away, hoping that problems get resolved. I'm not that woman anymore.

The King's eyes flash with fear.

"I only came here to find the proof to convict our corrupt leaders. I never intended you or your people any harm. Please." My voice cracks. "Not all my people are bad. Most of us want to live peacefully. We came here to build new lives. To live in peace with each other. Please... not everyone deserves to be punished. Please. Do the right thing. Help them."

For a moment, something like consideration crosses his face.

The king opens his mouth to reply, but a commotion nearby quickly closes it. Heavy footsteps and grunts of effort approach. Within moments I see two bodies, a distinctly blue and green one, being dragged along the passageway by guards twice their size. At least one of them has the common sense to actually resist. Of course, Zoran's expression is of excitement and not frustration at his detainment.

"Put them in with her. At least she will not be alone when she dies," the king commands the guards. He looks over his shoulder at me. "Send them all to the arena. I doubt any of them will last long. It's the best mercy I can give," he adds, glancing at me.

I snort. Like the guy's giving me a lifeline. Still, a quick death is better than a slow one... I guess?

Knowing the door to my cell is about to be opened, I prepare to fling myself through it. My muscles tense, ready to spring. And then what? Somehow fight off multiple

opponents bigger, stronger, and more experienced at combat than I? While wearing this stupid skirt?

With a sigh, I step back. I'm not a fighter, and I can't fight my way out of this. But I am smart; I will make my escape. I've done it once before, and I'll do it again.

I refuse to die here.

I barely step back quickly enough to avoid colliding with the bodies they throw in my direction. The cell door clangs shut once more, the sound reverberating through my bones.

"Now that just hurt!" Zoran grunts, standing and dusting himself off as if he'd merely tripped rather than been tossed into a cell like a sack of potatoes. When he sees me, he gives me a toothy grin as if he's sharing some secret joke, as if none of this concerns him in the slightest.

Melvall just lies on the floor and groans, dramatically flinging an arm over his face.

"Today was supposed to be a short day," Melvall groans as he lies on the floor. He flings a hand over his face. "Take me out, you begged. Just one fight. It'll be easy, you said."

"It was supposed to be easy," Zoran replies with a shrug, flexing his muscles as if making sure everything still works. "How was I supposed to know that we'd be visiting the arena twice?"

"Seriously? You two are still bickering?" I ask, as I crane my neck to watch the King and his guards walk away, their footsteps fading into the distance.

I guess there's no more reasoning with him or the King. Maybe there never was.

With a sigh, I slump against the bars and sink to the ground. The stone floor is cold and slightly damp beneath me. “I totally get the sentiment, Melvall. This was supposed to be a short quest. Just explore the mystery, an abandoned building then return to the colony. No complications. Why can’t life ever be simple?”

“Umm, because then it’d be boring?” Zoran replies. He comes to sit beside me, propping an arm on one knee. He still looks far too upbeat for the situation. I much more relate to Melvall’s outlook at the moment.

Another roar from the arena makes the walls vibrate slightly. Someone—or something—is enjoying the current match. My stomach churns.

We all remain in silence for a while, absorbed by our own thoughts. Of course, Zoran freaking hums the whole time, like we are simply waiting for the next bus to arrive. His foot taps against the floor in an irregular rhythm that’s slowly driving me insane.

“Can you explain something to me, please?” I ask, desperate to break the humming if nothing else. “What’s going on? The king was going on about slavers and being brought here... and none of it makes any sense.”

“Well you see—” Zoran starts, leaning forward eagerly.

“Like you would know, Zoran! You’ll leave out all the important parts.” Melvall huffs, sitting up and joining our little circle. “Let me tell the story.”

The two males stare at each other, participating in some staring contest as to who will be the better storyteller. You could cut the tension between the two with a butter knife—somehow this is more important than the fact that we are about to be sent to our deaths. Men.

“Fine.” Eventually, Zoran flicks a hand at Melvall in defeat. “I’d just tell her about all



the interesting things, like grand battles and legendary males, not the boring facts like dates and numbers.”

He leans closer to me and whispers in an overly loud voice, “I’ll tell you the real story later. Just smile and nod at him—it always works.”

I stifle a laugh despite myself.

Melvall sighs, but thankfully starts to explain. He stands to pace the small cell, arms behind his back and held in a stately pose as he fully embodies the appearance of a teacher. “There once was a mighty pirate?—”

“The king of all pirates!” Zoran cuts in, jumping to his feet with excitement. “Undefeated in conquest. He soared through the stars and?—”

“There once was. A. King. Pirate.” Melvall says, talking over his over-zealous companion. He shoots Zoran a glare that could melt steel. “He found a planet at the edges of space, and decided to make it the heart of his empire. It was far enough away from the Galactic Federation that he could make his own laws, or lack of them.”

“This is already sounding like a terrible vacation spot,” I mutter.

“It was truly a land where only the strong thrived,” Melvall continues, ignoring my comment. “Before long, every villain had a hand in the dealings that went on; drugs, trafficking, slavery, and fight-pits. If you can imagine it, then probably worse actually happened.”

“That planet is Atraxis, isn’t it?” I ask, not needing the clarification. It’s so obvious that even Zoran knows it.

“Wait until I tell you about the dragon fight!” Zoran interjects, bouncing on his toes like an excited child.

“There were no dragons,” Melvall says flatly.

“How do you know? Were you there?” Zoran counters.

I clear my throat pointedly. “You were saying?”

“Right,” Melvall says, shooting Zoran another look. “The fighting pits were particularly profitable, attracting criminals from all over the universe. You could watch, or even join if you felt brave enough.”

He runs a hand along the wall, tracing what looks like an old scratch mark. “But the pirate king’s gladiators kept dying in them—though to be honest many of them weren’t true warriors. Most were slaves, stolen from their home worlds.”

A distant scream makes me flinch. How many have died in these pits over the years? It’s timing is all too relevant to our discussion.

Melvall’s telling a dark and terrible story... and I prefer the light-hearted ones. You know, the ones where the people actually live at the end.

“The King found a way to keep them fighting; achieving what many thought was impossible,” Melvall continues.

“The medicine,” Zoran cuts in, his voice suddenly serious.

“The ability to heal all wounds, no matter how severe,” Melvall explains. “He had help from several parties, of course. After all, everyone, including entire planets and species, wants such a power for themselves, or at the very least wants to stop their

enemies from getting hold of it.”

“Long story short?” I prompt, rubbing my arms against a sudden chill.

Melvall stops pacing and faces me directly. “Supposedly the ‘investors’ found out about each other, and weren’t happy. During the fighting, the slaves took the opportunity to rebel.”

“And that’s when it gets good!” Zoran interrupts, mimicking sword fighting with an invisible opponent.

“You see,” Melvall continues, “when someone uses too much of the medicine, it becomes a part of them—they no longer need more in order to rapidly heal even the most serious of wounds. At that point you only need to give it to the younglings. In this case, so many of the slaves had been forced to fight, over and over again. They’d been healed countless times...”

“The gladiators and slaves won?” I ask, leaning forward.

“Compared to the pirate king’s men, they were unstoppable. Unkillable,” Melvall confirms.

The implications hit me like a physical blow. “The king was a slave?”

“He would have been quite young at the time,” Melvall confirms, his voice softening.

I lean my head back against the cool metal bars, the pieces clicking into place.

“It makes so much sense now; why there are buildings already on the planet. Even why Earth came here, especially under the pretense of mining.” I shake my head. “I’d like to say that I’m shocked that they even knew about this... but I’ve seen what

power does to people; it makes them think that they can do anything they want, sacrificing anyone that gets in their way.”

Through the bars, I can see a guard walking past, deliberately not looking in our direction. His armor gleams in the dim light, too fancy for the grim surroundings.

“The King’s not a bad guy,” Zoran tells us, sitting back down with a thump.

Melvall snorts.

“He’s right, Melvall,” I tell the blue male.

“Oh, not you too!” He gives me a pitying look, like I’m the one that’s crazy here.

“He’s scared,” I insist. “He feels all alone in this universe, trying to hold everything together even when it’s all falling apart around him.”

Melvall shakes his head in disagreement, refusing to listen.

“He is. Trust me. I know what it’s like to feel alone, to feel like you can’t trust anyone around you at all.”

That sense of loneliness, of isolation, of having no one that I could lean on for support... it was all in my mind. All this time, I’ve been the one to make my reality worse. For so long now, I’ve been driven by this false belief—just like the King has.

In reality, I haven’t been alone for a long time. I had my friends Ariana and Stacy by my side. Then there was Volan, who came out of nowhere to offer me aid. He saved me, so many times. Even Melvall and Zoran are here caring, companions in a way that only accused-criminals can bond.

“All this time I could have spoken out and told others that I was struggling, you know? I could have asked them for help, but I didn’t.” I trace a pattern in the dust on the floor. “Why? Maybe my pride. I don’t know. I had this stupid belief that I had to be the strongest person around, taking care of others. I was putting myself under pressure for no real reason.”

“There’s no shame in asking for help,” Zoran tells me, his usual humor gone. “Even a warrior must learn when a foe is beyond their own skill level.”

“There’s no shame in asking for help,” I repeat those valuable words, closing my eyes and internalizing what’s got to be the most important lesson of my life. I never ask others for help, but that’s about to change.

“I was always afraid,” I tell them, opening my eyes to meet their gazes. “All this time, I thought I was being strong, taking my destiny into my own hands. But it was always the fear driving me. I ran from it back on Earth. I could have said no to my own father, or told the authorities what he was pressuring me to do, but I didn’t. I didn’t speak up loud enough when Ariana went missing. And I ran from the colony rather than confront Walter and the council directly; all because I was so terrified that I would fail. I didn’t need more evidence; I had all that I needed. I was just so afraid that no one would help me. I really, really didn’t need to do this all on my own.”

Even knowing that I can and should ask, doesn’t make it any easier. A life-long mental issue isn’t just solved overnight. I’m a work in progress, and that’s okay.

It’s that very reason why I can’t find it in myself to blame the King. Not fully. He’s clearly trying to work around trauma... and he really needs professional help, but obviously can’t get it. He’s doing the best he can, even if that is a bit misguided.

I open my eyes and look at my two companions. They stare back at me, attention riveted. The sound of the arena has grown louder, closer. Time is running out.

“I’m...I’m asking now. For help. Please.”

“How can we help?” Melvall asks, his voice quiet from the other side of the cell. He doesn’t hesitate to offer his support, and I’m beyond grateful for that.

I place my trembling hands in my lap. I can still feel the weight of my tablet in my pocket. It’s a comforting presence; a connection to my beloved mother, and a gift to define my own freedom and life.

No one thought to search the defenseless female. Little do they know...

“I’ve got a plan. It’s time we broke out of this place and saved the day.”

Computer engineer to prison escapee in three easy steps. Great career move, Maya.

A beat goes by, my dramatic proclamation settling in.

“You are just as mad as the rest of them,” Melvall sighs, but a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “But whatever. If you can get us out of these cells, then let’s do this.”

“Finally!” Zoran exclaims, cracking his knuckles. “I’ve been ready to break some heads!”

“I said break out, not break heads,” I correct him, but I can’t help smiling.

I could laugh. I could cry. But what I’m really going to do is finish what I set out to do—punish the villains and save my colony.

### Chapter Thirty

MAYA

I hiss through my teeth as I squint at my tablet screen. Lines of code scroll before my eyes... and it's frustratingly slow. My nerves are shot, every little noise making me feel like I'm on borrowed time. And those noises? Over the last few minutes, they've gotten increasingly louder. The King said that we were going to be thrown into the arena, and I am starting to fear the games are just beginning.

"When you dramatically declared we were escaping this place, I kind of figured you'd have a key or something," Melvall complains from beside me. His face is pressed to the metal bars, nose squishing through, as he attempts to look down both sides of the corridor for the wayward patrolling guards.

"I do. Kind of," I tell him. "Hacking isn't like it is in the vids, okay? They make it look so easy. Just start an app or press a button, or maybe even two people can type on a keyboard at once and it somehow just magically works," I scoff.

"This is hacking?" Zoran asks. "Using this device with the glowing screen? I've heard about them, but never seen one in person before."

I slap his wrist as he reaches for my tablet, curious fingers questing.

"No. Hacking is much more complicated than just 'using the device'. You have to understand encryption protocols, authentication layers, and system vulnerabilities. I'm trying to find a security backdoor that will let me override the lock mechanisms,"

I explain, my fingers flying across the screen. “I was right! They’re using an outdated access control system down here. If I can bypass their authentication sequence, then I should be able to trigger the unlock protocols and...”

My fingers type across the screen, my brain screaming at me why I didn’t bring a keyboard as well. As soon as I get the opportunity, I’m going to get one of those fold-up ones... or maybe one of those projection models, though they’re more prone to typos than anything.

“What do you think is going on out there?” Melvall asks, craning his head. “It’s getting awfully loud.”

“Maybe a famous fighter?” Zoran replies. After a moment, he snorts. “Nah. They would have cheered that loud for me if it was.”

I ignore them, my mind focused on the data appearing before me. A jumble of command lines and access codes appearing, yet in my mind, I can visualize it all; pathways going to gates, splitting off from one another and even circling back, all interconnecting with other devices on the network. Each junction point, each security node is a vulnerable spot that I might be able to exploit.

If there is one thing I am certain of in this life, it is my ability to code. Computers don’t have messy emotions and evil motivations; they are simply logical operators of if, then, and that’s it. Clean. Trustworthy. They do not betray you.

Coding is nothing like the complexities of my heart and mind. My head tells me that I can’t trust him ever again... my soul begs for me to find him and patch things up because no one’s ever made me feel the way he does.

My breath catches in my throat as I visualize the path forward, a way to bypass the electronic locks of the cell doors. No one’s bothered to update the security here in



quite some time, perhaps ever. I didn't even need to create new exploit code; I found a vulnerability that's probably been around since this system was first installed. Had I needed to write custom code... it might have taken too long. Our freedom is as simple as someone forgetting to patch their security by pressing the update button...

My fingers shake as they hover over my tablet. So simple... It'll be a matter of just executing this command sequence, and then walking out of here. Without Volan by my side, protecting me. Without him guiding me through the dangers. I'll just have to casually avoid the hordes of warrior males, rogues, barbarians, and whatever other sword-wielding aliens there are between me and the colony. Easy.

Just weeks ago, I would have frozen with fear at the thought of being in this predicament. Now? I find myself calculating escape routes and planning countermoves like I'm the protagonist in one of those fantasy adventures I love so much. The same woman who once couldn't even confront Walter during a conversation is now planning a prison break. The irony isn't lost on me.

"You just have to press that button, right?" Zoran asks, face hovering over my shoulder, hot breath fanning my neck. "The one that says 'unlock doors', right?"

"Yes."

"So it is as easy as just using the device, then."

"I..." I look at him, to tell him that someone in the past wrote hundreds, thousands of lines of code, to combat hundreds of thousands of lines, and... He wouldn't understand all the time and effort that resulted in a frustrating, glaringly simple button. "Yeah, I guess I just gotta use the device after all."

"In three, two, one..." With a deep breath, I press my finger firmly to the screen.

We all wait with bated breath, but nothing happens.

“No... alarms?” Melvall asks, looking over his shoulder at me. “Did you do anything at all?”

“Well, I pressed the button!” I reply.

I glare at the cells of our prison.

“Did you try pulling?” I ask the blue-colored alien. “Not all doors are push, you know?”

Melvall scowls at me as if I suggested something so blatantly obvious that even a child would know... but sure enough, as he pulls back on the metal, the cage door swings open. I do my best to repress the smirk that threatens to pull across my lips, especially at Melvall’s shocked, delighted, and frustrated expression. It’s always amazed me that aliens and humans share so many facial mannerisms, even when sometimes our cultural behaviors differ.

Oh, how I have grown over the last few days.

I stand up and place my tablet in my pocket, making sure to zip it up to keep it safe. It’s my safety blanket, and I can’t possibly bear to be parted from it.

With my chin raised high, I step through the door... okay, maybe I step cautiously through the door and glance around for signs of anyone who might stop us. My anxiety is still buzzing beneath my skin, prickling like goosebumps, ready to make me jump at the first sign of danger... and that’s okay. I think I’m always going to be an anxious person. It’s kind of what makes me, well, me.

The hallway is clear.

“Come on, guys, let’s get out of here.” I don’t bother looking over my shoulder at my fellow escape prisoners; there’s a certainty in my bones that they are following closely behind.

The distant sound of cheering makes me pause, my heartbeat hammering in my throat. “Sounds like they’re having fun without us.”

“Not the kind of fun I want,” Melvall mutters.

“Speak for yourself,” Zoran grins, cracking his knuckles. “Nothing like a good fight to get the blood pumping. Just has to be a fair one—warrior against warrior, skill against skill.”

“It does make me wonder though,” I say, turning to Zoran. “You seemed so proud of your fighting skills back there. If you’re such a champion in the pits, why were you two breaking into the medicine lab? Couldn’t you just win it the usual way?”

Zoran’s usual bravado seems to diminish slightly. “Well...”

“Let’s just say that lately the King has been changing the rules,” Melvall cuts in, voice low. “Last tournament, instead of warrior against warrior, they brought in something else.”

“This huge beast with these long, tentacles,” Zoran explains, gesturing widely with his hands. “Dozens of them, whipping around so fast you can barely see them. And they’re strong—strong enough to crush armor. It pulls warriors underground and just...” He makes a graphic squishing gesture with his hands.

“A tangler,” Melvall identifies, his voice clinical despite the grim subject. “An extremely rare subterranean predator. Virtually impossible to defeat in confined spaces.”

“We watched as three warriors went in,” Zoran states solemnly, uncharacteristically subdued. “None survived.”

“I may be strong,” Zoran admits with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, “but I’m not stupid.”

“Are you sure?” Melvall asks, not missing a beat.

Zoran glares at him. “One beast with many arms against one warrior with two? Not favorable odds.”

Melvall sighs, nodding in acquiescence. “So we thought... alternative acquisition methods might be prudent.”

I nod, understanding dawning. “You were stealing medicine for your people because the King made winning it nearly impossible.”

“Exactly,” Zoran says, his usual cheerfulness returning. “Much more dignified to get caught stealing than to get eaten, right? This way I get to live to fight another day.”

Before long we are walking past several cages filled with all manner of beasts. A large blue and purple pile of fur catches my eye, and as I walk past I withhold my gasp when a bear-like face lifts and watches me silently. A smaller cage hangs against a wall, inside filled with a dozen bats... no, their skin isn’t soft and tender but cracked and creviced like rocks.

“They are meant for the arena,” Melvall informs us, pausing to also inspect the rock-bats.

“The Sulthari capture them,” Zoran tells me from my other side. He leans forward to prod at the birdcage, sticking a finger inside. He snatches his hand, dragging it away

from the bars, moments before the creatures inside throw themselves at the offending appendage. “My mother told me stories when I was a youngling, but I guess I never really believed them.”

“About the birds?” I ask, entranced. I tilt my head, studying the creviced body. Eerily, several of the birds copy my movement. “What did she tell you?”

“No, about the Sulthari,” Zoran corrects. “She told us that the Sulthari sneak from their caves under the light of the moon, and any that crosses their path will be captured. They drag their victims back into the caves, sometimes screaming, and they are never seen again.”

“That’s...!” I turn and gape at him. The thought of being dragged into the darkness, never to see the light again, is horrifying.

“I thought it was a youngling tale, one that she told us simply to stop my brother and me from wandering far from the village at night. We did that. A lot. Always exploring.”

Melvall shakes his head. “My sire taught me something similar.”

“Wow,” I mutter. “My people tell the same sorts of stories. Not about Sulthari, but just the general warnings to not wander far from home.”

I squeeze my arms around my waist. Volan is a Sulthari. Did he do this; sneak out and attack people at night, dragging them to their doom? Again I question him and his motives, wondering what is real.

Volan tricked me. He didn’t even need to drag me here, I just simply followed him like the fool that I am. I knew all along that aliens were quick to whisk away females, and for some stupid reason, I just didn’t think it would apply to me. After all, who

would actually want me? I'm falling apart at the seams, scared to do anything unless desperation forces me.

But that's not entirely true anymore, is it? The woman who cowered in fear from the scampers is now actively hunting for an escape route. Maybe I'm still afraid, but I'm not letting that fear control me anymore.

"These creatures..." I swallow the lump in my throat, trying desperately to redirect my thoughts from painful topics. "We can't just leave them here."

"What do you propose we do then? Release them and follow them down the hallway to freedom as if they are an army we command?" Melvall snorts.

"Would it work?"

"No!"

"I mean..." Zoran's eyebrows are lowered, and his brow is pinched. We turn and stare at him as an expression of almost-pain crosses his face.

"You make thinking look painful," Melvall comments. I can only nod. Indeed, his eyes are squished closed and his lips are pressed thin.

"That, or constipated," I remark. "Are you alright, Zoran?"

"What? Yes, of course. I was just thinking..."

"So that's what you call it," Melvall mutters, shaking his head.

"I was just thinking..." Zoran says, glaring at his friend, "that perhaps we could indeed follow the beasts out. If at the very least, we can use them as a distraction."

“No,” Melvall growls, stomping his foot.

“We can’t fight all those warriors,” Zoran admits. “I mean, I’d try...but a good warrior knows when to retreat for help. And we have the duty to protect the human female,” he finishes, attention fully on Melvall.

“Hey! I can look after myself!” I glare, hands on hips. “I mean, I took down at least half a dozen scampers back in the tunnels, didn’t I?”

Both males look down their noses at me. Not in a bad way, as if they are purposely looking down on me as a person, but simply because they are so much taller than I. And larger. Even Melvall, sleek compared to Zoran’s bulk, has muscles on muscles compared to my slight chub.

“I have claws,” Zoran admits. “And am a trained fighter. I can best many of my clansmen in unarmed combat. Can you say the same?”

Melvall nods. He holds out an arm, revealing the row of small but noticeable spikes across his forearm. “I have my spikes. They are quite sharp, and I can excrete poison if it comes to it. Enough to even take down a male like Zoran with ease.”

“And I have strength,” Zoran says with a grin, sharp teeth on display. He flexes his arm before me, muscles rippling. “I am strong enough to pummel a male like Melvall to the ground.”

“Well, my tail is much bigger than yours. I can sweep you off your feet and hit you several times with it.”

“Ha! You want to know what I’ve got that’s bigger?”

“Enough!” I shout, covering my face. “I swear to God, you are all as bad as

teenagers. This isn't a contest. Stop beating your chests!"

Melvall and Zoran quirk their heads towards me, expressions confused. "We are not hitting each other's chests..."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, frustration mounting. Why are aliens always so literal, and always at the worst possible timing? "Let's just focus, okay? Right now we are going to vote on whether we save these beasts. You two can release your own beasts to compare later if you want, but right now, our priority is getting out of here."

"We should not feel sorry for these creatures," Melvall tells me, changing the subject. "Each of these beasts will eat you if given the chance."

"I am not leaving them behind," I hiss. "It could have been us left in these cages, with no one to help!"

I blink, shocked by my own sudden anger. Melvall's recoiled from me, eyes wide as he looks down at me like I am some creature ready to spit acid or fire at him.

"No one's ever helped me before..." I tell them, throat tight. It's not entirely the truth, though, is it? Volan helped me. At least, he pretended to help me when he said he'd guide me to that room. And he did... right before he betrayed me.

"Just because no one else does the right thing, doesn't mean I have to act like them. I want to help these creatures, because it's the right thing to do. Help others, that is."

"It is the honor of a warrior to help others weaker than themselves," Zoran admits.

Melvall sighs but nods. "I'm not a warrior," he tells us. "But you are right, we should help those in need. After all, who knows when one day I might need the help in return?"



He turns and paces to the purple bear's cage. "So we just use your device and open the doors, right? Let's hope that the creatures choose to follow the hallways and not... you know, eat us."

I slip my tablet out of my pocket, walking up beside Melvall.

"Thank you," I whisper to him, already pulling up my apps to initiate the same unlock procedure I used before. Melvall simply grunts in return, his body stiff. I can feel the anxiousness rolling off of him... because it's literally bubbling under my own skin. No one ever said that doing the right thing wasn't foolhardy and safe. Opening these cage doors could very well mean that we are about to be mauled and ripped apart... but sometimes you need to look fear in the eye and choose to keep moving despite it.

"Right... On my mark, get ready to pull the doors open, okay?" I call out, making sure that I'm loud enough for Zoran to hear me. He's still hanging about with the birds, probably poking his finger into the cage. Given how loud the birds are squawking, I really don't doubt it for a moment.

"Umm, guys..." Zoran replies over the increasing shrieks and calls. "It's not pull. It's push."

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning to look at the green alien. The one with more brute strength than sense, but a heart of gold nonetheless.

My eyes widen as the meanings of his words sink in. Standing before me is a green alien. At least, what used to be a green alien. Latched onto his body, hanging off his arms, and perched on his head... are a dozen flapping, rock birds. They cover so much of his body that I can barely see any skin anymore. And of course, what I can see of him is his wide smile and obvious delight, despite the small claw marks all over his cheeks.

“Turns out the cage doors are unlocked already,” he says, the birds flapping their wings furiously as he shrugs. They practically threaten to lift him up and carry him off in flight.

“He’s right,” Melvall says from behind me, voice quiet. A chill goes down my spine as his hand grips my elbow, very slowly inching me to the side. “Turns out the cages are already unlocked. All of them.”

Oh shit.

### Chapter Thirty-One

VOLAN

A nger thrums through my body, pure and righteous and unbelievably powerful. All my life, everything I've worked towards... it meant nothing. My father never cared about our little kingdom - all he wants is power. He never cared about me, either—I was just a tool to use and discard.

The only one who ever cared for me was Maya, and I betrayed her.

After everything I did, it was for nothing.

I glance around at my bedroom—luxurious sheets on a large bed, smooth rock walls intermixed with metal doors. Food, fruit from the surface, and other luxuries litter my personal space. More wealth than I could possibly ever need... and I would trade it all just to know that Maya was safe.

I'm trapped in this gilded room, forbidden from leaving.

I glare at the locked solid metal door, barring me from my escape... and rampage. I wouldn't claw through it even if I tried. The only way to operate that lock and free myself is by using one of my father's toys; devices similar to the ones that Maya carried with her. Only the highest-ranking guards have those devices. I've never bothered carrying one, never barred from entering anywhere before.

Even if I were able to get to the other side, the King's personal guards are waiting.

‘For my protection’, my father had claimed. No... they are here to trap me like the raving animal that I am. Even if I were able to escape this prison, there would be no convincing them to look the other way.

“You know, you should try to eat something,” Tanis says, as he sits at my desk. He picks at the food, taking the best pieces for himself. I’ve never seen him so... disrespectful. Even he’s lost his faith in me. I can’t blame him.

“Where is she?” I ask, my voice guttural.

“Your father sent her to the arena cells,” he replies. “Along with your other two companions.”

“She’s alive,” I breathe out a sigh of relief. I receive a grunt in reply.

Tanis casually peels back the skin of some fruit, completely undeterred by my aggressive pacing. He holds out a piece of fruit towards me, “Want some?”

“Of course I don’t!” I snap, slapping the offending food from his hand. It bounces across the room. “Why are you here, Tanis? Shouldn’t you be out there with the other guards, keeping me locked up?”

“I’m here for your orders,” Tanis sighs, staring up at me.

He’s never been the smartest of males, but his heart is always in the right place. I’ve never really been able to fault him for anything. His loyalty touches me.

“My orders?” I scoff. “What could I possibly order you to do? What would even be the point? It’s not like I can help anyone from in here.”

“Is that what you want to do?” He asks, leaning forward. His eyes bore into me, as if

he's trying to see into my soul. "To help?"

"All I've ever wanted to do is help!" I shout, throwing up my arms and pacing away. "I want to help our people. I want to help Maya. Hell, I want to help you even find that perfect mate, just like how you've always talked about."

I sink onto the soft mattress of my bed, a groan slipping free. I scrub furiously at my eyes.

The luminae on Tanis' skin pulse gently, telling me he's happy. Probably because I admitted that I cared about the unfeeling bastard. The very bastard that thought to bring me food and drink, knowing he was likely to be turned away by the King's guards. The only being to consider me at all after my arrest.

"I'm sorry for..." I sigh, waving my hand at the discarded fruit. "I just... Our people are dying, Tanis. Ever since we found ourselves on this planet, we've been rotting away in the dark. We are supposed to be warriors. We should have led the charge to the surface. We should be liberating this world, defending others from danger... and instead, we force other tribes to fight in the arena, all so that they might live another day while they battle the dangers alone. Tell me, Tanis, how are we any different from those slavers? What happened?"

"Your father happened," Tanis replies. "And you happened."

I huff, unable to deny him. "I've been spoiled. And naive. How could I not see it? All those times I was forbidden to go on patrol. All those times he turned me away, telling me I was not ready to rule. I believed him. I thought he loved me, he was grooming me to take over... but..."

"He's your father," Tanis replies. "You're supposed to trust your father. As our king, we are supposed to never question his wisdom."

I scoff. "If I'm ever being that stupid, you're welcome to punch me."

"Noted."

I glance across at the male. He's back to picking at what is supposedly my dinner.

"Oh Tanis," I sigh, exhaustion pulling at my shoulders. I spent so many years of my life dedicated to my people, and look at where I've ended up--alone, trapped, and helpless. It's not like they even care; the only one here is Tanis, and he's eating my damned food!

"As soon as the door opens, you should just leave. Get away while you can. If I live through the night, and that's a big if, then best I can even hope for is exile. And I'll tell you now... I'm not leaving my mate behind. I'll fight for her."

And I'll die for her. As strong as I am, I'm just a singular warrior. There is no way I can fight against hundreds of warriors. I doubt I'll even make it to her side... but I'll still try.

I hang my head, defeated. There's nothing I can do. I can't help myself. I can't help Maya. I've doomed everyone.

"Of course our people care. They've just been waiting for a true King to lead them."

I laugh, the sound bitter as it erupts from my throat. "A true King? Look at me, Tanis. I'm trapped in a room, sulking. I can't fight, because I can't even get out! It's not like I can just command an army to stand with me."

"Sure you can," Tanis replies.

I raise my head, sadness touching me. He still doesn't understand. He thinks

everything is alright, just another night of me being punished for sneaking out of my room without the escort of my guards. He thinks everything will be fine in a day or two, like always.

“Tanis...”

He’s staring at me from across the room, a smirk stretching across his lips. He raises himself out of the seat, coming to stand at attention before me.

“All you’ve got to do is give the order,” he tells me. “We’ve been waiting a long time for a suitable leader to be ready.”

I blink at him. “What? Who’s we?”

“A sizable number of guards. Many prominent citizens and councilors. Even several warriors from other tribes are willing to step in. Your people are ready to support you, whenever you are ready to truly step up.”

I scrunch my nose at him, disbelieving. “It sounds like you’re saying that you’ve somehow managed to muster an army.”

“I have very much indeed mustered an army,” Tanis replies.

“But... how?” I ask. My head swirls. It’s impossible, isn’t it? Tanis? Of all beings, he’s soft-spoken and quiet. He cares far more than his fearsome appearance implies and always does as he’s ordered to.

Tanis shrugs, as if this isn’t a truly unbelievable feat. “A lot of people are unhappy. All it took was a few words here and there, and then things just sort of fell into place. I’ve spent the last few cycles doing all I can so that when you are ready to lead us to victory, so will be your army.”

“Why wait for me?” I ask. “If you truly have an army, you could have overthrown my father already!”

Tanis sits beside me on the bed, holding his hands out before him. He studies them, as if he’s trying to imagine just what he can grasp. A kingdom apparently, if he set his mind to it.

“I never wanted the throne, Volan. I’m a warrior, not a leader. I can organize fighters, but our people need someone who questions whether they deserve to lead—someone who worries about making the right choices and not someone who thinks it’s their divine right to just make decisions for others.”

“And you think that’s me? The male who just betrayed the one person who trusted him completely?”

Tanis nods firmly. “That’s exactly why. You’re haunted by your mistakes. The worst leaders are those who never doubt themselves.”

I stare at him, stunned into silence.

“You spend your time training with us guards, constantly pushing us to be better. Why? So that we don’t get hurt. When you aren’t with the council trying to convince them of things to change, you are sneaking off to patrol, even at your own personal risk.” Tanis’ luminae pulse vibrantly, lighting up the room with his passionate speech.

“Did you really think us guards were so oblivious to our Prince walking past in those ridiculous disguises? We’ve watched you. We’ve noticed that every action you do is for us, for your people. It’s never for your benefit. You actually care, and so we have dedicated ourselves to you. You are a True King. You are the one meant to lead us.”



I gape at him. All this time...

“You are a smarter male than I’ve given you credit for,” I tell him quietly, “and you are far more loyal than I deserve.”

Who is this male, and what did he do with my Tanis? We are so going to have to talk about this once I’m done. At the very least, he’s getting promoted to Advisor rather than a simple guard. Lights, I’m going to find this male a mate even if it kills me.

Tanis looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to talk. To give him an order. It’s all he’s ever done, I realize. He’s been waiting a long time for me to make this decision.

My mind is a whirl as I stare at nothing in particular, too active for me even to notice any decor around me in the dimly lit room. A pain squeezes at my chest, as if a hand was reaching out and gripping my very heart. My lungs feel tight as I try to breathe in deep, desperate for cool and calming air.

I’ve waited for this moment for years... and it’s not at all how I wanted to achieve my dreams. I imagined a joyous time, surrounded by those I cared about. Instead, I am about to declare war on the very male that’s supposed to dedicate his life to caring and protecting me. I’m about to send the very people I have grown to respect to their deaths.

“The king... is not fit to rule anymore,” I declare after a long moment, the words wrenched from my broken soul.

Tanis grins at me, the very same expression he wears whenever he’s won a particularly hard fight - usually against several opponents at once. The male is formidable—truly fearless.

I hold up my hand, stalling him. “I do not know if I am fit to be your king either,

Tanis. I made a promise to Maya, and I broke it. I am not a male of my word, as you seem to believe me to be.”

“You promised to return her home, correct?” Tanis asks.

“I did.”

“Then just return her home.”

“I...” A bitter laugh escapes me. “You make it sound so easy. Sure, Tanis, I’ll just break out of this locked room, lead my new army to overthrow my father, and then escort my mate back home where she will promptly leave me. Who knows, maybe we’ll just stop by for lunch and save her people while at it! Of course, that all depends upon us actually getting beyond that locked door. Easy. Not even my father’s personal guard can open this door without one of those special devices, and unless you have one on hand, it’s impossible.”

As if responding to my sarcastic outburst, a loud click echoes through the room. Both Tanis and I freeze, staring at the door as its electronic lock disengages with a soft whirl. The heavy metal door swings open so very slowly, inch by inch revealing our freedom.

“What the—” Tanis stares at the door, genuine shock flickering across his luminae. The same surprise that I feel. “Did you do that?”

“That was rather unexpected,” I agree with him.

I stare at the door with wide eyes. Every inch of my body alert. Is this the moment that my father’s guards come bursting in? Will they be here to expel me from the kingdom, to live as a vagabond, or to kill me for my treasonous acts?

My eyes land upon the equally shocked guards gathering on the other side of the door, peering in at us. Clearly, they didn't do it.

"I don't know about the stopping to get lunch part," Tanis mutters. "But it seems that we aren't fated to stay sulking in this dark room."

The door is open. I don't care if it was the guards, or just the Gods intervening with my fate. I can get through, and I can find Maya. This is my chance, I realize, as fiery hope runs through my veins. It burns as it rushes through my limbs, and my luminae lights up the room in response to my intense emotions.

"I refuse to be a slave to the darkness," I say out loud. "I refuse to break or bend, and I will fix that which is broken."

My heart beats strong at the thrill of the upcoming battle.

I'm confident as I step towards my father's chosen warriors. They draw and raise their spears towards me, even though I'm lacking my own weapon, as a vicious and bloodthirsty smile splits across my face.

Their defense doesn't bother me, not one bit. I am my own weapon. My father tried to stop me from training, but I always found a way, even if it involved sneaking about with Tanis' help.

With a battle cry, I dash through the door. I lunge, dodging the first attack and ducking under the sharpened blade as it swings past my shoulder. Using my momentum, I slam my arm against the side of the blade to push it safely aside, while my body slams into the guard's torso. He stumbles back, knocking into his companion. As the male falls with a shout, I snatch his weapon from his loosened hold. Planting my foot on his stomach, I spin my weight and body to bring the spear stabbing down towards my second opponent, as they both struggle upon the floor.

The spear sinks deep.

Silence stretches in the hallway as I look down at my enemies. I breathe heavily, panting even, as a laugh bubbles from deep within me.

“You have two choices: stay down and admit loyalty to your new King, or die.”

The males stare up at me with wide eyes, their luminae pulsing furiously in their shock. Between both their heads, the spear tip is embedded into the stone floor. I could have easily killed them just now, and they know it. They are outmatched, having become lazy over the years, comforted by their strength in numbers. Meanwhile, I’ve been training relentlessly, all so that I might protect our people if it ever came to it.

“Mercy!” One of the males stutters, shaking. I shake my head at him, ashamed at his lack of courage and strength.

The other male looks up at me defiantly, and for a moment I fear that I will indeed have to take more drastic measures. Finally, he says, “Wherever you lead, my King, I will follow.”

I stare at him for a long hard moment, tension crackling between us. Let’s be honest, I don’t trust this male as far as I can throw him; especially since he was so quick to transfer his loyalty.

“Inside the room,” I direct them, stepping back to give them space to stand. “Let’s see how you like being kept prisoner for now. We’ll deal with you later.”

With a shove, I watch my bedroom door swing close, once again becoming a cell door as it clicks shut with a slight noise. It’s rather... undramatic.

“Tanis, are you ready?” I ask my friend as he collects the other spear, preparing himself for war.

The male gives me a nod, ready to follow me to the darkest of depths. He’s lucky; I’d never send a warrior before me to brave danger that I myself wouldn’t face. But I would accept a friend at my side.

“It’s time for us to walk in the light.”

I’ve waited for this moment my whole life. I’ve worked endlessly. None of it matters anymore. Not the fame, not the riches, not even the glory on the battlefield. I don’t care if anyone ever remembers my name. Today is the day that the false king falls, and I restore my people’s honor.

Today is the day that I will chase after my little Maya.

She can run, but I will chase. She can hide, but I will find her.

I want this little female.

And I’ll give her everything that she wants - be it planet, kingdom, or even my soul.

Because one thing is certain - I love her.

### Chapter Thirty-Two

#### VOLAN

My spear leads as I move through the corridors, Tanis at my back. The stone beneath my feet no longer feels familiar – instead, it’s cold, hostile. Like the kingdom itself rejects my presence. My own home has become a battlefield, one where life, death, and freedom hang in an unstable balance.

Ahead, two guards round the corner. Their luminae flare in shock, catching sight of me. One raises his weapon while the other turns to flee – no doubt to raise the alarm.

“Stand down,” I command. The words echo off the metal walls, firm and unyielding.

The first guard hesitates, his spear wavering. His companion freezes mid-step. Their luminae pulse rapidly, betraying their uncertainty. They’ve spent years following orders, trained to obey without question. Yet here I stand, their prince, giving them a direct command that conflicts with everything they know.

“Your king has betrayed us all,” I tell them. My voice carries the weight of truth, heavy as the spear in my grip. “He cowers in darkness while our people suffer, and I will no longer stand by and watch idly. Will you stand with me? Will you help me lead our people into the light?”

The guards exchange glances. Their weapons lower slightly. They know our king’s not well, hasn’t been for a long time. They want change, even if they are slow and hesitant to admit it.

A flicker of movement catches my eye – more guards emerging from adjoining corridors. Within moments we're surrounded. My muscles tense, ready for battle, the sound of my heartbeat in my ears as my body prepares to act.

If they choose to fight, I'll give them one they'll never forget.

"What's happening?" one guard demands, luminae flashing with alarm.

"It's time for a change of rule. It's time for our people to stop hiding and start becoming who we are meant to be," I reply, voice loud enough that everyone present can hear. "The question is whether you'll be part of it."

Silence hangs in the air, an impressive feat with so many warriors gathering together—each ready to sacrifice their lives in battle. I don't want to fight them, but I will if I must. These are males I've grown up alongside, trained with, fought beside like the brothers I never had.

The first guard steps forward. For a heartbeat, I think he'll attack. He certainly holds his weapon before him, and his face is a stern expression of concentration.

Instead, he drops to one knee.

"My prince," he says. Then, with more conviction: "My King."

One by one, the others follow. Their weapons lower, their heads bow. My chest tightens at their show of loyalty. These males aren't just following orders – they're choosing to believe in something better; a new life for all of us.

"You don't have to kneel," I tell them, moving forward to clasp the first guard's shoulder. "Stand with me as equals."

Tanis shifts beside me, a constant shadow at my back. His luminae pulses with approval.

“This is why I choose to follow you,” he says quietly, once again reaffirming his decision. “You see us as more than just warriors.”

His words strike deep, reminding me of Maya. She saw me – truly saw me – not as a prince or a warrior, but as a male trying to do what’s right. I betrayed that trust. The pain of it burns through my chest like molten metal.

“We move for the throne room,” I announce, pushing aside my personal anguish. There will be time for redemption later. Right now, my people need me. “Anyone who stands with the king stands against their own people. Show mercy where you can, but do not hesitate to defend yourselves.”

The guards fall in behind us as we advance. More join with each corridor we pass, our numbers swelling. Word spreads ahead of us like wildfire – the prince moves to claim his throne – by lawful right, and by force.

Yet with each step, doubt gnaws at me. Am I any better than my father? He too once thought he was protecting our people. When did fear transform him from protector to tyrant? Will I one day look in the mirror and see his face staring back at me?

“You’re brooding again,” Tanis comments as we enter yet another corridor. I stare down its darkened length, lit by the warm luminescent glowleaf. Dotted occasionally along the walls are the harsh glare of artificial light; a reminder of just where we came from. Each room we pass was one used by villains for nefarious purposes; some for their own enjoyments—often at others’ suffering—and some simply for vile creations such as the medicine we so strongly rely on today.

This is where my kingdom began, formed out of bloodshed and pain. But it doesn’t



need to be where it ends. We led the charge to victory once before, when we drove our slavers off the planet, and we can do so again—only this time I hope that it will result in alliances with our fellow tribes rather than further alienation and competition.

But am I even capable of all that? Is that really the right thing to do, or am I like my father—too blindsided by my own ideologies?

“I’m contemplating the weight of responsibility,” I correct Tanis. “There’s a difference.”

“You’re wondering if you’re doing the right thing,” he says. When I don’t respond, he continues: “Your father would never question himself like this, you know?”

“A ruler should not doubt himself,” I reply absently, checking each doorway as we pass for hidden threats. Unlike Tanis, I am at least trying to pay attention to the dangers we might face.

“That’s why you’ll be a better king than him,” Tanis replies. “Doubt is natural. We all do it. The real difference is what we do with our fears. Do you let it consume you, questioning ourselves and situations over and over again, or do we just try our best?”

I grit my teeth. I’ve made so many mistakes.

“What if my best isn’t good enough?” I ask him, voice low so that the other warriors stalking behind us don’t overhear. Thankfully they stand back slightly, given Tanis and me room to maneuver, but close enough to intercede if a battle starts.

“You will make mistakes. You’ll never be perfect. But you can try, nonetheless. That’s all that anyone can ever ask from you, and no more. It’s all you should ever expect from yourself. If you do your best, then you’ll be doing good enough.”

“Since when did you become so wise?” I joke, throat tight.

Tanis just grins and shrugs. “I had to watch you do stupid stuff, and I chose to actually learn from your actions. Of course, since I am wise, you’re welcome to come to me for advice. I’m always happy to straighten you out when need be.”

“You just want an excuse to punch me when I do something stupid,” I reply, trying my best to quell my laughter.

“Eh,” Tanis replies. “I think we’re supposed to punch each other once every so often. That’s what brothers do, isn’t it? Get into fights. It’s like a rite of passage or something... Hey, what’s wrong?”

“No, I just got some dust in my eye,” I snap, turning my face away from Tanis so that he can’t see me rapidly blinking the...dust away. “Where’s the closest bathing station? I just need to wash my face.”

A commotion ahead draws our attention, breaking us out of our friendly banter. More males round the corner, weapons raised. Unlike before, these warriors wear the distinctive armor of my father’s personal guard—shining metal, pristine in its strength and superiority. Their luminae pulse with aggression - they won’t be so easily swayed.

“Stand aside,” I call out.

Their answer comes in the form of raised weapons and curled, disgusted lips. So be it.

I spin my spear, settling into a fighting stance. Behind me, my supporters do the same. The corridor fills with the harsh glow of battle-ready luminae.

This is it. The moment I truly declare war against my father. Every blow struck here

will echo through our history. But I've seen what becomes of people who hide in darkness, who let fear rule their actions.

I think of Maya, of her courage in the face of darkness. Of how she fights not for herself, but for others. She makes me want to be better. To be worthy.

"For the light," I roar, charging forward.

The corridor erupts in chaos.

Metal clashes against metal, the ring of weapons echoing off stone. The elite guards are skilled - they wouldn't be protecting my father otherwise. But my supporters fight with conviction, with purpose. We aren't just following orders; we're fighting for a future we believe in.

I duck under a slashing blade, my own weapon spinning to deflect another. My opponent is strong, his armor gleaming in the pulsing light of our luminae. His strikes are precise, calculated - everything I was taught a warrior should be.

But I've learned there's more to being a warrior than perfect form. Like having a reason to fight and even exist. That burning flame inside your soul, your very purpose of existing, pushing you forward when darkness falls around you, choking and blocking any sight of hope. You can be your own light and strength in those moments if you believe enough.

I feint left, then drive forward as he moves to block. My shoulder slams into his chest, disrupting his balance. Before he can recover, I sweep his legs. He crashes down, weapon clattering away.

"Yield," I command, holding my spear to his throat. His luminae flare with defiance, then dim in resignation.

Around us, the fighting settles. Most of the elite guards lie disarmed, some nursing wounds but none fatal. My warriors stand victorious, yet show restraint. Now is not the moment of victory; we still have a throne to take. They understand what we fight for.

“The throne room lies ahead,” Tanis announces, checking his own opponent is securely bound.

I nod, straightening. I turn to my companions, reminding them of our goal. “Remember - we bring change, not vengeance.”

The massive doors to the throne room loom before us, metal surfaces etched with our history. How many times have I passed through them, seeking my father’s approval? Now I come seeking something far more important - our people’s future.

“Ready?” Tanis asks quietly.

My answer comes as I slam the doors open, striding forward with determination.

The throne room stretches vast and cold, illuminated by the collective glow of dozens of courtiers’ luminae. They cluster along the walls, pressing back as we enter. Their lights pulse with fear and uncertainty. Males and females both; individuals that us warriors should have been protecting, not letting them fend for themselves.

And there, upon his raised throne, sits my father. His face betrays no surprise at our arrival. His own luminae are hidden beneath layers of formal robes, as always.

“So,” he says, voice carrying across the silence. “The misguided son returns.”

“I return to claim what you promised me,” I reply, striding forward. My warriors spread out behind me, weapons ready but not threatening. “Or have you forgotten

your word about ceding the throne?"

"To one worthy," he snaps, lips curling up in a snarl. "Not to a fool who would destroy everything we've built."

"Built?" I laugh, the sound harsh. "We've built nothing, father. We've only hidden, trapped in a prison of our own making. We could have left with the other tribes. We could have sought out new lives. Instead, we cowered in darkness, letting our people suffer, while we clung to power that should not be ours."

"I protected them! I've protected you! It's all I have ever done." My father roars, surging to his feet. His robes fall open, revealing luminae pulsing violent red. "You know nothing of protection, of sacrifice! I watched them die - all of them. My mother, my brothers, my friends. The outsiders took everything from us!"

Understanding floods through me, and I look upon my father with new eyes. All these years, his fear has ruled him. Ruled us all.

"We've become what we once hated," I tell him. My voice softens, hoping that he will hear me this one last time. "We cage others. Force them to fight. Take their freedom in the name of protection. How are we any different from the pirates that once enslaved us?"

"It's necessary," he insists, but doubt creeps into his voice. "I've created order from the chaos. I've given our people hope and safety."

"No." I take another step forward. "You took away their hope and safety, allowing fear to dictate your action. You're so afraid of the light that you've forgotten how to see it."

I notice how his guards surround him, inching closer to protect him should I attack.

“You’d give it all up, risk everything and everyone? All of this because of one human female?”

“For hope,” I correct him. “For a future where we don’t have to hide. Where we can be what we were meant to be - protectors, not jailers. Up there, on the surface, is where we should be. Making sure something like this doesn’t ever happen again. We should be protecting the other tribes and helping them rebuild.”

The courtiers watch in complete silence, the tension thick enough to cut with a blade. I can feel my warriors behind me, ready to act at my command, but I hold my ground. This isn’t just about taking power—it’s about changing the very heart of our kingdom.

“You all believe this?” He asks, disbelief crossing his face as he gazes at me and my hastily raised army. It seems like he’s only now starting to really understand what’s happening - the limits he’s pushed all of us, me included, to.

His voice is strained as if each word costs him dearly as he speaks, “You just don’t understand what I’ve saved us from. The outsiders... If you do this, you don’t know what they’ll do to you, to our people... They took everything from us.”

For the first time in my life, I see past the crown to the broken male beneath. He’s not a tyrant - he’s a survivor who never learned how to stop surviving. The realization softens something in me, even as it strengthens my resolve; we will not be dictated by our past traumas, not anymore.

“I understand all too well,” I interrupt, not uncaringly, taking another step forward. “I’ve seen what fear does to us. What it’s done to you. To all of us.”

Hope is such a fickle thing, but I can’t help but desperately wish that he will do the right thing, by our people... and by me.

“How many souls have died in our pits, because we forced them there? How many tribes have we forced into submission? We call it protection, but we’re the ones they need protection from.”

The courtiers murmur, their combined luminae casting shifting shadows across the walls. My words strike truth they’ve long ignored.

“Even though she’s an outsider, Maya showed me everything we could be,” I counter. “She fights for her people despite her fear. She seeks truth despite the cost. She showed me that true strength isn’t about hiding from what we fear - it’s about facing it. Our people are warriors, protectors, and it’s time that we actually protected.”

All these years I’ve wanted his approval, needed it like I needed air to breathe. Now, standing before him, I realize I don’t need it anymore. What I need is for him to understand. “Being hurt doesn’t mean we have to hurt others. Being afraid doesn’t mean we have to let fear rule us. I know this is hard, but you need to step down as king. We are asking you to step down. We—I don’t want to fight you. I just want our people to be free of this darkness we’ve wrapped ourselves in.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks. I watch as emotions battle across his face—anger, fear, pride... and beneath it all, a terrible weariness.

“Father, please,” I beg him. “I can do this. We can do this. Together.”

For a long moment, he doesn’t move. I see the war in his usually stoic face - pride battling fear, love fighting against decades of pain. Then, slowly, he stands. His hands release their death grip on the throne. One by one, he unwraps the layers of robes that hide his luminae. They no longer pulse; his inner light burned out. A male that’s sick, pushed beyond our natural limits until his body is giving out. He’s been suffering just as much as I have, perhaps more so, in his misguided attempts to lead us.

He steps down from the throne, approaching me, steps weak and unsteady. His own body faltering, collapsing under the years of grief and misery.

“All I’ve ever done is try to protect you,” he says, voice reedy and quiet. Tears glide down his cheeks unchecked. “You’re all I have left.”

“And you did,” I tell him, stepping closer. In this moment he looks so fragile. My father, the man that held power over all of us, ready to collapse into my arms.

My chest aches with a confused tangle of emotions - relief, sadness, lingering anger, and underneath it all, a small boy’s desperate love for his father. I reach for him, not as king to subject, but as son to father. I gather him close, for the first time noticing the lack of muscles on his body, once hidden beneath layers of fabric, now exposed to all.

“You did your best to protect us, and I love you for it.” I whisper into his ear, words meant only for him.

“I tried to be a protector, but I couldn’t. I’m not. I can’t.” Sobs wrack his body.

“You did your best, and that’s all I can ask from you,” I tell him, grateful for heeding Tanis’ own advice. My father has tried, and his only fault was not stepping aside when it was time.

Despite all the pain and confusion he’s inflicted upon me over the years, he has been a decent king. He’s led our people through a coup, a social upheaval that changed the very face of the planet, and crafted out a kingdom that by all means shouldn’t have survived at all. Our world was at its darkest moment, and he guided my people through it. His policies weren’t always healthy for us, but they kept us alive. But there’s light now, the blacks turning to gray, and it’s time for a new generation to carve their paths forward. We are ready for the next step now—to stop worrying



about simple survival and to actually start living, embracing life.

“I never wanted to hurt you. I can’t lose you too.”

“You won’t lose me,” I tell him. “You’ve taught me well. You can watch me thrive instead.”

My father leans back, searching my eyes. He nods, and in that one moment it’s like all the weight over the years suddenly catches up to him. He collapses at my feet, and I’m barely able to hold him.

“The throne is yours. Lead them better than I did,” he whispers. “I’m so proud of you, son.”

His concession hangs heavy in the air. Words I’ve spent my life waiting to hear.

Around us, the throne room is lit up bright with the combined glows of luminae. It’s not a celebration, there are no cheers or shouts. The room is solemn and quiet, warriors and courtiers watching the moment that crown passes from father to son. They watch their King fall and their prince rise. We stand at the precipice of a new age, a bright dawn stretching out before us, as long as we take the steps to embrace it—and our bodies glow with the same hope.

Our peace is disturbed when the throne room door bursts open. A warrior staggers in, weapon weakly clutched and dragging beside him as he struggles to stay on his feet.

“The arena,” he gasps. “The beasts are loose! All of them!”

My father’s grip tightens, desperate to keep me in place. “I didn’t! I swear, I didn’t command this...”

No one needs to voice how bad this situation is; these beasts are deadly, each beast taking a team of warriors working together to subdue. To have them all free to wreak havoc at once...

"We must secure the area," I state, already moving towards the doors.

The blood drains from my father's face.

"The tangler," he breathes. "I ordered it brought to the arena cells..."

My pulse thunders in my ears. It's true then; he really managed to secure a Tangler. A near impossible feat; how could he possibly think to contain the creature that made the very tunnels we have lived our lives in? It's a beast beyond comprehension. Deadly. And now loose in the heart of our city.

"Secure the area!" I call out to the surrounding crowd. My first command, as a king, and it's a desperate one. "Aid any you find, regardless of tribe or species. The beasts do not discriminate in their prey - neither shall we in offering protection."

"Forgive me," the king mutters, cold fingers digging into my arms. "The female - your Maya - I placed her in the arena cells."

Ice floods my veins. The arena cells. Where Maya is imprisoned. Where I let her be taken, all because I didn't defend her.

I don't wait to hear more, already running. I don't wait for acknowledgment. I don't wait to see if my father protests or if my warriors follow. I've spent too long waiting, too long calculating, too long playing it safe. My mate is in danger, and I will rescue her.

Maya may never forgive me. She may never trust me again. But I will not let my

betrayal be the last thing between us.

I run.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

MAYA

I stumble into blinding light, nearly tripping over my own feet in my haste. Of course, the massive arena would be lit up like it's the middle of the day—can't have the spectators miss any of the action after all. At least today they don't have to strain their necks to see what's happening. No, today the show's not just happening in the sand-covered pit; the entire arena is absolute chaos as beasts rampage through every level.

The grandstands erupt in screams. Winged creatures swoop down at the crowds, some spectators ducking while others draw weapons that glitter in the bright lights.

"Next time someone asks to go on an adventure, I'm going to say no," Melvall gasps as he tries to catch his breath at my side.

"I think this is my fault," I mutter. My hack worked a little too well—I'd only meant to open our cell doors, but I must have triggered every electronic lock in the facility. I'm no longer freezing in terror, but my stomach twists with guilt at the pandemonium I've caused.

"It's not your fault," Zoran replies, throwing his arms in the air. As if mimicking him, each one of the birds attached to his body also flaps their wings, sending him reeling. I have to hand it to him, I've never seen someone fight while covered in birds that are using him as their personal perch. "It's clearly all Melvall's!"

“Mine?” Melvall asks, eyes darting around the arena, the blue spikes along his arms bristling.

“You kept insisting there had to be an easier way to get medicine!” Zoran reminds him as he bats off an overly excited rock bird. The creature’s wings scrape against his skin with a sound like sandpaper on stone. “I said we should just fight, but no... you wanted to go stalking about in dark tunnels like a... a stalker!”

My lungs feel like they are on fire, each breath scraping against my throat. The dusty scent of the arena sand, acrid and sharp, fills my nostrils as I drag in deep breaths. The last few days of continuous running are really starting to catch up with me. I’m definitely making my friends sign up with me for some sort of fitness class after this. “Maybe we should deal with your bird situation, Zoran?”

“Oh,” Zoran looks down at himself. He gives a little shake. None of his passengers budge. “Turns out they’ve got quite the strong grip.”

“I told you not to touch them, but did you listen to me? No,” Melvall shakes his head. The blue fins across his body stand upright, sharp edges bristling. “Just like you never listen to me about how it’s not a good idea to charge into a battle pit head first!”

Behind us, shrieks echo from the tunnel we’ve just emerged from. The sound sends vibrations rippling through my chest. I don’t have to look to know what’s chasing us—the shreem bear. A fluffy, cuddly-looking thing, bright as cotton candy, but nowhere near as sweet. It’s absolute nightmare fuel.

“Don’t you two ever stop bickering?” I ask with a rueful twist of my lips. I’m about to die, and I’m with companions who somehow are more focused on making digs at each other than their looming deaths. “We really should be having this discussion later. You know, like, when we aren’t being chased and there’s not a bear about to eat us?”

The ground literally trembles beneath my feet as if to emphasize my point. Small pebbles dance across the sand like tiny jumping beans. The arena wall above us casts a shadow, blocking some of the glare from the overhead lights. At least I can clearly see the massive gates that line the pit's walls, and how each is now open wide, spilling all manner of creatures into the arena.

What a pleasant view; just what I've always wanted to see.

"Right," Zoran declares, coming to attention. At least, as much attention as one can when covered in birds. "Time to fight our way out of here."

I grit my teeth. "I don't suppose you've gotten any ideas? Preferably one where we don't all die?"

"I mean, I do usually just charge in," Zoran says, his green cheeks darkening, "and it mostly works out."

"Mostly?" Melvall scoffs. Then his eyes go wide. "I don't think we are going to get much of a choice in this matter..."

I turn, stomach sinking to my toes. Across the other side of the fighting pits, a large gate screeches open. The heavy metal bars are being pushed by something large, the sound of metal grinding against stone setting my teeth on edge.

"Oh come on, just get it over with already!" I wheeze at the gate as it swings open, tauntingly slow. The damn thing is mocking my already strung nerves. Could it honestly go any faster? It's like being stuck behind a hover car on the freeway going 60.

The ground rumbles. From behind the other side of the gate, a singular, long tentacle emerges. It lands upon the ground and unfolds with a sickening squelch. Hundreds of

tiny little tentacles fan out from the main one, spreading across the ground like roots from a tree, but slick with mucus that glistens under the arena lights.

“Oh, gross,” I say. I mean, what else can be said? I’m beyond terrified now. Fear is just a dull hum at the back of my mind, persistent but no longer paralyzing. I’m beyond that point now.

And then a second tentacle appears. Then another. The appendages drag a massive worm-like body forward, tearing up the ground and sand in the process. The stench hits me—something between rotting meat and stagnant water, making my eyes water. Between each inching crawl forward, its fleshy body pulsates with sick, wet sounds.

The creature opens its mouth—and yes, those tentacles all emerge from it—revealing rows upon rows of teeth. Just thinking about those jaws closing around me makes my stomach heave. My mind instantly flashes to Volan’s warnings about the Tangler—this is what he feared, what he tried to describe. It’s so much worse than I imagined.

The birds that have held onto Zoran finally take off in a flutter of stone-colored wings. They scatter around us, heading for the highest points of the arena. At least someone has the right idea.

“Options?” I ask weakly.

“Run?” Melvall suggests.

“Fight,” Zoran growls, cracking his knuckles. “Together we might actually stand a chance.”

The tangler sways its massive head in the air, as if scenting for its prey. And, because the universe hates me, its eyeless face turns directly toward us. I don’t see any eyes or

nose, but it's a freaking giant worm thing. Who cares. It's here to eat me, not admire my hair or clothing.

My brain keeps getting fixated on one thing: the gunk hanging between its teeth. I refuse to think of it as anything other than gunk. It's definitely not a chunk of leather armor or something from some poor soul.

"I'm going to die," I say aloud to the universe. "I'm going to die to a creature with more tentacles than I can poke a sword at, and it hasn't even learned to use said sword to floss."

I watch in stunned horror as Zoran charges straight at the Tangler with a roar. Of course he does. The male hasn't met a single problem he doesn't think can be solved by hitting it hard enough.

"Stay back," Melvall shouts to me as he dashes after his friend. "We'll handle this!"

The words have barely left his mouth when one of the Tangler's massive tentacles whips through the air. The sound it makes is like a wet towel slapping against tile, but a hundred times louder. It catches Melvall mid-stride, slamming him into the arena wall with a sickening crunch. His body crumples to the ground and doesn't move.

And all I can do is stare. It happened so fast.

"No!" Zoran bellows. He leaps toward his fallen friend, claws extended.

The Tangler's smaller tentacles lash out like whips, wrapping around Zoran's arms and legs. He thrashes against them, muscles straining, but more and more tentacles coil around him until he's completely entangled.

My feet are already backing away. Every survival instinct screams at me to run. I



could make it to one of the tunnels. I could escape while the monster is distracted with my companions. My heart hammers in my ears, drowning out everything else.

Just like I ran when my father made demands of me.

Just like I did nothing when Ariana needed me.

The thought hits me like a physical blow. All those weeks, wishing I had done more... And here I am again, about to abandon my friends to save myself.

“I stood by helplessly once,” I say through gritted teeth. “Never again.”

What I would do for a glittery dagger or sword right about now. Even my confiscated slingshot would be useless against this thing.

My fingers tighten around my tablet. It’s all I’ve got. The cool, familiar weight of it in my hands—the last physical connection I have to my mother. It’s all I’ve got. I remember her words as she pressed it into my hands: “This is for your protection, Maya. To help you build a life where you get to choose.” All these years, it’s been my security, my comfort, my shield against the world. But my mother wanted me to live, not just survive. She gave me this tablet so I could protect myself. Now I’m going to use it to protect others.

The Tangler drags Zoran closer to its gaping maw. Those rows of teeth gleam wetly in the arena lights.

I don’t have much time to act. I don’t have any time to think. I have a choice, and for once, I am going to choose right. My body still quakes, my hands still tremble, but I step forward anyway.

“Hey ugly!” I shout, my voice carrying across the arena. “Haven’t you heard of

dental hygiene?”

I hurl my tablet as hard as I can at the creature’s face. It strikes one of those razor-sharp teeth with a crack that makes my heart ache. The sound reverberates through me like physical pain—a piece of my past, of my mother, shattered in an instant. But it works - the Tangler’s head rears back, momentarily releasing its hold on Zoran.

Then its eyeless face turns toward me.

“Oh hell.”

I barely have time to think ‘this was a terrible idea’ before a tentacle whips around my waist. The ground disappears beneath my feet as I’m yanked into the air. The pressure squeezes the air from my lungs, the slimy surface of the tentacle soaking through my clothes with its rancid smell.

In these precious moments before death, my brain decides to fixate on the most ridiculous things - like how for all his faults, and there are many, Volan would never have hesitated to fight this thing.

Only, he probably would have come up with a better plan than throw a breakable object at it.

Instead, Volan would have marched right up to it, probably giving it some lecture about how warriors should face their battles with honor. His skin would glow with that intense confidence of his, like he truly believed he could take on the universe and win. He’d put himself between others and danger without thought, protecting those around him even at the cost of his own safety.

Which makes his betrayal hurt all the more.

But was it really betrayal? The thought hits me as the Tangler draws me closer to its mouth. Suddenly I understand why Volan did what he did.

He was trying to protect his people, just like I'm trying to protect my friends. Just like I tried to protect Ariana and the people of Eve's Rest. His position wasn't so different from mine—trapped between duty and desire, forced to make impossible choices.

We're the same, he and I. Two idiots who will sacrifice everything, even love, to keep others safe.

Because I do love him.

The realization hits me harder than the Tangler could ever strike. I love the way he pushed me to be stronger while always being there to catch me. I love how he makes me feel safe even when the world is chaos around us. I love his stupid smirk and his glowing skin and the way he looks at me like I'm something precious.

I was so caught up in my own pain that I couldn't see his. So focused on being betrayed that I never considered he might be trapped too. I'd been angry at him for keeping secrets, but I've kept plenty of my own.

Damn him for making me fall in love with him anyway. And damn me for realizing it now, when I'll never get the chance to tell him.

I squeeze my eyes shut as that horrifying mouth yawns open beneath me. The stench of rot and decay makes my stomach heave. At least I'll die knowing I tried to save my friends. That has to count for something, right? Volan had told me that my dedication to others was honorable. He'd looked at me like he had admired me. He'd made me feel for just a moment that I was more than some cowering girl, a burden to others, but someone that had true value to those around them.

“I love...” I squeak, breath squeezing from my lungs as the Tangler’s sticky tentacle wraps tighter around my chest. I just want to tell Volan how I feel, even if it’s my last words... Even if he’s not here to hear them.

A familiar roar echoes through the arena. The sound sends a shock of electricity through my veins. My eyes snap open just in time to see a gray blur leap from the upper level, spear raised high...

My first thought is that I must be hallucinating, because there’s no way Volan just launched himself from the top of the arena like some action-vid hero. But no—that’s definitely him, his skin blazing so bright it hurts to look at, leaving trails of light in the air as he descends. His spear strikes deep into the tentacle holding me, and suddenly I’m falling.

Strong arms catch me before I hit the ground. The scent of him engulfs me—warm leather and something uniquely Volan, a scent I’d know anywhere.

“You came back for me,” I breathe.

“I’ll always come for you, Maya,” he replies. Volan’s fierce eyes meet mine, his skin pulsing with an intensity I’ve never seen before. The rhythm matches my hammering heart.

My warrior came for me, in the end.

Then he’s setting me down and spinning to face the Tangler, placing himself between me and danger without hesitation.

“Protect her!” he roars. Warriors pour into the arena from all sides, responding instantly to his command. The sound of their boots hitting the sand is like rainfall. They form a ring around me, weapons raised, moving with practiced precision. When

did Volan become so...commanding?

Pain shoots through my leg as I try to stand. Definitely twisted—maybe worse. But I can't focus on that because Volan is facing down the Tangler and it's the most terrifying and magnificent thing I've ever seen.

He moves like he's dancing with death itself, dodging tentacles while his spear flashes in deadly arcs. His skin pulses with each strike, lighting up the arena like lightning.

"Drive it back!" he shouts, voice carrying over the chaos. "Keep it away from the injured!"

I watch in awe as warriors respond to his commands, working in coordinated groups to slash at the creature's tentacles. The sound of metal cutting through flesh, the growls of warriors, the shriek of the beast—it all blends into a battle symphony.

The warriors move together, never faltering.

They engage the beast, each looking to Volan for direction. He's not just a prince by birth—he's a true leader.

And I see it now, so clearly—this was always who he was. A protector. A leader. He wasn't trying to capture me; he was trying to save me in the only way he knew how. His methods were flawed, but his heart never was. How could I have ever seen his protective nature as a betrayal when it's so clearly part of who he is?

This is what it means to have protection, to be truly protected. This is what it means to have a hero risk everything, just for you.

Zoran appears through the ring of guards, half-carrying a dazed Melvall. They

collapse beside me, both breathing heavily but alive. I want to check on them, but I can't tear my eyes away from Volan.

He's magnificent. There's no other word for it. The Tangler lashes out with its remaining tentacles, but Volan seems to anticipate every move. He uses the creature's own bulk against it, letting it tangle itself as it tries to strike him. His spear finds vulnerable spots with deadly precision while he continues shouting directions to the other warriors.

"Now!" he bellows. Multiple spears strike from different angles. The Tangler rears back, its horrible mouth opening in a shriek that makes the ground beneath us vibrate—and Volan takes his shot. His spear drives deep into the creature's throat, his luminae flaring so bright I have to shield my eyes. The flash burns through my closed eyelids, turning the world momentarily white.

The Tangler's death throes shake the arena. Sand billows up around us in choking clouds. When the light fades and dust settles, the massive beast lies still. And Volan... Volan is already running back to me, his eyes wild with concern, his skin pulsing in time with my racing heart.

I've lost my tablet, my last connection to my past. But watching Volan sprint toward me through the chaos, I realize I haven't lost everything. Maybe, just maybe, I've found my future instead.

### Chapter Thirty-Four

VOLAN

My heart nearly stops when I see Maya crumpled on the ground. She's so small, so vulnerable, compared to the warriors surrounding her. The urge to gather her in my arms and never let go burns through me, but I have no right. Not after what I did to her.

Around us, my warriors maintain their protective circle as they deal with the remaining beasts. I barely register Tanis shouting orders in my place - my entire focus is on Maya. Her leg is twisted at an awkward angle, and lines of pain crease her face. I did this. I brought her here, exposed her to these dangers.

"Maya," her name escapes my lips like a prayer. My luminae pulse erratically, betraying every emotion I instinctively desire to hide.

She looks up at me, those dark eyes piercing straight through to my soul. I expect to see hatred there. I deserve her hatred. Instead, there's something else... something that makes my heart stutter in my chest.

"You jumped off the arena wall," she says, her voice tight with pain. "That was either really brave or really stupid."

A laugh breaks free from my chest, rough and desperate. Even injured, she challenges me. "I would jump from much higher to reach you."

The words slip out before I can stop them. Maya's eyes widen slightly, and I curse my lack of control. I need to focus on helping her, not making grand declarations that I haven't earned the right to speak.

"Your leg," I say, kneeling beside her but not daring to touch. "Will you let me help?"

She studies me for a long moment. Beside her, the blue-scaled male - Melvall - groans as the harkcana helps him into a sitting position. Zoran hovers anxiously between them both. They fought to protect her when I couldn't. They proved themselves better allies than I ever was.

"I'm pretty sure I can't walk," Maya admits. Her fingers dig into the sand beneath her, and I recognize her frustration. She hates feeling helpless - it's one of the first things I learned about her. One of the many things I admire about her. She's not a warrior in the traditional sense, but she embodies the spirit and loyalty of one.

"I wonder who can help with that," Melvall pipes up, giving me a distinctly firm and pointed look. "He's got all sorts of medicine that-"

"I will give her the nanites," I cut him off. My hand goes to the pouch at my belt, where I keep a personal supply of the medicine. The same medicine that's caused so much strife, so many battles. The same medicine that might now let me help her, if she'll trust me one more time.

Maya's spine stiffens. "The medicine everyone's fighting over? That's what you want to give me?"

"Yes." I pull out the small container, its metallic surface catching the arena lights. "It will heal your injury completely."



I swallow hard, then force myself to meet her gaze. “I know I have no right to ask you to trust me again. But please, let me help you.”

The words feel like shards of glass in my throat. Everything in me screams to simply gather her up and treat her wounds, to protect her as I’ve failed to do so far. But I won’t take her choice from her. Not again. Not after everything she’s gone through. In this manner, I will fully respect her decision - even if it kills me to know that she chooses pain rather than my assistance.

Maya’s gaze darts between my face and the container in my hands. Around us, warriors continue to battle the escaped creatures, their shouts echoing off the arena walls. We’re in the eye of the storm, a small bubble of quiet in the chaos. Just Maya and I, and this fragile moment that could shatter with one word from her.

“I betrayed you. I led you here under false pretenses. I-” the words tumble from my throat, completely unplanned. A confession - and one that doesn’t feel good enough. Nothing I will ever say will be good enough. Not for what I’ve done to her.

“You also just killed a giant tentacle monster to save my life,” she cuts me off. “So maybe we start there?”

Hope flares in my chest as I glance up at her face. The same face that has haunted my every thought since I first met her. She looks at me not with the hatred that I had expected, but with a complexity of emotions that makes my heart race.

“The nanites will heal you,” I tell her softly. My fingers shake slightly as I open the container, revealing the silvery gel inside. “But there are things you should know first.”

Maya’s eyebrows raise at my hesitation. I can almost hear her thinking how unusual it is for me to show uncertainty.

“The medicine... it changes you. It becomes a part of you.” I meet her gaze, willing her to understand the magnitude of what I’m offering. “This isn’t just healing, Maya. This is something that will alter you forever.”

“You mean like how you heal so quickly?” she asks. Of course, she noticed. She notices everything.

“Yes.” I find myself leaning closer, drawn to her despite my attempts to maintain distance. “The nanites in my blood are why I heal so fast. Why many of my people do. It’s our greatest secret... and our greatest shame.”

A cry from the stands draws my attention. More warriors pour into the arena, dealing with the remaining beasts. I should be leading them. I am their king now, after all. But I can’t leave Maya’s side. Not until she understands everything.

“Your father,” Maya says slowly, “He was protecting this secret. That’s why he wanted me dead.”

Pain lances through my chest at her words. At how close I came to losing her. “He was wrong. About so many things. About you most of all.”

“And you?” she challenges. “What were you wrong about?”

“Everything,” I admit. The word comes easily now that I’ve started confessing. “I thought I could protect my people by following his path. I thought I could protect you by bringing you here. I was wrong about what it means to be a protector, a warrior... a king.”

Maya’s eyes widen at that last word. “A king?”

“Yes.” I look down at the container in my hands, unable to meet her gaze. “I am -

was - the prince. Now I am king. But none of that matters. Not compared to what I did to you.”

“It matters,” she says softly. When I dare to look up, her expression is gentle despite her pain. “It matters because it explains why you did what you did.”

“No,” I tell her. “Being king, having power... none of it means anything if I can’t protect those I care about.” I meet her gaze, willing her to see my sincerity. “Your quest - to save your people from corruption, to protect them - it’s more noble than anything I’ve achieved. Let me help you. Let me prove that I can be worthy of your trust again.”

Maya’s lips part in surprise. For a moment she just stares at me, and I fear I’ve said too much. Then her fingers brush mine as she takes the container from my hands. The touch sends electricity through my skin, my luminae pulsing in response.

“You really mean that, don’t you?” she asks.

Hope blazes through me, so intense my luminae probably blinds everyone nearby. “Every word. I swear on my very life, I will help you save them all.”

“Don’t,” Maya says sharply, her fingers tightening on mine. “Don’t swear on your life.”

Her reaction startles me. My luminae flicker with confusion as I study her face, trying to understand the pain I see there.

“When that thing had me,” she says, her voice catching, “when I thought I was going to die, all I could think about was you. How I’d never get to tell you...” She breaks off, looking away.

My heart thunders in my chest. I want to pull her into my arms, but I force myself to be gentle as I apply the nanite gel to her injured leg. “Tell me what?”

She watches the silvery substance seep into her skin, her own hands trembling slightly. “That I understand why you did it. That I forgive you.” Her eyes meet mine, fierce and vulnerable all at once. “That I love you.”

The container slips from my fingers, forgotten. My luminae blaze so bright the warriors around us step back, shielding their eyes. “Maya...”

“I know it’s crazy,” she continues in a rush. “You’re a king, and I’m just some computer engineer who can’t even fight properly. But when I saw you leap down here, putting yourself between me and danger without hesitation... I realized that’s who you are. You protect people. You protected me. And somewhere along the way, I fell in love with that stupidly noble, overprotective, absolutely infuriating male.”

I can’t help myself - I gather her into my arms, pulling her against my chest. She comes willingly, her small hands gripping my shoulders. “You are everything,” I tell her, my voice rough with emotion. “You’re brave and fierce and utterly remarkable. You make me want to be better, to be worthy of you. I love you, Maya. I think I’ve loved you since the moment you stood up to that scamper with nothing but a slingshot and pure determination. No, before that even, when you looked up at me in your people’s marketplace with such defiance in your eyes, like you were just begging me to disagree with you.”

She laughs against my chest, the sound watery. “You have really weird taste in females.”

“I have perfect taste,” I correct her. I pull back just enough to see her face, to memorize every detail of this moment. “I choose you. If you’ll have me?”

“You’re a king,” Maya says softly, pain in her eyes, but she doesn’t pull away from me. “Don’t you need someone more... appropriate? Someone who knows how to be a queen?”

“I need you,” I tell her firmly. “Someone who challenges me, who makes me see beyond what I was taught. Someone who’d throw her most precious possession at a monster just to save her friends.” I brush my thumb across her cheek. “You already have the heart of a queen - you put others before yourself, fight against corruption, protect those who need it. You are my light, the one to guide me through my darkest moments.”

A shaky laugh escapes her. “Is that what you saw? Because I’m pretty sure I just looked terrified and desperate.”

“I saw someone absolutely magnificent.”

Maya’s eyes widen at my words, her cheeks darkening.

Before she can tell me otherwise, I scoop her into my arms. She fits perfectly against my chest, like she was made to be there. There was a time when I took what I wanted, believing it was my right as prince, but now, I can see that it’s a gift to be given your desires instead.

“As soon as things are resolved here, we will return to your people. I promise.”

My people do too, I realize, but as I glance around, I notice Tanis quite capably shouting orders. The normally shy male stands tall, focused entirely on his work... and for once, he’s oblivious to the few females that watch him from afar.

“We need to deal with Walter and the council members,” Maya says, her expression hardening with determination. “They knew about your existence here all along.

They're clearly after the nanite medicine. In the right hands, it could save countless lives. In the wrong hands...We've got to stop them."

Around us, the arena has finally quieted as the last of the beasts are subdued. My warriors await my command, and for the first time, I truly feel like a king. "Together, we'll expose the corruption and protect both our peoples."

Maya's hand comes to rest over my heart. "Together," she agrees. Then she grins up at me. "But first, you might want to put on a shirt. I mean, the glowing is impressive and all, but if we're going to overthrow corrupt officials, you should probably look a bit more... official."

I can't help but laugh. This remarkable female who can face down monsters and still make jokes - she is truly everything I need. "As my queen commands."

"I'm not your queen yet," she reminds me, but there's a smile in her voice.

"Yet," I agree, holding her closer. No matter what comes next, I know we'll face it together. And anyone who tries to harm her or her people will learn exactly why the sulthari are feared warriors. We were born to be protectors, and this is the legacy I will see restored.

My luminae betray my joy. Maya loves me. She forgives me. And together, we'll build something better than either of us could achieve alone.

VOLAN

I step into the sunlight, relishing the warmth on my skin. For too long my people hid beneath the surface, claiming the light brought only danger. Now as I emerge from the tunnel entrance, pristine white snow blankets the world around us, transforming the landscape into something pure and untouched. The last time I emerged from my underground kingdom, I was searching for a way to prove myself worthy of leading my people. Now I step forward with the crown of a king, but more importantly, surrounded by companions I'm proud to call friends. Companions that I never truly expected to have, but find myself treasuring all the same.

My luminae pulse with satisfaction. I've always known we were meant for more than cowering in shadows. The light doesn't blind me - it illuminates possibilities.

Behind us, Tanis emerges from the tunnel entrance. My friend—and yes, I can finally admit that's what he's always been—surveys the snowy landscape with careful attention to detail. Even now, he's analyzing potential threats, mapping escape routes. Old habits die hard.

“Most of the council has pledged their support,” Tanis reports, ever focused on duty. His luminae pulse steadily, a familiar rhythm that speaks of his contentment. “Even those who initially opposed change are beginning to consider the benefits of coming up to the surface.”

I nod, pride filling me.

“And my father?” I ask, the words catching in my throat.

“Confined to his chambers and under watch as per your orders,” Tanis’s expression darkens. “He asked about you this morning. I’m hesitant to say it, but I believe he truly thought he was doing the right thing.”

“Fear can break even the strongest warrior,” I reply. The words taste bitter, but I refuse to let uncertainty rule me as it did him. He isolated himself from everyone, paranoid to lose any and all control. I’m going to embrace those around me, taking their opinions and advice to heart. “At least now he has a chance to heal.”

I turn to face Tanis fully. “I never properly thanked you,” I tell him. My luminae dim with regret. “Not just for supporting my claim to the throne, but for all these cycles of being more than just a guard.”

“I merely did my duty,” Tanis replies, his own markings flickering with embarrassment.

“No,” I correct him firmly. “I was so focused on proving myself to my father that I didn’t see what was right in front of me - someone who already believed in me. Who stayed by my side not out of duty, but friendship.” I meet his gaze directly. “I’m sorry it took me so long to recognize that.”

Tanis shifts uncomfortably, unused to such openness between us. But his luminae pulse with pleasure he can’t quite hide. He’s never been particularly adept at hiding his emotions.

“Well,” he says gruffly, “someone had to keep you from getting yourself killed all those times you snuck out.”

“Speaking of near-death experiences,” Maya interjects with a pointed look, “What exactly are you planning to do about the fight pits? You know I’m not all that comfortable about sacrificing animals.”



“I brought up this issue with the council and several prominent guests last night,” Volan replies. “I proposed that we convert several areas into training grounds where warriors can test their skills without the risk of death. The harkcana that were present seem particularly enthusiastic about the new arrangement.”

“Of course they are,” Melvall mutters as he steps from the shadows and joins us. “Bunch of battle-hungry brutes.”

“By the Gods, it’s freezing!” Maya hisses as a gust of wind sends soft snow brushing against us. She wraps my thick cloak tighter around herself and steps closer to huddle. I can’t help but wrap an arm around her, drawing her against my side. She fits perfectly there, as if the universe designed us to complement each other. The gods knew that we were two lonely souls, and could be completed by each other.

If it was just us, I’d suggest a variety of ways to keep her warm... it’ll have to wait until I return home with her. As a king, I get what I want, and I want Maya. I intend to take her home, even if she’s screaming. Ideally, she will be screaming, and breathless, and panting, and moaning...

“It did get cold rather fast, didn’t it?” Melvall comments, looking completely unbothered by the cold. The blue male actually seems more comfortable out here than he did in the warmth of the underground tunnels.

“I can hunt you some pelts!” Zoran offers enthusiastically. “I’m excellent at hunting. Just ask Melvall - I’ve brought him dozens!”

“Please don’t encourage him,” Melvall groans. “I already have more pelts than I could possibly use. My entire dwelling is practically buried in them.”

“You know who else gets cold easily?” Zoran says with a sly grin. “Human females. Like Eve and Ariana. I’ve seen how you watch them from afar, all envious-like...”

“I am not envious!” Melvall’s fins flare. “And I certainly don’t need your help providing for a potential mate.”

“After all,” Zoran continues as if Melvall hadn’t spoken, “what male doesn’t want a mate to provide for? To keep warm with all those lovely pelts...”

“I am perfectly capable of providing for myself and any future mate!” Melvall snaps. “I’m a respected trader, not some novice hunter bringing random pelts to every female he sees.”

“And yet you keep accepting them,” Zoran points out with a grin.

“Because you won’t stop bringing them! What am I supposed to do, turn away perfectly good pelts?”

“You love them,” Zoran’s grin grows impossibly wider. “Just like you love me. Just admit it; we’re basically brothers.”

“I hate you,” Melvall declares, but there’s no real heat in his voice.

“He likes the pelts a lot, he just won’t admit it,” Zoran whispers overly loud to us, knowing full well Melvall can hear. In response, Melvall’s eye twitches. It’s amazing the two haven’t killed each other. Yet.

“The path to the human settlement should be clear,” Tanis reports, professional as always. He seems to ignore the duo as they continue bantering about the valuable purpose of pelts, but then his lips twitch and he raises his voice, “Though I must admit, the weather provides excellent cover for our approach.”

“See?” Zoran exclaims. “The snow is perfect! Just like I said it would be. You know what else would be perfect right now?”

“Don’t,” Melvall warns.

“A nice warm pelt!” Zoran finishes triumphantly. “You know, like the ones I so thoughtfully provided?—”

A snowball catches him directly in the face, cutting off his gloating. We all turn to stare at Melvall, who’s already packing another projectile.

“I changed my mind,” the blue male declares. “I don’t hate you. I despise you.”

Zoran wipes snow from his face, his expression shifting from shocked to delighted. “Oh, it is ON!”

“They’re like younglings,” Tanis remarks, though there’s fondness in his voice. A curiosity. For someone who’s lived the last few cycles spending day and night guarding me, never having the opportunity to get close to another, he’s no doubt interested in Melvall and Zoran’s friendly banter.

“Good,” I reply firmly. “Our people have forgotten how to simply enjoy life. Everything became about survival, about maintaining power through fear.” I watch as Zoran attempts to stuff snow down the back of Melvall’s clothes. “This is what I’ve always wanted for them - the freedom to choose their own path.”

I should probably stop them. As king, I should maintain some sense of dignity and decorum. But watching Zoran and Melvall chase each other through the snow, pelting each other with increasingly large snowballs while hurling increasingly creative insults, I can’t bring myself to end their fun.

This is what I wanted for my people all along—the freedom to simply exist without fear. The ability to play in the light rather than hide in darkness. The right to choose their own path rather than follow ancient traditions born of pain and fear.

“Even if that path involves throwing snow at each other like younglings, acting like complete fools?” she asks, watching as Melvall successfully tackles Zoran into a snowbank.

“Especially then.”

Maya’s expression turns thoughtful as she watches the chaos unfold. I recognize that look - she’s working through something in that brilliant mind of hers.

“What are you thinking?” I ask softly.

“About the medicine,” she replies. “My friend Stacey has been studying medical biology, both human and alien. She’s clever, maybe even more than me when it comes to understanding how things work. She might be able to help us understand the nanobots better, make it safer to use. You know, not creating super-soldiers in the process.”

I consider her words carefully. “You’d trust your people with such power?”

“I trust that if we work together, we can find a better way. I believe that most people just want to help others and to live in peace.” She glances at Melvall, who’s now perched atop a snow drift, raining frozen projectiles down on a sputtering Zoran and Tanis. “Look at Melvall - he’s already proving that trade works better than force. Did you know that he’s been trading with all manner of tribes on the surface? They are thriving because of him. Melvall could have exploited them all, but instead he’s helped them by giving the medicine to help those who need it most. It doesn’t have to be a weapon.”

“Is that what you want? To study it? I could... if you want, I could order the machines destroyed entirely.” I don’t voice that it’ll likely be the end of everyone on the planet - there’s too many dangers and threats for any of us to survive without the

aid of the medicine and its uncanny strength.

“I recognize we need it, so I want to understand it,” she says firmly. “It can be a tool, not a weapon.” She turns those fierce eyes on me. “What do you want?”

“Peace,” I tell her honestly. “A future where we don’t hide in darkness or force others to fight for basic needs. I never agreed with my father’s methods, but until you, I never saw another path.”

Maya’s expression softens as she gazes up at me.

“You’re going to be a good king,” she tells me. In the last few hours, I’ve had plenty of people tell me so, but from Maya it’s entirely different. Her words penetrate deep, enough that my knees feel weak and my breath hitches. She doesn’t tell me this simply because she wants to manipulate me; I trust that she tells me what she truly believes.

I pull her closer, pressing my forehead to hers as emotions burn the back of my eyelids. My luminae pulse with the depth of my feelings for this remarkable female. “And you’ll be an amazing queen. You taught me that sometimes the best way to protect people is to let them fight their own battles.”

“I haven’t agreed to be queen yet,” she reminds me, but there’s no real protest in her voice.

“Yet,” I agree, smiling down at her. She’s so small compared to me, yet she contains more strength than anyone I’ve ever known.

A particularly loud whoop draws our attention back to the ongoing snow battle. Somehow Tanis has been drawn into the fray, his usual stoic demeanor cracking as he precisely calculates trajectories for maximum snowball impact. The sight fills me

with joy—my most serious guard, finally letting himself simply enjoy life.

“Your father would have a fit if he saw this,” Maya comments, watching Tanis dust snow from his armor with dignity despite his disheveled appearance.

“Good,” I reply firmly. “Change isn’t always comfortable. But it’s necessary.” I gesture at the winter landscape around us. “Look at this world, Maya. It’s beautiful and dangerous and absolutely worth exploring. We can’t hide from it forever. My people were born to protect, it’s time we took back that title for ourselves.”

“We can face it together,” Maya says as her small hand slips into mine. Her fingers are cold, and I immediately wrap mine around hers to warm them. It’s not because both of us are nervous, still learning to be vulnerable with each other.

“We should probably stop them,” Maya says, though she makes no move to do so. “We do have a colony to save, after all.”

“In a moment,” I tell her, drinking in the scene before us. The pristine snow, the laughter of friends, the way the light catches in Maya’s dark curls. “Let them have this moment. They deserve it. We all do.”

She nods, understanding as always. Then a wicked grin crosses her face. “Or we could join in.”

Before I can respond, she’s scooping up snow and lobbing it at me with surprising accuracy. The cold impact against my chest startles a laugh from me.

“You dare challenge your king?” I demand in my most regal voice. It would probably have more impact if I could repress the smirk covering my face.

Maya’s only response is another snowball to my face, her laughter echoing in the air.

“Oh, I’m going to get you,” I declare, chasing after her. I’m a king, and I always get what I want in the end. Maya might not admit it aloud, but she’s already mine.

### MAYA

Light snow drifts around us as we emerge from the forest's edge. Eve's Rest lies ahead, its wooden walls rising against the white landscape like some fairy tale village. Only there's nothing magical about the armed guards that patrol the wooden walls, their weapons glinting in the weak sunlight.

"Something's wrong," I say, studying the colony that was once my home. Smoke rises from countless chimneys despite it being midday – everyone's inside when they should be going about their daily business. The usual sounds of the marketplace are absent; no children laughing, no vendors calling their wares. Even the machinery that usually hums beyond the walls is silent.

"Rather different from the last time we were here," Zoran remarks, scratching his chin. "When we stormed through the gates..."

Melvall elbows him sharply. "Which you're sorry about, right?"

"Oh yes, terribly sorry," Zoran grins, not looking sorry at all. "Though the fight was quite invigorating."

"I'm not sorry," Volan says quietly beside me. "It's how I met Maya."

Volan's luminae pulse softly in the growing darkness, casting shifting patterns across the snow. At any other time, I'd stop and stare at the beautiful sight. It's hard to take my eyes off my mate, if I'm honest—especially when he says sappy things like that, making my heart race.



I try to hide my smile as I study the walls again, noting the increased guard presence. “They must be worried about another attack. The council has never ordered a full lockdown before. They’re expecting trouble.”

“Tanis is already scouting the perimeter,” Volan says. His most trusted guard had gone ahead of us, as silent and lethal as a shadow. It was rather shocking to see such a large male just disappear into the surroundings, only his footprints left to indicate his passing. He’s deadly.

“He’ll signal if he spots any patrol changes,” Volan informs us.

“You know, if we have to get inside, I could throw Melvall over the wall,” Zoran suggests helpfully. “He’s quite aerodynamic with all those fins.”

“I will end you,” Melvall replies calmly, not even bothering to look at his friend.

A smile tugs at my lips despite the tension. These males – my friends – make even the most serious situations bearable. My gaze drifts to the communications tower standing alone beyond the walls, its antenna rising high above everything else.

“We don’t need to get inside the colony,” I tell them, pointing to our target. “The tower’s outside the walls. Though I still can’t believe they built such vital infrastructure out here without proper defenses. At least their stupidity works in our favor now.”

I pause, glancing at my companions. Once, I would have hesitated to give orders to these powerful warriors. Now I know better. They’re waiting for my lead, trusting my knowledge of this territory.

“Follow me,” I say, “and stay low. We’re about to show everyone exactly what’s been happening on this planet.”

I lead our small group through the snow-covered landscape, keeping low where we can use the terrain for cover. The path to the communications tower feels different now. Last time I ran this way in blind panic, heart thundering in my chest as I fled from the guards. Now each step is measured, purposeful.

A light snow continues to fall around us, helping to mask our approach. My boots crunch softly in the fresh powder, but I no longer fear the sound will give us away. Let them hear us coming. Let them know that everything is about to change.

“You’re smiling,” Volan comments softly from beside me. His luminae flicker with curiosity.

“I am?” I touch my lips, surprised to find them curved upward. “I guess I am. It’s just... last time I was terrified. I could barely think straight. Now...” I pause, trying to put the feeling into words. “Now I feel like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

“You were brave then too,” he tells me. “You just didn’t know it yet.”

Behind us, Melvall mutters something about keeping watch while Zoran suggests increasingly outlandish battle strategies. Their bickering has become oddly comforting – a reminder that I’m not alone anymore. I don’t have to carry this burden by myself.

We pause behind a small ridge, the communications tower looming ahead of us. A single guard stands at attention by the entrance – I recognize the spiky green-tipped hair even from this distance.

“I know him,” I whisper to my companions. “He was one of the guards who tried to arrest me before.”

“Want us to take care of him?” Zoran asks eagerly, already half-rising before Melvall

yanks him back down.

“We need a plan,” Melvall hisses. “Something subtle. Perhaps I could create a distraction while?—”

“Or we could charge in!” Zoran interrupts. “Nothing says subtlety like a good frontal assault.”

I watch them argue tactics, remembering how I once froze at the first sign of conflict. Now their enthusiasm brings a fierce joy to my heart. I’m not that scared girl anymore, always second-guessing herself. I know exactly what needs to be done.

“We’re not going to hurt him,” I say firmly, cutting through their debate. Both males turn to look at me, clearly surprised by my commanding tone. “But we do need him out of the way. Volan?”

I glance at my mate, and find him already moving. Like shadows merging, he seems to simply fade into the snowy landscape. Sometimes I forget just how lethal he can be when he wants to be. How did I ever think I could handle this quest alone when having allies like this makes everything so much easier?

Zoran opens his mouth, probably to suggest throwing someone again, but Melvall clamps a hand over it. We watch in silence as Volan approaches the guard from behind, swift and silent as death itself.

Volan moves with fluid grace I remember from the colony attack, when he rescued me from these very same guards – the way he’d flow through combat like it was a dance, every movement precise and controlled. Back then, I’d been terrified of his lethal efficiency. Now watching him stalk toward green-tips, my heart races for an entirely different reason.

“Wait for it,” I whisper to Zoran and Melvall. Zoran practically vibrates with anticipation while Melvall rolls his eyes.

“If we time this right—” Melvall starts.

“I say we—” Zoran interrupts.

They both fall silent as Volan strikes. One moment green-tips is scanning the horizon, the next he’s caught in Volan’s iron grip, a knife pressed against his throat. The guard’s eyes go wide with recognition when he sees me stand and approach. Confident. I walk up to him like I have no care in the world. I don’t. I know that Volan will come for me now. I’m not alone.

“You? Seriously?”, green-tips groans. “Not again.”

“Afraid so,” I reply, unable to hold back my smile. “Though this time, you might want to hear us out before trying to arrest anyone.”

“Even if arresting people is your favorite hobby,” Zoran adds helpfully as he bounds over. “Though I still say we could have gone with my plan.”

“Your plan involved throwing me at him,” Melvall points out, following at a more dignified pace. “That’s not a plan. That’s just you wanting to throw me at things.”

“It would have worked!”

“Name one time throwing me has ever worked.”

My victorious smile falters as I listen to my companions banter.

“Wait, Zoran’s actually thrown you? You aren’t just joking around?”

“We agreed never to speak of that again,” Melvall snaps, giving Zoran a very intense glare.

I shake my head, turning my focus back to my task. This is a story for another time, clearly. I’m absolutely certain Zoran will be happy to spill the beans. Green-tips stares at my alien companions with a mixture of terror and fascination.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “They’re actually quite friendly. Well, mostly friendly.”

“Very friendly,” Zoran agrees. “Want to see how far I can throw?—”

“No!” Melvall and I say in unison.

Green-tips swallows hard. “What... what do you want?”

“Just to right some wrongs,” I say. “And maybe change everything you think you know about this planet.” I glance at Volan, who still holds the guard securely but hasn’t harmed him. “We won’t hurt you. But we are going to need to restrain you for a while. Melvall, can you do the honors?”

“Why not me?” Zoran asks, lips downturned.

“Because you’ll forget to hold him, and next thing you’ll know you’ll be chasing him,” Melvall replies.

“Chasing is more fun...”

Melvall sighs heavily, and takes hold of the guard from Volan. His grip is firm, but not unkind.

Thankfully the guard, despite how terrified he looks, isn’t particularly fighting back

against us. If anything, he looks closer to fainting. Even Melvall realizes this, holding onto his arm like he expects the man to just collapse at our feet.

“They lied to us,” I tell green-tips, hoping that if I keep talking to him he’s not going to have a full meltdown and start screaming for help. “Everyone at the colony, including you, deserves to know what’s really going on. After today, everything’s going to change. For the best.”

Inside the communications tower, I pull my beloved tablet from my pocket. The screen is a spiderweb of cracks from where it struck the Tangler’s teeth. For a moment, my fingers hesitate over the damaged surface. This device has been my constant companion, my safety net through everything.

“Damn it,” I mutter as the screen flickers, refusing to respond to my touch in several places. “This is going to be trickier than I thought.”

“Can you still make it work?” Volan asks, his presence warm and solid beside me.

I glance up at him, at the steady pulse of his luminae, and suddenly the broken screen doesn’t seem so important anymore. I’ve spent so long relying on machines because I couldn’t trust people. Now I have something – someone – far more reliable.

“It only needs to do one last job,” I tell him, already connecting my tablet to the tower’s systems. “It’s served its purpose.”

My fingers fly over the working portions of the screen, muscle memory taking over as I access the colony’s communication network. Every resident’s personal device will receive this broadcast – every piece of evidence I’ve collected, every secret file I’ve uncovered. The truth about Walter, about the council’s lies, about the aliens who call this planet home.

And the medicine. They need to know that's the reason why Earth came to this planet. Not to colonize and live in peace, but to dominate and control.

Green-tips watches the screens with growing horror as the evidence fills them – documents proving Walter's deception, footage of the underground city, proof of the nanite medicine's existence.

"This whole time..." he whispers. "They knew? About all of this? I thought... I thought we were just starting a new life."

"They knew," I confirm, watching his face. His shock mirrors what the rest of the colony will feel. "They lied to all of us. But now everyone will know the truth."

I look back at the screen, momentarily staring at the images that flash before me, eyes unseeing.

"It's done," I whisper. "My quest is done."

I've completed what I set out to do. I'm the heroine in my own story, and now it's completed.

The computer before me beeping snaps me out of my daze. The broadcast has been completed, sent to every single person. Knowing that our time is running short, I quickly type in Stacy's personal communication code. My heart pounds as I wait for her response.

"Maya?" Stacy's voice crackles through the speakers. "Where are you? I just... you sent so much? What's going on?"

"I need you to listen carefully," I tell her. "The colony isn't safe anymore. You need to get out."

“And go where?” Stacy asks. I know she’s got a million questions, but she’s practical. Always has been. She can probably hear the urgency in my voice, suspecting we don’t have much time... very soon the colony’s guards and Hunters will be flooding this area, looking for me.

“To the river,” Melvall suddenly offers. “I know the area well. I can watch for her arrival, make sure she’s safe. Bring her to you.”

“Perfect. Stacy, Melvall will meet you there. You can trust him. Just get to the river, okay?”

“I... okay.”

I can’t help but smile as I disconnect from the systems. There’s no going back now.

And honestly? I wouldn’t want to. I did exactly what I set out to do, and it feels amazing.

I nod, taking one last look at my damaged tablet before leaving it behind. I don’t need it anymore. Its purpose, like my quest, is complete. We’ve given him – given everyone – the truth. Now they have to choose what to do with it.

We slip out of the tower and into the snowy landscape. Behind us, the colony walls loom silent and dark. Already I can hear shouting in the distance – the evidence is spreading, causing exactly the chaos I’d hoped for. Walter and his conspirators won’t be able to contain this.

Ahead of us, Melvall and Zoran bicker about the best route to the river. They wave at us as they leave to go their separate ways.

“I’ll stay and observe the humans’ response,” Tanis offers, appearing suddenly by my



side. I yelp at the unexpected presence, which only causes Tanis to shrink in on himself, looking contrite.

“Someone should monitor how your council reacts to this revelation,” he tells me in a gentle tone, as if he’s expecting me to flee from him.

I open and close my mouth, gaping. How did he just show up like that? I never saw him coming at all. One moment there’s empty ground beside me, and the next he’s standing there taller than life.

Volan clasps Tanis’ shoulder, sending me a teasing smirk before turning to his friend. “Be careful. Send word through Melvall or return home whenever you have word.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, grateful that I have another person that I can rely on and trust.

“Now that the secret is out, Earth’s military will come,” I warn Volan as we make our way back toward the forest. “The medicine is beyond valuable. They will not give it up easily.”

“Let them come,” Volan replies, his voice steel and silk. His luminae pulse with determination. “We’ll be ready.”

I slip my hand into his, our fingers intertwining. My heart thrills at how he considers this our fight—me and him working side by side as equals.

“I spent so long thinking I had to do everything alone. Like I was rushing off on some epic quest to save the world. But that’s not what being a hero means, is it?”

“No,” Volan says. “It means having the courage to trust others. To let them stand beside you.” His luminae flare brightly, and he looks down at me, his gaze warm. “To

let them love you.”

Snow continues to fall around us as we walk away from my old home and toward whatever future awaits. I don’t know exactly what’s coming – war, change, chaos probably. But for the first time in my life, I’m not afraid.

I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.

THE END

Thank you for reading. So few people leave reviews. It helps both me and other readers!

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:37 pm*

My thighs burn with the effort of sitting cross-legged for so long on the cold stone slab at the edge of the training ring. I shift, trying to find a more comfortable position, only to realize there isn't one. Every muscle in my body protests the movement, reminding me how woefully unprepared I was for "basic training" with the sulthari warriors.

Why did I think that it would be a good idea to get in shape?