



Alien Mate

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Chapter One

The day Diana met her first alien dawned liked any other—with a dry, cottony mouth and a bad case of bed head. She didn't even have any warning because, unlike the *X-Files* and sci-fi movies, she didn't see any lights in the sky, and her TV image didn't go all snowy. That kind of pissed her off, because had she known she would be having an up-close-and-personal encounter with life from another planet, she might have at least brushed her hair and worn something other than her ragged robe, plaid boxer shorts, and loose tank top. *This is definitely not my most attractive look.*

Anyway, there she stood, ironing her underwear—being single left her with way too much time on her hands—when suddenly, *it* appeared in the middle of her living room. It wasn't a spectacular living room as living rooms went, outfitted with a secondhand sagging couch and chair, a coffee table that wobbled, and some kind of Oriental print rug in bad need of a beating. A receptionist's salary didn't go far in the city.

Needless to say, when *it* appeared, it did so right on top of her flimsy coffee table, which under its weight collapsed, something her visitor absently noted when it looked down at its bare and fairly large feet.

Studying it in shock, Diana amended the “it” part to “Holy Hunk” because, if it hadn't been for the fact his skin shone a startling sky blue, she would have mistaken him for some super-hot underwear model—one who magically appeared in her living room, only sans the underwear.

Good thing he's hung like a . . .

With flaming cheeks, Diana quickly averted her gaze, but his sizable endowment stayed with her, and flustered, she stammered, “Wh-Who are you?” *Other than the most gorgeous naked man I've ever seen.* She was so startled by her naked visitor that she accidentally left the iron lying on her underwear too long, and a burning smell wafted up. Nose twitching, Diana quickly set the iron upright and looked down in dismay at the big burn mark on the ass of her favorite pair of undies. *Damn.*

So of course her blue alien chuckled—yes, apparently creatures from space or alternate dimensions had senses of humor too.

“Greetings, earthling female,” said a voice, smooth as hot, melted chocolate with just a hint of an accent. “I come in peace. I will be your leader.”

Startled by her alien's horrible B-movie speech, Diana said the only thing that came to mind. “Um, isn't that supposed to be “Take me to your leader?””

Brilliant white teeth that shone opalescent like pearls between darker blue lips appeared when he smiled. “No, you heard me correctly, earthling. I've come to be your leader.”

Diana laughed. She just couldn't help herself. Of all the things she expected him to say, that had to rank as one of the dumbest. His face remained quite serious, though, so of course she continued to howl even when she saw a tinge of annoyance draw his handsome features tight.

“I fail to see the humor, earthling female. I will be your leader. You will respect me as is my due.”

Diana cackled again, wiping the tears in her eyes with the back of her hand. “Oh, you are so funny. And just how is one naked alien going to convince the world that he's now their new leader?” Diana giggled anew at the thought of him aiming that weapon between his legs. Given its size, he'd definitely intimidate the male population and make the female one swoon.

A frown met her answer, followed by a wide Colgate smile, which made Diana wonder—*do aliens brush their teeth?*

“I never said I intended to rule the world, earthling. I’ve come to be *your* leader. You have been chosen by the oracle and the spirits of my ancestors to be my mate,” he stated with a self-satisfied grin.

That comment rendered Diana speechless. She could almost hear the thump as her jaw hit the floor. *His mate?* Diana knew at this point she had to be hallucinating. Super-hot aliens did not suddenly appear on a lazy Sunday morning to claim size-fourteen plumpers in their don’t-answer-the-door-clothes as their mates. Maybe she’d eaten some bad potato chips.

Shame about the mental lapse, though, because Mr. Blue could probably be found under the definition of gorgeous. After all, what wasn’t there to like on his six-foot-something frame with abs she could bounce quarters off of? With short ebony hair that curled slightly at the tips, a tapered waist, muscled legs, bulging arms, and that club between his legs—which, shockingly enough, appeared bald—he also defined the word “yummy.” While she contemplated his perfection, he assumed her acquiescence.

“Now that you understand,” he said, gesturing to her impatiently, “disrobe that we may perform the bonding ceremony and be on our way.”

Make that the definition of arrogance. Just who does he think he is? “Excuse me? Did you say you wanted me to undress?”

“Yes, this is part of the ritual. Fear not, your clothing will be replaced with something more appropriate for space travel. Besides,” Mr. Blue said, looking at her outfit disdainfully, “you cannot mean to tell me that you are attached to such unattractive garments.”

Diana drew her ratty robe more tightly around her and tilted her head regally. “Ugly clothes or not, they are staying on. And I never said I agreed to any bonding ritual. This is a joke, right? Some of the guys at work have paid you to play a trick on me. Ha! Ha! So funny. You can come out now. Where’d you hide the camera?”

“Do you babble often without making sense?” her alien finally interjected.

“Oh, please. How gullible do you think I am? I’ll admit you might have had me fooled there for a second ’til you asked me to take my clothes off.”

Mr. Blue sighed in exasperation. “I assure you this is quite serious. Now, stop your pointless arguing and disrobe that we may get the ritual over with and be on our way.”

Did this alien live on some kind of caveman planet? Ordering her about like some harem girl—hmmm, now that had some interesting visuals. Reining in her naughty thoughts, Diana glared at the source of her frazzled mood. Did he really think that he could simply materialize into her life and she’d become his willing love slave? Hadn’t he heard of Women’s Lib?

At his impatient look, she replied sarcastically, “Yeah, well, good luck with that. You might be hot for an alien guy, but I am single and staying that way, and the clothes are not coming off.”

Although, on second thought, maybe I should get naked. After all, it’s not like I’m a virgin, and to be honest, when will I ever get another chance to play alien probe with a hottie like this?

Blue’s ebony brows drew over his clear violet eyes, and when he spoke again, he’d lost some of his arrogance. “You don’t wish to be my mate?” The idea seemed to flummox him.

“Look, I appreciate the offer, but even though this must be some kind of weird hallucination, or joke, come on, your mate? That sounds like a long-term commitment to me, and well, I just don’t think that’s going to work. We’ve just met, after all, and I know nothing about you, not even, for example, your name.”

“Kor’iander Vel Menos, but you may call me Kor. I am descended from the Third Moon clan, the primary line, of course, and I have the post of first warrior to the Third Moon regiment,” he said with a bow—marred only by the swinging appendage between his legs, which made her blush crimson again.

Gathering her composure, Diana looked him in the eye—no lower. “Nice to meet you, Kor, but I’m still not going to be your mate. Now why don’t you go back to where you came from and meet some nice blue-skinned girl and get married? You’ll be much happier.”

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen,” he muttered darkly.

“Sorry, but that’s how it’s going to be,” Diana said primly. Although her shameless side was screaming, *Take my clothes off and have your way with me, you big hunk of stud!*

And then Diana wondered if he’d read her last thought, for, with a curse—or at least she assumed he cursed, as he spoke in an odd guttural language—he strode all six-foot-something of blue nakedness over to her and grabbed her by the arms. Diana, stunned, didn’t even think to scream. She gaped up at him, utterly distracted by the tingling his closeness created in her body, and she wondered if his lips would taste like blue raspberry.

“Now,” he barked.

Now what? Diana wondered. But as it turned out, he wasn’t speaking to her.

And her lack of action, caused by her overactive hormones, was what led to her being on board her very first alien spacecraft.

Not that she admired it for very long, because she felt a prick in her arm and fell—make that crashed—to the floor in a dead sleep.

Chapter Two

Kor'iander Vel Menos stared at the slightly snoring form of his soon-to-be mate asleep on the floor and shook his head in disbelief.

The Oracle had to be wrong. Of course, that had never happened before, but in this instance, Kor really had to question the Oracle's choice.

Surely, this feisty, argumentative female could not be his life mate? Docile, he'd specifically written docile when he'd filled in his request for a mate. And this is who the spirits of his ancestors had chosen? A celestial jest on their part perhaps?

Her looks at least seemed passable. Perhaps once she groomed herself she'd even be attractive. The kogi nest that currently adorned her head made him want to shave it for fear of unsavory little critters. As for her shape, the ugly garment she wore did not give a proper indication, although she did seem plump and healthy. Thank the Three Moons. His poor childhood companion Rex'Anor had been given a very slim mate for bonding, and it had taken him many moon cycles to plump her up 'til he'd found her attractive enough to bed.

Kor sighed. And to think he'd been so excited when he'd been called to see the Oracle. He'd felt honored and thrilled to be chosen. *What a joke*, he thought, staring down at his chosen's limp form.

Well at least there was no one here to witness his ignoble attempt to go through with the mating rituals of his people, somewhat adapted to take in the new reality that they needed to mate with females from outside their species.

The problem with being alone, though, was who in the silvery moons did he ask for help?

"Alphie, please search archives for anything on the subject of reluctant earthling females."

Kor could have sworn he heard Alphie—Alpha 350, the ship's artificially intelligent computer who someone mistakenly gave a sense of humor—snort.

"This is not entertaining. My chosen refuses to acknowledge me as her leader and won't bond with me."

"Could it be because you demanded instead of asking?" came the computer's smooth voice.

"Why would I ask? I'm doing her a great honor and following ritual. I think maybe I didn't get the right female."

"The coordinates were exact. But perhaps you should have done a little more reading on earthlings, their women, to be precise, before ordering her about. On their planet, the concept of arranged marriages is almost nonexistent, especially in the area she resided in. As a matter of fact, many of the Earth women choose to not enter into a pair bond."

"What? But that's preposterous," said Kor, appalled at the thought of thousands of females roaming around without the guiding hand of a male.

"Preposterous or not, that's this planet's custom. And furthermore, I did recommend you read the file on your future mate. But what did you say to me?" reminded Alphie.

Kor grumbled. "I said it would be fairer if we met at the same time without preconceived notions about each other. You could have warned me." When he'd made the decision at the time, it had seemed like the right choice and still would have been had his intended been docile like he'd asked for. *But a feisty mouth might mean a feisty bedmate*. Her bed skills, though, would only become apparent once he convinced his earthling she had no choice but to bond with him.

“You should have listened better,” continued Alphie in a matter-of-fact voice. “What’s the point of having access to a supercomputer like myself if you don’t take advantage of it? Now stop your complaining. What’s done is done. There’s still time for you to catch up a bit before she wakes. Now, are you ready for the decontamination process? Might as well get it done now while she’s still unconscious.”

Kor straightened his intended’s limbs, then sighed and braced himself for the low-level laser cleansing. The process, accomplished painlessly—actually, truth be told, it could be quite arousing—was necessary to ensure that alien microbes did not survive and cause havoc back on his home planet. During the course of the voyage, his soon-to-be mate’s body would be cleansed and prepared to adapt to life on his planet, something he just knew she’d argue about too.

Unmoving, she lay as he’d positioned her on the floor, and he decided that perhaps it would be best if he gave her the first of the several inoculations she’d need to ensure her body adapted to the slightly different atmosphere and consumables of his planet. He injected her quickly with only a slight red pinprick left behind to show he’d even touched her. With that done he also decided he’d better relocate her just in case the sedative wore off sooner than expected and she awoke on the hard floor.

Picking her up, Kor found himself pleased at the soft curves that pillowed against his body, making his blood pound faster through his veins and other places. His erection was impossible to hide in his still undressed state, but with no one to see him except a machine, Kor relaxed and decided to enjoy holding his chosen female without her haranguing him.

The cruiser, thankfully, had a well-appointed cabin, one with a large bed that took into account the new service the males of his planet required. The cruiser’s primary use now consisted of fetching female mates from around the galaxy so that the males of his world could mate with them and make sure his people did not die out. *A pleasant task for most*, or so he’d heard, he thought with a disgruntled look at the still sleeping female who had refused to do as he told her.

Kor laid the earthling on the covers and stood back, looking at her again pensively. The garments she wore were truly awful, and given her earlier stance about keeping them on, with a mischievous grin, he stripped them off her. When he’d disposed of them—permanently—he looked at her again, interest making his violet eyes glow and his body firm up in arousal.

Lush curves met his gaze, her smooth, unblemished skin tempting his hands to touch. She had a very full bosom, heavy handfuls with light pink areolas that puckered as if sensing his interest. She had an indented waist, a rounded tummy, and a thatch of ebony curls that hid pinker delights, which he’d explore and taste later when she finally accepted her fate.

Kor found a brush and painstakingly combed out her messy hair, the texture so silky between his fingers that it made him shiver as he imagined her dragging it across his sensitive skin. With her dark hair fanned across the bed’s pillows, sensuous full lips slightly parted, and serene face, Kor found himself mightily attracted to his future mate. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so horrible after all.

Tempting as he found her, though, he would wait ’til she awoke and completed the bonding ritual with him. He wanted their first joining to be mutually pleasurable, something he’d trained for with great success, according to his teachers. Now if only he could get her to feel the same attraction when she awoke. Then they could mate properly and satisfy the sexual urges that now consumed his body.

However, the sedative he’d given her would last a few more hours still unless she proved resistant, so with time to waste, Kor dressed in loose slacks and a billowy shirt before going

to check on their travel status and other ship functions that needed tending. But while he worked, his mind strayed often to the lusciously obstinate female in his bed.

* * * *

Diana woke slowly, her mind still pleasantly befuddled from the dream she'd had about a handsome blue alien who wanted her as his mate. Diana only wished the dream could have continued a little longer and that she hadn't been so prickly. She would have liked to touch that smooth blue skin and maybe even taste it. *Oh, the things I would have done to his deliciously muscled body.*

Diana giggled and rolled over onto her stomach, the smooth, satiny sheets rubbing sensuously against her bare skin.

Bare what? I never sleep naked.

Diana opened her eyes and sat up in shock. Her gaze flicked down to see she wore not a stitch of clothing and that the bed she found herself in wasn't her own.

Where on God's green earth am I?

She looked around in consternation, not seeing anything familiar. Panic settled low in her tummy. *Okay, let's not freak out here. Maybe I'm still dreaming.* Diana pinched herself hard.

Owww! Diana glared offensively at the red mark she'd given herself. *Okay, maybe not a dream then.* Grabbing the loose satin sheet on the bed, she draped it around herself and stood up to take a look around.

Smooth, seamless cream-colored walls surrounded her. No door, no nothing to show how to get in or out. *Is this some kind of prison? But I've never heard of a prison like this. And besides, I've committed no crimes.*

For furniture there just seemed to be the large bed covered in creamy sheets and pillows, and two chairs that looked like overly large beanbags that had been punched in the middle for a seat.

The floor underneath felt spongy on her bare feet, and Diana looked down at it and frowned. She'd never seen anything like it. It looked and felt like suede with the consistency of rubber, making it very cushy to walk on.

Her dream of the blue alien came back to taunt her. *Surely not. I mean, aliens don't exist, right? But where am I then?*

Feeling a change in the air, Diana whirled, the sheet clasped tightly to her breasts, and saw her blue E.T. standing in a doorway that had just appeared in the wall.

"You?" she exclaimed, then narrowed her eyes as understanding sank in. "Where am I? Why have you kidnapped me?"

"We are aboard my spacecraft heading for my planet. As for why you are here, I told you that earlier. You have been chosen to be my mate. I will be your leader, or will be as soon as we complete the ceremony."

"I am not doing any ceremony with you. I demand you take me home right now, or I'll—I'll—" Diana got flustered at this point. *What exactly can I do if what he says is the truth? If we really are in space, I can't just jump ship and walk home.*

"Taking you home is not an option. Believe me, I am not so sure the Oracle made the right choice either. But choose you as my mate she did, so whether you are willing or not, we will be conducting the bonding ceremony."

Not likely, she thought. "I can assure you it won't be willing. So unless you intend to force me, there will be no bonding, mister. Besides, did it ever occur to you that maybe I already have a boyfriend?"

"You mean a mate?" Mr. Blue frowned at her. "Do you have one?"

"No," Diana said sulkily. Stupid jerk had been cheating on her, so she'd dumped his ass. "That's not the point. I could have had someone special, but you didn't even ask."

"Sorry," he said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. "Now can we move past this? You will be my mate and the mother of our children. It has been decided. You need to accustom yourself to this idea so that we may move on."

"Children? Okay, now you're really getting ahead of yourself there. Just who is this Oracle who says I'm supposed to be your bride? I'd like to talk to her. I think she's made some kind of mistake."

"Are all earthling females so argumentative?" he asked.

"Only the smart ones," snapped back Diana. "And my name is Miss St. Peters to you, not earthling."

"I will call you whatever I wish."

"We'll see about that," growled Diana. "Now I demand to speak to this Oracle."

"You cannot speak to the Oracle."

"Why not?" Diana asked, chin jutting out stubbornly.

"Must you keep questioning everything?" he asked with exasperation.

"Hey, this is my life we're talking about here. I think I have the right to know what's going on."

Kor—she remembered his name from the dream that wasn't a dream—sighed loudly. "Will you be more agreeable if I answer some questions for you?"

"Maybe."

"Fine then," he said, walking over to sit in one of the funny-looking chairs. "Ask away."

Diana hadn't expected him to give in that quickly given his previous high-handed behavior, so she collected her thoughts before speaking. "How did I get here?"

"Molecular transportation."

"What?" said Diana blankly.

"My computer dissolved our molecular structure and reassembled it here, on the ship."

Diana's eyes widened. *Beam me up, Scotty*. She patted herself down, relieved to see she seemed to have made it in one piece, including those pounds she'd have preferred to lose.

Shuffling her feet, she got her toes caught in the edge of the sheet wrapped around her body, reminding her of her nude state. "Where are my clothes?"

Kor grinned at her with what she swore was a twinkle of mirth in his eyes. "Gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"They were ugly, so I got rid of them. Next question?" he said, leaning back, looking pleased with himself.

Diana glared at him. Never mind the fact he was right, her clothes had been awful, that didn't give him the right to strip them from her. *Wait a second . . .*

"You undressed me?" she asked slowly.

Kor nodded his head.

"But that means you saw me naked!" Diana flushed crimson. Somehow this fact had evaded her usually alert mind, and she burned with embarrassment.

"I have to admit that, in that respect, the Oracle chose well. You have a beautiful body, and I look forward to enjoying it."

Diana just gaped at his comment. On the one hand she felt a tingly little pleasure that he'd liked what he'd seen, but on the other . . .

"There will be no enjoying nothing, mister. I mean it," she said, stomping her foot when he chuckled.

Kor didn't seem to mind her childish tantrum. He stood and walked over to her, thankfully dressed now, unlike earlier, but even clothed he still seemed very intimidating—and sexy. Diana backed away, but the cabin wall met her back, and she couldn't escape him when he draped an arm on either side of her body. He leaned toward her, his violet eyes alight with some emotion she couldn't identify—she just hoped it wasn't anger.

Diana lost her ability to speak—a rare occurrence—stunned by his proximity, a closeness that had her body warming in naughty places. His face drew nearer, and when he spoke, his minty breath feathered across her lips, making her nipples tighten and her lower parts flush with heat.

“Oh, I will enjoy taking you, and I guarantee you will enjoy me in return,” he promised arrogantly before touching his lips to hers.

Chapter Three

Diana's eyes fluttered shut as he kissed her, his full lips surprisingly firm against hers, and she felt an electric shock run through her body. Make that more like a lightning bolt, as his touch made every nerve ending in her body come alive and sing with pleasure. Diana wanted to push him away, but her body betrayed her. Melting instead under his sensuous onslaught, her lips parted on a soft sigh to let his alien tongue plunder her mouth. She felt his hands move to grab her around the waist and pull her closer to his body. This close to him, she could feel the hardness of his arousal pulsing against her tummy, making her go damp. Diana sighed into his mouth, and moved her hands slowly up to grasp his shoulders, then...

An amused voice broke the embrace.

"Kor, while I see you are busy, you are being hailed by your mother on the status of your mission. Should I tell her to call back?"

Diana, shocked to discover their kiss had been witnessed, found the strength—barely—to push him away. Kor let her flee to the other side of the room, his face thoughtful and his eyes glowing. Diana for her part felt shaky and unfulfilled. Wanting . . .

She rubbed her lips, trying to erase the feelings he'd aroused in her, but her body still pulsed, and she quivered when she looked down at his body and saw him in the same state.

Kor smiled at her regretfully. "Your questions and the rest of our *discussion* will have to wait. I hope you now see that this is what's meant to be. I shall return shortly."

"But . . ." Diana spoke to empty air as Kor left and the door sealed seamlessly shut behind him.

"Arrgh!" she yelled, stomping her feet. She flounced over to the bed and fell on it, her thoughts and emotions a jumbled mess as she fought arousal and irritation in equal measures. *How did he manage to get me so hot so quick? I don't even know him.*

"Do you require anything?" asked the smooth voice that had interrupted the kiss.

Diana peered around the empty room, looking for the source of the voice, but saw nothing. "Who are you? Can you take me home? I think your friend's gone off the deep end," Diana asked, hoping for a way out of this mess.

"I regret that I cannot take you home. But never fear, your new life will be an enjoyable one with wonders never dreamed of on your planet. As for me, I am Alpha 350, ship computer and the premiere model in artificial intelligence. You may call me Alphie. I can provide you with food, clothing, toiletries, as well as answer some questions you may have on your new life."

Great, a computer. Hopefully this one doesn't go psycho like the one in that sci-fi book. "Okay, I have a question for you. Why me?"

"Why not?" retorted the smart-ass machine.

That's if it's really a machine, Diana thought. *Seems to talk pretty human to me.*

"Oh, come on. I mean, look at me. I'm not exactly the kind of woman men go all gaga over."

"Please explain. I am not familiar with the term 'gaga.'"

Diana rolled her eyes. "What I meant to say is usually kidnapping for the purpose of marriage happens to pretty, skinny women, not plumpers like me."

"Where Kor comes from, women with girth are considered much more attractive than one who is, as you say, skinny. A too-slim mate is the sign of a poor provider. Was that all you wanted to know?"

Great, a BBW-lovers society, this is getting weirder and weirder. “I have another question. If Kor is an alien and you’re an alien computer, just how is it that I can understand you? Don’t tell me English is the language of the universe.”

“Of course not.” The hidden voice chuckled. “Kor learned your language through an implant. We’ll give you one too as part of your integration. It will allow you to understand any language in the universe and, where vocally possible, speak it as well.”

Diana, while intrigued at the idea of being multilingual, did not like the idea of an implant. *It never goes well when they get one in the movies.* “We’re going to have to talk about that implant idea. Have to say that doesn’t sound like something I’m going to enjoy.”

“I begin to understand Kor’s difficulty.”

Diana put her hands on her hips. “Hey, are you implying I’m difficult?”

“Let me phrase this using an expression I discovered when researching your species. If the shoe fits . . .”

“I am not—that is, if the situation were different . . .” Diana sputtered.

“Let me ask you, earthling—”

“Would you stop calling me earthling? My name is Diana.” Why she gave him her first name when she’d told Kor to address her formally, she didn’t know. *Maybe because he’s not trying to marry me and get into my pants.*

“Diana, then, what exactly do you object to? According to my report, you have no close living family. Very few friends. No current love interest. No pets. You hate your job. You hate your apartment. Your romantic fantasy confessed to an online acquaintance consisted of a tall, dark stranger sweeping you off your feet and taking you away from it all. So let me ask you, what has Kor done that you object to so strenuously?”

Diana just listened, dumbfounded, as the computer recited off facts of her life that made her sound, well, pathetic, and lonely actually. “How do you know all these things?” she whispered, shocked.

“I did my research, of course. The advent of computers and the Internet on your world have made it quite simple for an advanced AI system like myself to find out pretty much anything I need to know.”

“Have you told Kor all of this?” she asked, hoping the answer would be no. Her life, or lack of one, was none of Kor’s business.

“He never asked,” said Alphie sullenly. “But that’s beside the point. Let me ask you again, what exactly about his choice in you as a mate do you object to?”

“Well,” she stammered, “he didn’t ask. He just told me, and he’s—he’s blue!”

Alphie gave a snort of disgust. *How does a computer snort?* “I can’t believe you’re an alienist.”

“A what?” she asked, confused.

“Someone who thinks her species is better than all the others. We see that a lot in earthlings.”

“But I never said I thought I was better. You’re twisting my words. It’s just, he took me by surprise. I’ve never seen a blue man before and certainly never imagined marrying one.”

“If he weren’t blue, would you be reacting like this?”

Diana thought about it. “Actually, yes, I would still act like this because this isn’t romantic. When I dreamt of my fantasy man taking me away, it was because of love, not because some busybody told him to. He doesn’t even like me, but he wants to marry me ’cause some Oracle says so.”

“Romance? Hmmm, I’ll have to research that. Let me get back to you. Bye.”

“Wait,” Diana shouted.

“What?” asked Alphie.

“Before you take off and do computer stuff, could you maybe get me some clothes? I’d rather not wear this sheet all day. And maybe something to eat, I am kind of hungry.”

“Of course.” And with those words, a drawer popped open, and Diana walked over to it and pulled out an outfit—a very revealing, diaphanous outfit made of draped layers of what seemed to be scarves stitched together.

“You’ve got to be bloody kidding me,” she grumbled, holding up the flimsy cloth.

“It’s what the females of his world wear,” said Alphie with a snicker. “Talk to you later.”

As he said that, another drawer opened in the wall, and Diana peeked in hoping for more clothes, but instead saw a steaming plate of food consisting of a white-sauced pasta with vegetables and a garlic toast. *Well at least they’re feeding me stuff I recognize*, which made her wonder who did the cooking.

Sighing, Diana decided to eat first before tackling the sex kitten outfit. *But I swear to God if Kor laughs when he sees me looking like a giant fluffy marshmallow, I am going to sock him where it hurts.*

* * * *

Kor walked in and stopped. For the first time since he’d laid eyes on Diana, he thanked the Oracle. And yes, he’d finally relented enough, or should he say groveled enough, that Alphie gave him his mate-to-be’s name along with some basic information about her, but not too much. Kor, for some unfathomable reason, looked forward to discovering more about his chosen. He especially couldn’t wait to see how she’d look naked with face flushed and her body aroused. That erotic thought presided at the forefront of his mind as he viewed his intended looking radiant as the moon goddess wearing the flowing garments of his people. Her shapely curves, both hidden and revealed by the strategically draped cloth, made her look good enough to eat. As soon as Diana opened her mouth, though, Kor rolled his eyes and lost his appetite.

“I demand you find me some proper clothes,” she stated, hands on her hips, glaring at him, not realizing what a fetching picture she made. “I refuse to be dressed like a harem girl.”

“I do not know what you refer to, but the answer is no. All the women on my planet are attired thus. I do not see the problem. Your planet seemed to embrace attire of a much more revealing nature than this.”

“I look like an idiot.”

Kor processed the word and its meaning. His brows rose. “On the contrary, you look quite attractive.”

Surprisingly enough, his compliment stopped her next harangue, and, pinking prettily, she said, “I do?”

“Very,” he said, crossing the room to stand before her, his towering height making him feel oddly protective, an emotion he was unaccustomed to. “Come,” he said, offering her his arm. “The ship is not large, but I thought that perhaps you would enjoy a tour, and perhaps I could satisfy some more questions I’m sure you have.”

For once not arguing—had his one compliment disarmed his prickly intended?—she tucked her hand onto his arm, her pale skin looking stark against the vivid blue of his own and sending a surge of lust through him. His aroused body demanded he throw her down ’til those pale hands scratched his back in pleasure.

But no, he had to control his urges and guide her slowly as one would a Jelaxian mount, those pesky alien creatures commonly used for planetary travel. They were well known for

their skittishness, just like his intended. He needed to build up Diana's trust in him. Not perhaps the way he'd envisioned his mating trip, but given her lack of cooperation, a necessary step.

Leading her from the bedroom, he showed her the conservatory where fresh produce was grown to keep space travelers healthy. They toured the lounge area that also doubled as a dining area, then finally the command center with its large window screen showing the vast, dark space they traveled quickly through.

"Oh my God," she exclaimed, taking her hand off his arm and wandering up to the large display, her eyes wide in her face as she took in the celestial view.

Kor wandered over to the main console and slowed the ship down so she could better see some of the stars and planets they were passing.

He heard her gasp. "We really are in space."

"Of course we are," he replied, somewhat confused. "Where else would we be?"

Facing him, she looked uncertain, and he had the strangest urge to take her in his arms and hold her tight. *What is happening to me? I am a warrior by trade, she simply my mate. Why do I feel like this?*

"I guess I thought this might still be some kind of prank or even a dream. But it's not, is it? This is really happening. To me. I'm never going back home, am I?" The last she said in a lost voice, her arms reaching around to hug herself as if she felt alone.

Kor, without thinking, strode over to her and replaced her arms with his own. Hugging her lush body tight to his, he rubbed his cheek and chin against the softness of her dark curls. "You will have a new home, never fear. One I am sure you will approve of. And I will show you such wonders as you've never imagined."

"I'm sure your planet is chock-full of neat stuff, but it's your planet, your people. How is someone like me going to fit in?"

"As my mate, you will be accorded full respect."

"I'm not talking about respect," she said, pushing out of his embrace, a spark of her will straightening her back again.

So much for docile, he thought ruefully.

"I'm talking about friends and companionship," she said, gesticulating with her hands, agitated.

"I will be your companion," he said with a grin. "I look forward especially to sharing the communal bed with you."

"I'm sure you do," she muttered darkly. "But what about the rest of the time? Surely you have to go work or something. What about then?"

Kor held back some of his glee that she finally spoke as if she intended to bond with him. He needed to tread carefully now. "There will be other mates for you to befriend, earthlings like yourself and females of other species who have been mated."

"So I'm not the only one?" she queried.

"No, there are many like you who have been chosen to leave their home worlds and become mates to the males on ours."

"Why?"

"Let us become more comfortable if we are to embark on a history lesson," he said, guiding her back to the lounge area and pressing a button to drop from the ceiling a vid screen. At least instead of arguing she was now showing an interest. He hoped she'd be more receptive to his plight once he gave her a history lesson.

* * * *

Diana allowed him to seat her, still somewhat stunned by the reality of her situation.

I'm really on a spaceship flying through the universe on my way to a new world. Holy crap! And by the sounds of it, I'm not the first one.

A giant screen that had dropped down from the seamless ceiling lit up, and Kor stood beside it pointing to the large planet that appeared in the middle of it.

"This is my home world, Xaanda, or, translated, Planet of Bounty. You'll notice it resembles your planet Earth quite a bit, although we are several times larger. We have a bright sun much like your own and a second, smaller red sun. Rotating around our planet are three moons, the resting place for our ancestors. But that is a history lesson for another day."

Kor touched the planet on the screen and zoomed in quickly 'til the view shrank to a panorama of a city—a futuristic one by Diana's standards. It gleamed silver, white, and cream with some buildings towering high while others seemed low and spread. Little saucers zipped around busily like bees in a hive.

"This is our capital, Menderiosa, where what you would call a president or emperor resides. We will be living just outside the capital, here, in Jenol." Again he zoomed.

Diana gaped at the astonishing scenes he was showing her. *It's so pretty*, she thought. "It's all very nice, but you still haven't explained why you took me."

"I'm getting to that. We discovered the ability to space travel quite some time ago, something your people are only just coming into. We've been exploring the galaxy far and wide, bringing back treasures in the form of new plants and animals. We chart the stars and their planets, tracking other sentient beings like ourselves, making contact when deemed ready. We are, however, a violent species, much like earthlings. The world I showed you is divided into six major areas of government. And while we skirmish over borders and rights, we mostly save our aggression for the races beyond our planet who enjoy subjugating. One of these violent races thought to enslave us. They are now extinct."

Diana shivered at the dark smile that came over him when he said that.

Kor continued. "But before we destroyed them, one of them came to our world unbeknownst to us. He brought with him a deadly virus. One that attacked our women and killed them. Those that survived were left barren. Our males retaliated and wreaked horrible vengeance, but our revenge was bittersweet, for the cure to the disease was found too late. Over ninety percent of our female population died, and of the ten percent left, less than three percent could still bear children."

"That's horrible," whispered Diana.

"Beyond horrible. Without the gentle guiding hand of our females, the males became wild, fighting among each other, fighting over the few females left. We were going backward in evolution. Then the Oracle spoke. The Oracle, you have to understand, has always been. Whether it has always been the same being or if the position of Oracle is an inherited one, no one is sure. However, the Oracle is considered the most powerful person on the whole planet. When she speaks, all listen."

"The Oracle is a woman?"

"The Oracle has always been a female, yes. Anyway, she told us during the great turmoil to basically stop our fighting. If we wanted to rebuild our world, there was a way."

"So you started kidnapping women and forcing them to be your wives?"

"No, not quite. See, even though we are similar physiologically, alien matings rarely reproduce. Certain conditions need to be met. One of them is a mental harmony."

Diana giggled. "What, they need to be in love?"

Kor frowned at her. "I am not sure I understand that word. We don't have a translation for it in our language. What I am talking about is complete mental balance, where the souls of both join and become as one."

Now it was Diana's turn to frown. "What do you mean the souls join? You guys believe in souls? Life after death?"

"Yes, but we are digressing. The Oracle said she'd found a way for us to rebuild our population by bringing in female outsiders. At first this idea was scoffed at. We are a proud race, but numbers, mainly population numbers, brought us to our senses. If we did not do as the Oracle suggested, our race would die out."

"So one person is in charge of setting all you men up with wives?"

"Not quite. The Oracle, as you said, is only one, the universe vast. She wisely turned to the spirits of our ancestors to help us in our hour of need."

"You mean you're letting ghosts choose your brides?"

"The spirits of our ancestors are nothing so vulgar as your world's concept of ghosts. They are beings of energy that retain a sense of their corporeal self."

Diana snorted. "Ghosts."

Kor's brows drew together, and she could see him about to argue again, but he held himself back. With a pained expression, he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "The ancestral spirits, not being bound by the laws of physics that we are, can travel the galaxy quickly. With the fate of our civilization at stake, the Oracle asked them for help. While some had been dead so long they'd lost their sense of self and family, many others, especially the recently dead females, still remembered and thus set themselves to the task of finding mates for their remaining male family members. As choices are made, the spirits inform the Oracle, who then notifies the lucky male."

"Do the men not get a choice in this?"

Kor squirmed a bit. "The males are given the choice of whether or not they wish to have an alien mate found for them, as the females of our species, even so many of moon cycles later, are still too few."

Diana watched him and had a feeling there was more to it than that. "And?" she said, arching a brow and trying to look supercilious.

"Males fill out a questionnaire with one of the Oracle's acolytes, and the questionnaire is relayed to the spirits."

Diana jumped up. "You mean I was chosen from some kind of shopping list you made up?"

Kor's cheeks blushed a mauve color, but instead of admitting he was wrong, he jumped up to defend his actions. "If my ancestors had followed my list, you wouldn't be here. I asked for a biddable female, not someone who questions everything I say or do."

"Well excuse me, Ken, for not being your perfect Barbie doll," she retorted, hurt that he didn't consider her his ideal female. She was even more pissed that she even cared what this stupid blue alien thought.

"I do not know what you refer to, but before you get all annoyed, let me just say in my defense that I was simply following procedure."

"Blah, blah, blah," chanted Diana. "I'm not listening to you."

Maybe it was the fingers in her ears that sent him over the edge. Whatever it was, Diana found herself wrapped in a pair of strong blue arms, looking up into a volatile pair of violet eyes that swirled with emotion.

"Let me g—" Diana never did finish her sentence, as his firm lips crushed hers and captured her voice. And to her mental chagrin—but her body's delight—she felt that same

inferno as earlier go racing through her body, lighting all her senses and making her melt in his arms.

Floating on a pleasurable cloud that consisted only of his lips making hers feel *oooooh sooooo* good, she didn't register what he said at first.

"They didn't follow my list, but," he said, tightening his arms when she tried to push away, "I'm realizing that perhaps my ancestors knew what I needed better than I did."

Diana stilled and looked up at him. "Really? Even though I'm not docile and I argue?"

"Well, I could do without the arguing. However"—he grinned at the glint in her eye—"it will sure make our lives more interesting, won't it?"

With lots to ponder, he brought a dazed Diana back to the cabin. To her surprise, he left the door unlocked, a fact she discovered when she learned how to open the door by watching him. Basically she just needed to slide her hand over the wall in the right spot. *So I'm not a prisoner on the ship, at least.*

But instead of roaming, she paced, thinking about what she'd learned. Diana still wasn't crazy about the idea of some ghosts running around the universe with a list looking for gals who could be kidnapped, but in a perverse way, it was kind of romantic. *I mean, think about it. Of all the women in the universe, they chose me. And from what Kor's said, they know their stuff. Me, the perfect wife for a hunkey blue stud.*

Even better, in his obtuse way, Kor had said he liked her. Diana warmed at the thought.

Then kicked herself.

Hello, Earth to Diana. What the hell am I thinking? I can't seriously be entertaining the thought of bonding with him. He's arrogant, controlling, a kidnapper, not to mention part of an entirely different species. But then again, he's hot, he thinks I'm hot, and he makes me feel better than a cherry-topped, caramel-smothered, vanilla ice cream sundae. Mmm, now I'm hungry again.

"Alphie," she called.

"Yes, dear Diana."

"I'm hungry," she said plaintively. Although most of her hunger seemed to be centered between her legs. No matter, the between-the-lips kind would have to do. She never made important decisions on an empty tummy.

And as she sucked on her spoon, licking every creamy drop of the sundae Alphie managed to conjure up, she thought about her blue suitor and, to her chagrin, how he made her feel.

Chapter Four

“No, absolutely not,” Diana said, arms crossed, shaking her head.

Kor sighed and resisted the urge to rip out his hair. “These shots are necessary to ensure your health and well-being once we arrive on my planet.” Not to mention one of them had the implant that would allow her to speak and understand all languages. He’d thought it best not to tell her about it being included in the shots, given her earlier rant about implants turning humans into killers. Earthlings had way too much imagination.

“No way. I am not letting you inject me with some weird alien cocktail,” she repeated stubbornly.

“The shots will barely hurt. Please cooperate. We need to vaccinate you.”

“Not to mention make your Earth eggs more viable,” piped in an unhelpful Alphie.

Kor mentally groaned and braced himself.

“*What?*” she shrieked. “You’re trying to pump me with fertility drugs? I haven’t even agreed to marry you yet.”

Kor brightened. She used the word “yet” instead of “absolutely not.” *I’m making progress.* Now if she’d just calm down so he could give her the shots.

But Diana was on a rampage, and he watched her through slitted eyes as she railed back and forth about aliens and their needles. Although she did lose him for a bit when she ranted about anal probes. What kind of perverted medicine did earthlings practice anyway?

When she finally ran out of breath, Kor said one word that he’d discovered during his recent research into earthlings and their behavior. “Chicken.”

Diana stopped and faced him, mouth open. “Am not,” she retorted.

“Yes, you are chicken. All your unreasonable claims of me trying to poison, kill, or maim you are just that, unreasonable. If I wanted to hurt you, I could. Yet I haven’t, even though you would provoke just about anybody else. So you know what? Don’t take the shots. And when you end up in the hospital with your stomach dissolved and coming out of your rectum, don’t complain. I’m just trying to prevent this.” Kor had a hard time keeping a straight face when he said this, but his words had the effect desired. She turned to the side and presented him with the smooth flesh of her shoulder.

Kor quickly gave her the shots and then, in another Earth custom, kissed the red mark. “All done,” he said, pleased when she flushed at his touch. His feisty intended seemed to be melting toward him. He just wished she’d hurry it up. He didn’t want to be the first one to ever return unbonded because his chosen didn’t like him.

“Why are our species so alike?”

Her unexpected question startled Kor, so he replied with a question. “Don’t your people keep histories?”

Diana wrinkled her nose. “Of course we do, but what’s that got to do with how similar we are physically?”

“I’d say we have a lot of differences. I can show you if you’d like?” Kor said with a comical leer.

Diana giggled and blushed. “No, I’ve seen your difference. I’m talking about how we look and stuff. I mean, we’re both from different planets, right?”

“But we share the same creators.”

She gave him a perplexed look. “What, you mean to say God made you too?”

“The progenitors of our race were not gods. We are—and I am speaking of both our people—descended from a race of superior sentient beings. Space travelers that roamed the galaxies seeding populations and starting civilizations.”

“You mean we’re descended from aliens?” Her eyes grew wide.

“Did it ever occur to you that who is an alien is a matter of perspective?”

Diana thought about this for a second and frowned. “Wait, are you saying you’re not the alien, I am?”

“You will be when we reach my planet. But fear not, alienists are few. Rebuilding our species is more important than illogical notions. But forget about that. You want to know where we come from. Many sentient beings are descended from this super race. The differences that have evolved, such as our skin and small biological features, are a result of our different planetary environments. Our bodies’ adaptations. This shared genetic heritage is why it’s possible for us to mate. Sentient beings that evolved on their own do not share these common traits with us.”

“You mean there are real aliens out there?”

“If you mean nonhumanoids, then yes. Alphie has a catalog of charted planets and their inhabitants if you’re interested. I especially enjoy the Kergorsiams—their touch has enough hormones in it to make you orgasm on the spot. Kind of embarrassing if you’re in public when it happens.”

Diana laughed as he intended, and Kor went on to tell her more tales of alien encounters just to keep her smiling. It beat her yelling at him, and as she relaxed, he inched closer. He just couldn’t help himself. He wanted, no needed, to touch her. Even more puzzling, he wanted her to feel the same way.

Ancestors, what have you done to me?

* * * *

Diana giggled as Kor told her far-fetched stories of alien life. *I know he’s got to be pulling my leg, but at least he’s entertaining.*

After one tale on the mating rituals of the Xianmalons—it seemed odd that you needed to die in order to get married first—she broached the subject of bonding.

“Okay, so you need to explain this bonding thing to me a little better. I mean, it is why I’m here. Mind you, I’m not saying yes. I’m just curious.”

Kor, who had gotten closer to her while he talked—disturbingly close—seemed pleased with her question. “What do you want to know?”

“If I understood you correctly before, we get naked, then say some words, and we’re, like, married?” *So much for a white wedding.*

“Bluntly, yes, although it is a little more spiritual than that.”

“I still don’t see why we need to be naked.” Although she had to admit that a part of her looked forward to seeing him naked again. *Surely he can’t be as big as I remember. Can he?*

“As part of the bonding ritual, the shedding of our vestments symbolizes the leaving behind of our previous life and coming into our new life together as equals.”

His words startled her vision of all the smooth blue flesh, and she almost blushed. “That makes sense, I guess. In my world, we wear our fanciest clothes for the occasion. Women especially tend to wear really fancy white dresses, and the men wear tuxes.”

“I’ve seen examples of Earth weddings. It seems rather ornate and ritual-driven, not to mention crowded with spectators. On my world, it is a private matter between two individuals.”

Kor leaned even closer when he said this, his lips hovering over hers, making her breath hitch. Feeling her body betray her again, Diana moved away. She couldn’t think coherently when he got that close.

"I'm not saying I won't be your mate, but I'd like more time to decide or at least feel like I'm the one making the choice and not some strange oracle." *Although if he keeps getting close to me, it will be my hormones making the choice soon. Damn, he turns me on.*

"I will respect your choice, for now. But keep in mind that we must have this accomplished before we arrive at my planet. While females are held sacred, that doesn't mean that they will allow a nonmated female to walk around. Oracle or not, there are some who will claim you for their own with no regard to your wishes."

Diana didn't like his last remark. She didn't like feeling pressured. She'd bond if and when she chose to. And if anyone thought—Kor included—that they could force her, she'd . . . *Probably not have much of a choice*, she thought, sighing.

It wasn't that she disliked Kor. On the contrary, she found him entertaining, a good listener, patient—very, very patient—not to mention super sexy. But was that enough? They were talking about a lifelong commitment. Or was he? Did they have divorce in his society? And she still worried about adapting. Would she be lonely for others of her kind? Homesick for the things she'd lost? And what color would her babies end up being—light blue? Diana almost giggled at that thought. She must have made some kind of noise, though, for Kor looked at her oddly.

"What is so entertaining?"

Diana thought about lying, but then imagining a purple baby, giggled and told him, "What color are the babies?"

That flummoxed him, apparently, and he knitted his dark brows. "I don't know. I've never held one, and I honestly don't recall seeing any. I was the youngest of my mother's brood. Alphie?"

"I already heard the question," said the computer, and to Diana it sounded like he was suppressing chuckles too. "The babies, depending on the parents, run a gamut of colors, actually, but most often they are a mixture of the parents' skin hues."

"I'm going to have a blue baby?" Diana spoke without thinking and then tried to backtrack. "That is, if I decide to—"

But Kor had heard enough, and with a grin, his arms were around her, his lips capturing her mouth and shushing her. *He sure has an interesting way of making me shut up*, she thought, closing her eyes and enjoying what had become a daily occurrence between them. And despite her protests, she looked forward to his daily embraces.

As he deepened the kiss, parting her lips to slide his tongue inside, she grew bolder as well. Her hands touched the hair at his nape, the texture softer than it looked. As the kiss deepened though, she let her fingers drift from the silk of his hair to grip the defined muscles in his shoulders.

His hands performed an exploration of their own, skimming up her rib cage to lightly touch the underside of her breasts. Diana felt her breath hiccup as she waited for his hands to grab her full globes and squeeze them. They felt heavy with longing, her nipples so taut. But instead his hands came back down to her waist and slid around her to hug her in close.

Diana felt frustrated and mewled against his mouth, arching her body into his.

Kor chuckled. "Sorry, moon flower, but I will not take advantage of you without the bonding ritual. If you are ready, let me know."

Diana felt like a cold bucket of water had been dumped on her. She jumped up, his unresisting arms falling away.

"I—No," she managed to say in a voice that wasn't too breathy. Then she fled from his laughter, the heat from his kisses still branding her lips, her loins wet enough to wring.

However horny as she was, she knew one thing for sure. *I'm not ready yet.*

I still have so many questions. So many concerns. And lucky me, I only have a horny blue man and a sarcastic computer to answer them.

The responsible part of her knew she should say no. After all, they had nothing in common.

Oh yeah, like me and my ex Rick had so much in common. Rick had been a lawyer by day, asshole by night. She'd dated Rick the gym enthusiast for three months. They spent most of their dates at either his place or hers. Ostensibly to watch a movie, but usually they ended up in bed.

And while she could not say she had actually loved him, she had liked him and thought he liked her too. Turned out she was his closet fetish, a fact she discovered by accident when she asked him why she hadn't met any of his friends. Rick had hemmed and hawed and then finally admitted that her size embarrassed him.

"Excuse me? I thought you said you loved my curves."

"Well, I do in private, but in public, no one wants to be seen with a fat chick."

Diana had thought she'd been pretty restrained when he'd made that comment. After all, she'd only slapped him once. She'd been more pissed at herself for crying when she got home. Who cared what one asshole thought? *So what if I'm plump? I'm also smart, funny, considerate . . .*

Now that she thought about it, Kor appreciated all her qualities, even her rounded shape. So what was her problem? Kor had no intention of hiding her away like a shameful secret.

Or would he?

"Alphie, how are the women on Kor's planet treated?"

"Could you be more specific?" asked Alphie.

"Well, do the women over there have freedom? Are they allowed to go out and do what they want? Do they have to wear veils over their face? Do men decide everything?"

"Yes and no," came Alphie's oblique reply. "Before the plague, females had almost as many rights as men. Since the plague, some of those freedoms have been curtailed in order to protect them."

"Curtailed how?"

"Simply put, females must be married when they come of age, and widowed females must likewise be taken under the care of a male guardian. This is for her own safety, though, as the lack of females makes the males a little more violent in their courting methods."

Diana kind of found that idea archaic-sounding for a supposedly advanced culture. It did sound, though, like the issues were mostly safety ones. And Kor certainly hadn't tried to restrain the way she spoke to him. How bad could it be?

"Anything else I should know?" she asked. "Like, can he dump me if it doesn't work out?"

"Mate bonds are for life. A male mate, especially of the warrior class like Kor, would die before allowing you to come to harm. You will be well taken care of."

But will I be loved? she wondered, still confused as she went to sleep in the large bed, alone.

Chapter Five

“Kor,” said his mother in a firm tone, “what do you mean you have not bonded yet? You are almost home. What are you waiting for?”

“She hasn’t said yes yet, Mother,” said Kor, restraining an urge to run his hand through his hair, a sign of agitation his mother was sure to recognize.

“What? Who cares if she hasn’t said yes? She was chosen by the Oracle. Now do your duty, and bond with her.”

What did his mother think he’d been trying to do? By all the silvery moons, he thought he’d had her the last time they’d kissed. She’d been ripe for him. He could sense it, smell it. His body still twitched in remembrance. Yet, she still hesitated. He’d never understand females.

“I’m trying,” grumbled Kor under his breath.

But his mother, of keen ears, heard him.

“Well try harder, son. Have you not explained the plight of our world?”

“Of course I have. But she insists that we date.” Dating, an unfamiliar term that Kor had researched and found to mean on her planet some kind of extended courtship.

“Date? Oh my, I haven’t heard that term in a long time,” said his mother with a chuckle. “They found you an Earth girl. How marvelous. But that changes nothing. Give her what she wants, and be done with it.”

“I’m not even sure what she means by a date. I’ve been courting as best I can on board.”

“Then take her somewhere off ship. Somewhere romantic.”

Romantic, another term Kor didn’t quite comprehend. Did he not lavish attention on her already? What more did Diana need?

Kor chatted with his mother a few moments more before saying good-bye and switching off the communication console. He leaned back in his seat, thinking.

According to Alphie’s research and his mother, he should take her somewhere pretty and flatter her, make her feel attractive—didn’t his kissing and touching her every chance he could count? He needed to make her feel comfortable in his presence. By the power of the moons, this dating business seemed complicated. No wonder the bonding ritual had been invented. A pity his mate couldn’t see the beauty of it.

Kor pulled up on-screen a map of the system they were currently flying through and grinned when Alphie circled one particular planet in red.

“Thanks, Alphie,” he said, jumping out of his chair. He’d found the perfect spot to make Diana his.

* * * *

“Come with me,” Kor said mysteriously, interrupting her virtual game of chess with Alphie.

Diana barely glanced at him, intent on her next move. But her body sure knew he was there. *Treacherous body*. She’d barely slept the night before for thinking about him. At least she’d come to a decision. She’d bond with him before they got to his planet, but only when the time seemed right, which, judging by her reaction to his presence, would probably be the next time he kissed her. However, she had no intention of telling him that. A lady should always play hard to get if she wanted her man to appreciate her.

Kor leaned into her line of sight with a pleased look on his face like a little boy who had a surprise and couldn’t wait to reveal it.

“Come with me,” he repeated.

“Where?”

Kor shook his head with a smile and didn’t answer. Diana found herself intrigued at his mysterious, almost playful air and rose from her seat. Tugging her hand, Kor led her to a bland room she had never seen before.

“Close your eyes.”

“Why?” Diana asked suspiciously. *Is he going to kiss me again? Yay!* Diana frowned at her subconscious glee at this thought. *Just because I’m going to marry him doesn’t mean I have to be so eager,* she thought. *Remember, make him work for it.* But even with that admonishment to herself, her body tingled in anticipation. The man, alien, whatever you wanted to call him kissed like a god, and she couldn’t wait to taste him again.

But he didn’t kiss her. Instead he spoke. “You asked for a date. I think that was the term you used. So I had Alphie find a place for us to go on a picnic. According to your Earth histories, that is considered romantic.”

Diana smiled. *He’s been doing research? For me? Maybe I’ll kiss him first this time.*

“Now close your eyes, no peeking,” he said, standing close behind her, his hands on her waist, that simple touch enough to set her pulse racing. Diana shut her eyes tight and waited.

Nothing happened.

“Open your eyes,” he said, his breath teasing the lobe of her ear.

Thinking something had backfired, Diana opened them, expecting to see the bland beige room again, but instead a colorful vista appeared, to her shock.

“Oh my freaking God,” she exclaimed, trying to take it all in.

Kor, pleased at her reaction, smiled before tucking her hand into his arm and leading her down a pink grassy hill—although she’d never imagined a grass that would tickle like silk on her ankles.

But making love on this would feel . . . Diana almost gasped at the direction of her thoughts. She seemed to be inundated with naughty thoughts that kept multiplying and centered around her blue suitor. *Remember, make him work for it. This is just part of his diabolical plan to make you succumb to his delicious body. I can’t give in too easily.* But God, he was making it hard.

“Where are we?” she asked, crouching down to stroke the pink tendrils at her feet that she could swear sighed in the wind with pleasure.

“Ambresia. A planet that has no resources, no sentient life, no real value other than it’s pretty and gentle.”

“I’d think a planet like this would be mobbed with folks. Or are there, like, ferocious alien-eating monsters or something?”

“There are those who’ve tried to build here, but the planet overtakes the structures overnight. It’s like the planet itself is sentient and prefers to remain untouched. As for monsters, unless you count cute, cuddly creatures who mob you for petting, then no, nothing to worry about.”

Diana sat down on the pink lawn and looked up at Kor with a smile. She had to admit he’d found the perfect spot, not to mention he looked so yummy standing there, loose white shirt rippling lightly in the gentle breeze, his snug breeches ending midcalf, his feet bare like her own. Her eyes caught his, and she stared, transfixed, at his violet orbs, aware that once again they were glowing, something that happened, she noticed, when he became aroused. *And what do you know, it happens every time he gets close to me,* she thought gleefully.

Blushing—and feeling heat coursing through her body—she dropped her gaze. So of course he chuckled. Alien jerk, he knew how he affected her.

Hearing him moving around, she watched as he spread out a blanket, a checkered red-and-white thing reminiscent of home—Alphie, she supposed. Then he unpacked a type of cooler filled with food—little bite-sized pastries, fruit both familiar and not, a bottle of something that sweated, along with crystal glasses. He'd come prepared.

Diana moved onto the blanket and sat lotus-style before helping herself to tidbits. Then, curious, she asked him more questions about the planet as they ate, the atmosphere—not to mention the company—relaxing her completely. She wanted to blame the fresh air and sunshine for the way her body came alive, but she knew better. *Oh, why lie? I love being with Kor. For an alien, he sure knows how to make me feel good.*

Diana, stomach happy, lay on her back, her head pillowed by one arm. Kor moved to lie on his side beside her, head propped on one hand, watching her. Diana could see his eyes glowing again, and her body tingled, aching for him to touch it. *Wanton*, she chided herself. But who was here to care? *And to be honest, it's not like I miss my old, boring life. In fact, I've been happier and more alive these last couple of days than I've ever been. So why fight it?*

Diana made the first move and lifted up her free hand to lightly run a finger down the side of his face. Kor closed his eyes, and she could have sworn she felt him tremble. She rolled onto her side to face him and this time gently touched his lips with her finger. He parted them for her, and the edge of his tongue wet her fingertip before his lips closed around her digit and sucked it.

A jolt of longing shot through her body and she let out a surprised cry. His eyes opened, blazing now with arousal. He reach up a hand and touch her face like she'd touched his. He mimicked her action, and when his finger parted her lips, she nipped it and then sucked it.

"Oh, Diana," she heard him whisper, his hand sliding to the back of her head to twine itself in her hair and draw her face toward his. Diana's eyes fluttered shut, and she held her breath at the feel of his lips, featherlight, sliding across hers. Diana trembled at this delicate touch, her whole body awake and taut with erotic tension. He rolled her onto her back and lay partially on her, his heavy weight so welcome. The hand in her hair had traveled down her body, touching her neck briefly before tracing a path between her heaving breasts. When his hand cupped one round globe, Diana arched and moaned, a moan that quickly turned into a cry of pleasure as his lips, which had been softly teasing hers, moved to wetly embrace the tip of her breast.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The annoying sound that would not stop had Kor pull his head away from her body and the delicious things he was doing to her nipple through the fabric of her top.

Diana pulled at him to come back, and with a groan he came back down to crush her lips with his own. But Alphie's intrusive voice dowsed them like a cold shower.

"Kor, I hate to interrupt, but this is important."

Kor, with a heavy sigh, rolled onto his back. "Alphie, I am going to unplug you."

Diana giggled as she traced patterns on Kor's chest, her body still aroused, hoping Alphie would go away so they could continue their sensuous exploration. And once they got naked, what the heck, maybe get bonded.

"Kor," came Alphie's unrelenting tone.

"Fine," grumbled Kor, standing up and giving Diana a hand. "Let me take care of this, and then, perhaps, we can resume where we left off," he said to her with a hard kiss.

Bemused, Diana wandered down the hill to the water's edge, while Kor dealt with whatever it was Alphie had deemed so important. The violet-hued liquid sparkled in the light of the three red suns. A rustle on the other side had her looking up quickly only to see the cutest floppy-eared pink bunny ever! Of course, the bunnies back home only had two ears,

not four, and their tails weren't as big as their heads, but still the little critter was adorable as it regarded her with big eyes.

Looking back at Kor, Diana saw him talking up to the sky—Alphie no doubt trying to give him pointers—and she shrugged. She wouldn't go far. Besides, having Kor come find her could be fun. In the movies she'd watched back home, a lifetime ago, a man chasing a woman usually tended to end in torrid outdoor fun.

Diana hopped across the stones that glittered like diamonds in the water—*could they be giant diamonds?*—and landed on the other side.

The little bunny creature stared at her, whiskers twitching. *Oh my God, it is so cute!* Diana crouched and put out her hand, but this movement startled the fluff ball, and it bounced off. Diana giggled and followed it, not too worried because Kor was, after all, just behind her, and he had told her that nothing dangerous inhabited the planet. *Well, unless you count him. He looks like he could be plenty dangerous—yum!*

The pink bunny hopped behind the thick trunk of a tree, a gnarly, twisted mauve specimen that looked like something Dr. Seuss dreamed up. Diana rounded its trunk and stopped in astonishment. She'd found her bunny but wished she hadn't as it twisted in the grip of a large, hulking brute who, even from three steps away, stank to holy heaven.

"What have we here?" He leered at her.

"Nothing," Diana stammered, her heart suddenly racing in fright. "I'll just be on my way now. My friend is waiting." Diana whirled to run back to Kor but came face-to-face with a broad chest wearing a studded bandolier. Swallowing because she already knew it wasn't Kor, she looked up to see an ugly, ogreish face that grinned at her, the black spaces of missing teeth and the two intact sharp incisors giving him a sinister look. He reached out calloused hands and grabbed her upper arms tightly.

"Let me go," she said, her voice wavering in fear.

"I don't think so, me pretty," he said, his fetid breath washing over her. He tightened his grip on her while someone behind her pinched her rear.

That's when Diana screamed really, really loud.

Chapter Six

"This better be good," grumbled Kor.

"Stolen vessel spotted on the other side of the moon. Could be some contraband inside. Shall we disable it?" said an eager Alphie.

"Not now, Alphie," said Kor, distracted, watching Diana saunter down to the water. He turned away from her, trying to control his urge to chase her down and make her his. *I am a warrior. I have control over my body.* Kor repeated this mantra to himself, but his body didn't seem to be listening.

"Come on, Kor. She won't even know," the computer whined.

Frustrated with himself for not being able to resist her allure and with Alphie for continually interrupting, Kor almost snapped. "Alphie, if it were any other time, I'd say go after it, but I am so close to getting her to bond, I can't risk it."

"You are no fun," said Alphie in a distinct pouting tone.

Kor, about to respond, instead jolted into action when he heard Diana let out a piercing shriek.

Looking around, he realized she'd wandered off out of sight, not something to be worried about on this gentle planet and one of the reasons he'd chosen it. But Alphie's inopportune call made him think of the stolen vessel hiding behind the planet's moon. Under normal circumstances, Kor would have hunted the stolen vessel down because of possible pirates. Could Diana have run into some of the vessel's crew? Or had some cute and cuddly critter jumped out to scare her?

He heard her shriek again, followed by gruff, snorting guffaws of laughter.

Pirates! He'd found the stolen vessel's crew—or rather, Diana had.

Kor cranked up the speed and ran down to the water's edge. He leapt over the babbling brook to land with sure feet on the other side. Up ahead, he could see the hulking figures of the space pirates—not to mention smell them on the breeze—and he felt his heart stutter. And here he came to challenge them weaponless. Thinking with his groin instead of his head, he'd left his daggers and blaster back on the ship, a fact he now cursed.

"Unhand my mate," he bellowed, seeing Diana struggling, her face fearful as they bounced her among them like a child's ball.

"She bears no band of mating, so she's free for the taking," said a one-eyed brute with a smirk, and then, instead of waiting for Kor to wipe the smug smile off his face, the pirate thumped the communicator on his chest, and they were gone.

Kor skidded to a stop and cursed. "Alphie!" he bellowed.

He'd no sooner said the ship computer's name than he found himself on board.

"Follow that ship discreetly. And I want the plans for their vessel. I am getting Diana back." Kor bubbled with a dark rage at the effrontery of these beasts who thought to take what was his. And for that they would pay. "And while you're at it, explain to me how in the silvery moons you managed to miss their life signatures when you scanned the planet."

"This planet gives off inconclusive readings because of its sentient nature. I will have to revise my programming in the future to take that aspect into account. I apologize, Commander. It won't happen again."

"It had better not. Now status!" barked Kor, more mad at himself than Alphie.

"Ship plans located, Commander," said the computer, all business now. "Enemy vessel still located behind the moon. Now what?"

"Now," said Kor in a menacing tone, "I rescue Diana and punish her kidnappers." *Very painfully*, he thought.

* * * *

Diana's mind spun. Things had happened so rapidly. Only seconds ago, she'd watched Kor running for her, his face grim and his eyes flashing. A moment later, she found herself in a dank room that smelled bloody awful. Her captor let go of her, and Diana rubbed her arms where he'd gripped her, trying to erase the slimy feel of his touch. Diana looked about frantically for a place to run—any kind of refuge—but found herself surrounded by loud, hulking creatures. The crew of dubious origin—although judging by some of their porcine features, she could guess—leered and grunted at Diana. The unpleasant aroma of unwashed alien and something even more rancid tickled her nose as they swarmed around her. The foulness in the air made her stomach churn.

Diana tried to take shallow breaths, not much better, as she could almost taste the filth. *I wonder if they'll let me go if I puke on their feet?* But judging by the grime on their boots, that had been tried before, and she didn't think they cared.

Grubby fingers pinched her chin and turned her face from side to side, inspecting her like a potential buyer. Diana clenched her teeth and reminded herself she was outnumbered and that it would be best not to antagonize them 'til she knew what they wanted. But even knowing that, she had an insane urge to kick her captor in the shin or other sensitive parts. *I wonder if he'd squeal like a pig?*

The lug pinching her chin stepped back and gave her a partially toothed grin. "I can't believe the stupid Xamian didn't bond with this fine piece. A virgin with plump flesh like hers will fetch a pretty price in the market."

Diana couldn't help the laughter that bubbled out.

"What's so funny, girl?" asked her captor, narrowing his eyes at her.

"I hate to disappoint you, but I'm not a virgin." Too late Diana realized she should have kept her mouth shut, as several pairs of eyes now swiveled to look at her with interest. "I—um, can I take that back?" Diana wanted to kick herself. *Dummy!*

"Not a virgin, well then there's no reason not to test the goods before we sell them then."

"What? No testing the goods. Not a good idea," Diana stammered, panicked.

But the brute in charge just pinched her boob with rough fingers, making Diana wince. "Well, my crew, it seems we're going to be entertained tonight." A flurry of grunts and snuffles accompanied this announcement. "But first let's get out of this space system in case the moon warrior decides he wants her back."

Diana found herself rudely thrust into a cell with the door slammed shut and locked. She ran at the door and pounded on it with her fists, screaming, "Let me go! Right now. You can't do this to me." Dead silence answered her. Pacing the confines of the room—it didn't take long as it measured only about four feet by four feet—she looked for a way to escape or, barring that, something she could use as a weapon. The scratched and stained walls were seamless and the room devoid of furniture of any type. She couldn't even find a crack big enough to squeeze a mouse through. Diana sank to the floor and huddled her knees to her chest, the seriousness of her plight finally sinking in.

I can't believe I went from almost making love to the man of my dreams to being the intended victim of a gang rape by smelly ogres. She wished she could rewind time and not been so prickly with Kor. Had she bonded with him in the first place, they would have never gone to that planet, and she wouldn't have been kidnapped.

But at least she wasn't alone. Oh no, she had misery for company.

* * * *

Kor, using his people's advanced technology, teleported onto the pirate ship with them none the wiser. They'd messed with the wrong Xamian. Alphie had managed to locate a schematic for the stolen vessel, and Kor had memorized it. He'd arrived in an obscure part of the engine room that he doubted they manned. On silent feet, he edged out around the ship's energy core, disappointed to find the room clear.

Kor had been angry since Diana's abduction, and he really wanted to hurt something to help ease some of his temper. Alphie thankfully hadn't tried to talk him out of this insane rescue attempt. For one, he knew what Kor's answer would have been—no. Besides, Alphie was well aware of Kor's training in the guard. After all, it was his high rank and commendations that had made him eligible for a mate in the first place. Only the best were rewarded.

Kor peered out of the doorway of the engine room into the corridor and found it still empty. He padded on silent feet down it, anticipation rising when he heard the murmur of voices around the bend.

Drawing his blades—only idiots used laser weapons on board a sealed vessel in space—he dropped into a roll and went around the corner, his unexpected arrival allowing him to gut the two crew men before they even had a chance to realize death had arrived.

Kor wiped his blades on the tunics of the downed creatures—although judging by the filth staining the cloth, the blood might have been cleaner. Impatient to find Diana, Kor carved a path of violence through the ship, pausing only briefly once to question a crew member on the whereabouts of his mate—an interrogation that involved a lot of squealing. Discovering the captain planned to enjoy Diana first before handing her over to the crew, Kor made his way quickly to the captain's quarters.

Kor intended to be on hand before anything happened to his chosen. The only taste the captain would be getting tonight would be that of his own mortality.

Kor crouched in the captain's quarters, his eyes glowing in the darkness and his teeth bared in a vicious grin. In a grim silence, he waited to execute the beast who'd dared lay hands on his mate.

* * * *

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I have got to be the dumbest earthling to ever leave her planet. Absolute brilliance telling them you're not a virgin. Hey, why not send out invitations for rape?

Diana huddled dejectedly in a corner of the cell with tears prickling her eyes as she thought longingly of Kor and his strong arms.

It's my fault I'm here instead of with Kor. If I'd only been a little less stubborn and done the mating thing with him, we wouldn't have even been on that planet. Hell, it's not like I don't want him. He's nice, gentle, thoughtful, not to mention the hottest thing since wing night at Kelsey's. But I just had to fight it, and now instead of making love to a hunky blue alien, I'm gonna be . . .

Diana hiccupped in tears and fright. She really deserved a Darwin Award for this.

Diana heard the lock in the cell door turn and looked up hopefully. A foolish part of her had entertained a faint hope that Kor would come to rescue her like a damsel in distress from a romance novel. But seeing the big ogre the others called captain enter, she slumped dejectedly. Kor would be insane to try to rescue her. After all, what could one blue man do

against a horde of nasty brutes? He'd probably just go to the Oracle and ask for another mate—one not so reluctant and argumentative.

"Get up," grunted her captor.

Diana sat in complete apathy, hoping he'd just leave. That turned out to be a slim hope. Harsh fingers dug into her forearm and dragged her up.

"Let me go," she cried, terrified into action. Diana pulled at the meaty hand grabbing her, but the grip of iron didn't budge, and she found herself being dragged from her cell. Diana struggled, kicking at her captor and twisting in his grip, but her kidnapper just chuckled, the rattling sound of phlegm making her feel ill. *I'll die if he touches me.* She shuddered.

"I like a wild one in bed," he wheezed with a leer, his fetid breath steaming in her face, making her gag.

Diana's heart froze at his words while deep despair flooded her. *Oh God, someone please save me. Please.*

Too soon they reached a door that the captain opened, flinging her roughly inside. Diana, eyes awash in tears, stumbled into a hard body inside, and she sobbed as arms of steel wrapped around her. Diana opened her mouth to scream, but stopped when she felt her nose twitch at the clean scent of the chest she'd landed against, a fresh scent she recognized.

"Kor!" she exclaimed, looking up with relief. *He came for me!*

Kor gave her a brief, hard smile, his arms tightening around her briefly before he set her behind him.

"You shouldn't have taken what was mine," said Kor in a deadly low voice to the captain, his words sending a thrill to the core of Diana's being.

"Prepare to die," snarled her repulsive captor.

"Not today. Today I avenge the honor of my betrothed," said Kor, who suddenly held a silver dagger in each hand, their blades encased in a shimmering light. The captain, chuckling evilly, pulled out a long dagger of his own and with a bellow charged at Kor. Diana backed up fearfully, looking for a place to hide in the small room, for Kor would surely move aside to avoid that deadly-looking rush.

But Kor stood his ground and provided her with a shield using his own body. The brute hit Kor with a grunt, but Kor, like a wall, remained unmoved. A few lightning flashes as Kor moved his deadly blades, and the fight, as quickly as it had begun, was over.

The captain fell with a gurgle to the floor, and Kor wiped his slimy blades on his prone body before sheathing them on his belt. Then he turned to Diana and opened his arms.

Diana flew into them, sobbing with relief. Clutching at him, she pulled his head down to kiss him frantically. "Thank you for saving me," she murmured against his lips. His arms crushed her against him as he devoured her lips back.

Diana, her relief over her safety and his assuaged, leaned back. He let go of her reluctantly.

Then she yelled at him. "Are out of your mind? You could have been killed!"

Kor looked stunned for a moment, then grinned. "You mean you'd care?"

"No." Then at his pointed look, she muttered, "Maybe a little."

"You're mine whether you've said the mating words or not. No one touches what is mine."

Diana felt goose bumps at his words. His words were possessive, but God, so hot! She threw herself in his arms again, her lips hot and wet against his.

She felt her feet leave the floor as he swept her up into his arms.

He lifted his head long enough for her to see they were back on his ship and for him to say, "Finish it, Alphie, and see that we're not disturbed."

Then his lips came back to crush hers, and Diana clung to him, relief and desire making her determined not to let him go 'til she was truly his, body and soul.

* * * *

Kor had never felt such relief as when he'd found her safe. And revenge had never tasted sweeter. His little earthling, even without the ritual, had come to mean so much to him already. He might not understand the scary dangerous feelings she aroused in him, but he did know they now seemed to rule him.

Her sweet capitulation, instead of reducing this feeling, had actually increased it. *Mine*, he wanted to shout to the world. *All mine*. And he intended to claim her—no more arguments or interruptions.

He laid her on the bed, his body painfully aroused at the sight of her swollen lips and heavy-lidded eyes. He stripped himself quickly, feeling his cock jerk and dance in anticipation. Diana licked her lips watching him, and Kor shuddered, imagining those lips and that pink tongue licking other things. He removed Diana's garments quickly, something she didn't protest. Nay, she lifted her hips and helped him, and when she lay before him nude, his heated gaze visually devoured all that creamy flesh that begged for his touch.

When he would have covered her body with his, though, she raised a hand to stop him.

"I want you, Diana," he whispered, "and I know you want me too." He slid his hand up her calf to her thigh, feeling his breath almost stop at the way her body arched and writhed at his simple touch.

"Oh," she gasped, her face flushed. "I want you too. But first . . ." She lost her train of thought as he teased an ebony curl at the *V* of her thighs. "Oh, Kor, damn it, I can't think. Do the bond thing quickly, would you, before you drive me mad."

Kor was tempted to take her first and do the bond after. But he just knew what his mother and the Oracle would say about that. And they'd find out somehow. They had ways of ferreting out a male's shameful secrets.

At least they were already both naked, and the ritual itself was simple.

"Kneel," he told her, dropping to his knees on the spongy floor. Diana, in all her naked splendor, knelt before him, and Kor almost asked her to postpone this 'til later. His body ached for her in a way he'd never thought possible.

"Put your hands against mine," he said, holding up his two hands, palms facing her. She placed her pale hands, so much smaller and more delicate than his, against them, the vibration of their bodies' energy, their souls, sizzling at the touch.

"My life, my soul, I pledge to thee."

Diana, without prompting, repeated the words huskily. "My life, my soul, I pledge to thee."

"Forever joined for eternity."

Looking into the whirlpools of her eyes that tumbled with emotions, Kor heard her repeat the words, and when she said "eternity," like hot and cold colliding, he heard a thunderclap as their souls merged. He heard Diana gasp as their spiritual signatures, each a distinctive energy, swirled together and forever more into one. The euphoric sensation became so intense it made them both cry out. Then the flare of their joining died down, and all that remained was desire.

Somehow they found themselves on the bed again, skin to skin.

His erection pulsed and hung heavy between his legs. He could smell her arousal and, when he touched the apex of her thighs, feel her wetness on his fingers. But he wanted her more than ready. He wanted her wild.

With just the tip of his cock, he rubbed it against the nubbin that hid just below her curls. Diana arched, and Kor grinned in male pride. But her arching also drew attention to another splendid part of her body that he had fantasized about, her luscious breasts.

Kor, bracing his body on his forearms so as to keep up the sliding motion of his swollen head against her clit, leaned down and captured one pink tip in his mouth, his teeth lightly grazing the already erect nipple. Diana panted and thrashed, her hands reaching to grab him by the hair and push his mouth down more firmly onto her areola. Kor obliged and opened his mouth wide to suck in more of that perfect globe. He swirled his tongue around the taut nub, and applying suction to the mouthful he had, he pulled his head back 'til his lips snapped off and left her breast quivering. He then switched his attention to the other breast, lavaging it with the same attention, a sweet torture that had his beautiful mate moaning.

The tip of Kor's erection slid slickly back and forth still across her taut clit. Too close to the brink himself now, he stopped the torture and pushed his engorged head between her nether lips, an action she approved of judging by how fast her legs locked around him, driving him deep inside, 'til the tip of his shaft nudged her womb.

Kor let out a moan at the exquisite feeling. Her slick muscles tightened around his shaft, squeezing him tight, and Kor almost lost it. He pulled back, then pushed himself as deep as he could to sheathe himself, and Diana arched high off the bed. Kor retreated again and then slid himself hard and deep, the tip of his erection curving to find her sweet spot. Diana let out a short scream when he found it and stroked it. And once found, he'd never lose it again. With long, measured strokes, Kor pushed in and then pulled out, each thrust hitting her hidden spot, making her keen in pleasure, the sound building in intensity until, with a loud scream, she came to the edge of the abyss of pleasure and fell into it. Kor quickly joined her, shouting her name when, at the feel of her muscles orgasming around him, he found himself losing control and finding his ultimate pleasure deep inside of her.

And for the first time since he'd crossed the threshold into adulthood, he saw the universe explode.

Chapter Seven

Diana felt her body tremble as it came back down from the intense orgasm she'd just experienced.

Apparently size did matter? Or did he just have more skills than the human lovers she'd had in the past? It had seemed almost like his cock had a G-spot sensor, one that ensured he hit it each time he pumped into her.

Whatever the case, Diana felt like purring, and judging by the look on Kor's face, he wanted to thump his chest and strut. He had a right. That had been amazing. Diana laid her head on his chest and listened to the steady sound of his heart beating. His arms snuggled her tight. And to think she'd come so close to missing all this.

"I didn't think you'd come back," she whispered, cradled in his arms. Now that the bliss had mellowed and reality returned, she had to ask.

"I will always protect you," he vowed with such sincerity that Diana felt her heart tighten. Perhaps the term "love" might not exist in his vocabulary, but it seemed possible the emotion existed under a guise of other actions.

"But you could have been killed." The thought of him dying terrified her still.

He shifted position until he could cup her face tenderly between his big hands, his calloused thumbs gently rubbing her swollen lower lip, his eyes pools of light as they stared into hers. "You are my mate. I will not allow you to come to harm."

Diana thought about retorting, *I've only been your mate for a few minutes*, but instead she let the sincerity and pure maleness of his words wash over her, making her body shiver with arousal and renewed need. She saw that same need mirrored in his eyes, and even more titillating, she felt it against her thigh.

God, is he ever hung. I wonder what he tastes like. Feeling reckless and suddenly possessed of an insatiable curiosity, she slid down his body, her lips and teeth grazing the taut skin of his abdomen 'til she reached his hairless groin, the skin here smooth and soft, not to mention so temptingly lickable.

Diana felt her body flush with desire when she saw him already erect and getting bigger the more she stared at it. She reached out a hand to grasp his erection, eager to play, but as soon as she touched him, she found herself distracted by her wrist.

"What is that?" she asked, staring curiously at the smoky gray band around her wrist, a band she couldn't feel, and when she tried to touch it with her other hand, her fingers went right through it to her flesh below. She let go of his shaft and played with her new piece of smoky jewelry.

"It's our mating band."

"Our what?" she said, looking up from the bracelet that kept changing shape.

"Mating band. With females being so scarce, a way was needed to ensure that males did not just claim any female they found. In the early days, once our madness had settled, there were many arguments and misunderstandings caused by females being claimed twice, sometimes even three times. Once again our ancestors came to the rescue with a solution. When a pair bonds now, a small piece of our ancestors forms itself into a bracelet on the female. This band cannot be removed, except by death, and can identify a female's mate should a challenge arise."

Kind of like a wedding ring, Diana thought, *just not as sparkly*. "And what do the men get marked with?" she asked, looking over his body for a mark to show he'd bonded to her.

"Marked? No, the males do not get a band."

Diana sat up in the bed and frowned at him. "Well that doesn't seem fair."

“No one’s trying to steal us,” he teased.

But Diana found herself annoyed with this indication, once again, of a male-dominated society.

Kor, as if sensing her mood, smiled and raised his hands in mock surrender. “If it bothers you that much, then I will let you shackle me. You’ll have to settle for metal instead of a spirit band, but . . .”

Diana tuned out his voice as she watched his wrist in fascination. Kor stopped talking and looked down at his wrist as well, and Diana giggled at the stunned look on his face.

“Well,” she said, holding her spirit-banded wrist up beside his now-matching one. “Looks like your ancestors just heard me and agreed. Now we match.”

Kor, however, looking at the gray band he now sported, didn’t seem as happy about it as she did, though.

“What’s wrong?” teased Diana. “Now everyone will know you belong to me.”

“I suppose,” he said slowly. “But I’m the only male I know of with this mark.”

“I’ll give you another mark,” said Diana impishly. Suddenly she felt frisky again. She pushed him onto his back and straddled his abdomen. She leaned forward, and her heavy breasts brushed his chest while her hair fell in a curtain around his face. Diana could see his eyes beginning to glow, and her lips curved into a sensual smile. Hovering close to his lips, she stuck out the tip of her tongue and licked his lower lip before tugging it down with her teeth. His hands came up and pushed her hair back to cup her face. But Diana laughed and shook her head and his hands free. She grabbed his hands and pushed them up over his head. She bent over his face and teasing him with the sight of her breasts hanging so temptingly close, close enough his warm breath made her nipples tighten.

When she let go of his hands, he went to grab her boobs, but Diana grabbed his hands and pushed them back up above his head. “Keep them up here,” she mock growled.

“Or what?” he drawled, his eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

“Or I won’t do this,” she said, sliding down his body, his erection a hot poker that pressed against her as she slid down its length. When she straddled his thighs, she smiled wickedly at him as she grabbed his jutting member.

“Is this good enough?” he said, locking his hands together and tucking them under his head.

“Perfect. Don’t move,” she warned.

Finally she could look at him like she’d been aching to do since she’d met him. She perused the long, lean length of his blue body with its well-defined muscles, and she licked her lips. His body lay before her like a feast, and all she wanted to do was eat it.

Her frank appraisal made his cock grow even harder in her grip. Stroking his silky length up and down, she marveled at the size and color. Dark blue like the rest of him, when engorged, the tip blushed a deep purple color. Diana leaned forward and flicked her tongue against his swollen head, gratified to hear him groan. *It’s time to make him lose control.*

She bathed his shaft with her tongue at first, licking it up and down before swirling her tongue around the head. Then she took him in her mouth, his girth a tighter fit than she’d ever attempted, but so worth it when he closed his eyes and let out a gasp.

She worked his cock up and down with her mouth, her cheeks hollowed as she sucked him. With one of her hands, she gripped the base of his shaft. She used her other hand to play with his heavy balls. He really seemed to enjoy her touch on those, so she cradled them in her hand and squeezed them, a move that made his hips arch.

Diana worked his shaft wetly with her mouth and hands, his obvious pleasure making her own pussy wet with desire. Unable to contain herself, Diana sat up and positioned

herself over his shaft. Rubbing her cleft with his engorged tip, she threw her head back in pleasure before sitting down hard on it, impaling herself.

Oh God, that feels good.

His long, thick cock filled her so tightly, the throbbing length so deep inside of her, she convulsed a little in pleasure.

Distracted by the sensations his shaft inside her made her feel, she didn't protest when she felt his hands on her hips, helping her to rise and fall on his member, each movement down its length sending a shock of pure bliss through her that made her mewl in pleasure. She could feel her body tightening and coiling around him, lost in a vortex of pleasure that rapidly gained in intensity the faster they pumped their bodies together 'til, with a scream, she felt her muscles convulse around him, spasming with the intensity of her orgasm. He echoed her shout, driving himself one last time deep inside, his shaft shooting molten liquid inside her.

Diana collapsed on top of him, her body glistening with sweat, her breath erratic. He hugged her tightly, his breathing just as irregular.

And as Diana felt her body slow down, a heavy languor overtaking all her limbs, making her slip into sleep, she thought she heard him whisper, "Mine, forever."

Chapter Eight

Kor awoke slowly, the unfamiliar feel of a warm, naked body pressed against him an instant—and pleasant, indeed—reminder of the previous day's events.

She's mine. This possessive thought made his lips curve into a smile, and he hugged her close. As if it had a mind of its own, one of his hands found the heavy globe of her breast and squeezed it. Even in her sleep, she squirmed and sighed at his touch. Kor felt himself getting hard.

"Ahem," came the ever-present Alphie, using his uncanny ability to interrupt at inopportune moments.

Kor sighed and rolled onto his back, letting go of Diana's breast with regret.

"Your mother is calling again. Shall I put her on the view screen in here?" said Alphie with altogether too much mirth.

"No!" Kor shot out of bed and scrambled for his clothes. While he hopped about in an undignified manner to yank them on, he heard Diana's sleepy voice from behind him.

"I have to say I never expected the day after getting married to be greeted by a blue moon."

Confused, Kor turned to ask her what she meant, finally sliding his pants up over his blue buttocks, but he had no need to ask as it dawned on him what she meant when both she and Alphie burst out laughing.

Pretending affront, Kor stalked out of the cabin to the command center to take the call from his mother—again. As his matriarch, he owed her respect, but these daily multiple calls were getting tiresome. Not to mention he'd had different plans about what he'd be doing when he woke up beside his mate for the first time.

"Mother, what can I help you with today?" he asked, sitting in his chair and drumming his fingers impatiently.

"Judging by your disheveled look, I'd say you finally did the deed. About time."

Kor shook his head at her blunt statement and laughed. "Yes, it's done. Does this mean the calls are going to stop? I just left my mate and a warm bed to attend to you."

"Oh, you poor thing," said his mother without the least hint of remorse. "I'll see you in a cycle when you arrive home. In the meantime, get started on making me a grandchild. I want to be able to brag about one to the ladies at our next moon gathering."

Kor shook his head and signed off. *Children, well, there's a way to make a warrior avoid the pleasures of the flesh.* Sure, he'd thought about it, in a very abstract kind of way like, yes, eventually he'd have some. However, his mother's words suddenly made the prospect seem imminent. *By the silvery moons, Diana could already be pregnant. We certainly gave it a good attempt last night. I don't know if I'm ready to be a father. I'd kind of hoped to enjoy my mate for a while.* But enjoying her meant possibly impregnating her, as birth control was unheard of since the plague. Kor suddenly had a vision of Diana, her belly rounded with child, his child, and from somewhere deep inside him, a wave of protectiveness rose at the thought. *My mate, my child. My family.* Feeling more positive about the idea, he rose and left the command center to find Diana.

No time like the present to get started on the future.

In the cabin, Diana lounged on the bed, her body pleasantly sore and even still a bit aroused at the thought of the previous evening's pleasures.

Kor is a phenomenal lover! The way he uses his tongue, his body. Diana felt like sliding a hand under the sheet to stroke and ready herself for his return, but her tummy growled impatiently.

Resigned to take care of other bodily needs first, she draped the sheet around herself and stood up.

"Alphie, you there?" she called.

"I am always here."

"I'm hungry," she said, almost plaintively, rubbing her tummy.

"Well we can't have that," said Kor, striding in looking deliciously rumped.

Diana licked her lips looking at him. Suddenly she felt a whole different kind of hunger. Kor wagged a finger at her.

"First, real food," he said, his eyes glowing. "Then we play."

Diana liked the sound of that. Looking around, she spotted her dirty veil outfit from the day before and wrinkled her nose. Kor, seeing where she was looking, picked up the garment and, pressing the wall, opened a chute where he dropped it.

"So am I going to breakfast naked?" she asked, boldly dropping the sheet. She felt her nipples pucker as his look turned smoldering hot. With a groan, he looked away and stripped off his shirt, then tossed it in her general direction.

"Quick, put this on before I forget about eating and we both die of starvation."

Diana smiled as she slipped the loose shirt smelling of him over her head. *It's always nice to know you're wanted.* The only problem now was he stood there bare-chested, and Diana so wanted to rub and lick that delicious blue skin.

"By all my wiring, would the two of you stop looking at each other like you're a five-course moon feast? Go. Eat. Now."

Grinning like a kid caught being naughty, Kor grabbed Diana's hand and brought her to the lounge, where a meal had already been laid out for them.

While they ate, Kor supplied a steady stream of conversation, which Diana didn't hear a word of. Between chewing her toast that almost tasted like home and sipping her orange juice, which tasted freshly squeezed, she wondered what Kor really thought about the human mate he was now bonded with. He certainly enjoyed her body, and she his. But did they have anything else in common?

"I thought after our meal that perhaps you'd like to get clean."

The word "clean" caught Diana's attention, and with a look down at herself, she suddenly realized just how filthy she must be. Her daily washes with the moist cloth Alphie had provided did not replace the need for a real shower or bath. *I am such a dirty girl. Hell, I didn't even think about bathing I was so worried about getting his clothes off and having my way with him again.*

"I'd like that," she said. "Do you keep water on board for showers and stuff?"

"Water?" Kor looked shocked at her suggestion. "Water is much too precious for us to waste on such a thing like bathing, especially on board a ship. I know your society still uses water like it's a renewable resource, but that will soon change. Our society adopted strict water conservation measures quite some time ago. We've come up with new methods of washing and cleaning, and not just our bodies, but clothing and dishes too."

"What, no more baths?" said Diana mournfully, thinking of her decadent love of hot water and bubbles.

"I think we have some alternatives that you'll quite enjoy. I'll show them to you when we reach my planet. Now, are you ready for your first space cleansing?"

Dubious, but willing to try, Diana took his hand and followed him back to the bland room he'd taken her to before when they teleported down to the bunny planet.

"Strip," he told her, dropping his loose pants and standing there naked as a blue jay. Diana almost giggled when she thought of this. He did have a big blue bird, after all.

Biting her lip so as to not giggle, she stripped off her shirt and stood there naked, feeling a little self-conscious. After all, Alphie, the computer with no boundaries, was probably watching, but hey, having an audience did make it more exciting.

"Okay, now what?" she asked, waiting.

Kor placed his hands out toward her, palms out, and Diana lifted her hands to place them against his. As with every other time she touched him, Diana felt a tingle run through her. Apparently he did too, judging by the lifting appendage below.

Then, whatever the cleansing process was, it began. Diana felt a staticky energy that tickled and sizzled across her skin, starting with the soles of her feet and moving up.

"Oh," she exclaimed when the energy cleaner reached her buttocks.

"Spread your legs," whispered Kor, whose eyes had begun to glow.

Diana spread them and felt the electric tingle on her nether lips, an erotic sensation that made her quiver, to her embarrassment.

"This can't be clean," she gasped. "It feels too dirty."

"If you mean pleasurable, then yes," said Kor, leaning forward to nip at her ear.

The energy wave continued its way up Diana's body. Her nipples puckered at its ghostly touch, and her hair floated around her head in a halo.

And then the beam came back down her body again, and Diana's awakened nerve endings shivered and her body arched forward to touch Kor's. The electrical jolt as their skin touched made her moan. She felt his hands grasp her buttocks and squeeze them. The hardness of his cock poked at her belly, and Diana reached a hand down to grab him. He jerked in her grasp, a living, pulsing, thick pole that she wanted to feel inside of her.

Kor bit her neck and sucked the skin, an erogenous zone that had her knees buckling, but he held her in a controlled descent to the floor, its cold surface chill against her fevered skin. He pushed her legs up 'til they rested on his shoulders, exposing her to his sight, and Diana felt herself gush wetly at his smoking gaze. He licked a finger and rubbed it against her clit, and Diana cried out. With her legs still pushed up, he sank down 'til his breath feathered against her inner thighs and brushed softly across her wet lips.

Diana pleaded with him, arching her hips. "Please, Kor."

And he obliged, his hot, wet tongue flicking at her swollen nubbin while he slid two fingers inside of her. Diana moaned incoherently at this point. The feel of his tongue laving her and his mouth sucking her tender flesh while his fingers pumped in and out of her was too much for her sensitized body.

She could feel her muscles tightening, and her pleasure built itself up quickly, a symphony of notes that was about to end in a big climax, 'til he suddenly pulled away.

Diana cried out. "No, please."

But he replaced his fingers and mouth with his rock-hard cock, his thick length sliding easily into her dampness, and with her legs pushed up, he drove himself deep into her. Every stroke seemed to unerringly jab that sweet spot on the underside of her womb, creating a sensation so pleasurable she moaned each time he hit it. It didn't take long for her to reach orgasm, the intensity of it rippling through her body while her muscles clenched him tightly in waves of bliss that had her gushing wetly.

She felt him come inside of her, a hot spurt of liquid and a spasm that shook his whole body as he joined her in heaven.

He collapsed on top of her breathing hard. Diana giggled under his slumped body.

"I'm afraid to ask what you find so amusing."

"Well," said Diana, running her fingers down his dewy back, "I think we need another cleansing. We got dirty again during the first one."

Kor grinned. "Yes, that's an unfortunate side effect when you cleanse yourself nude with your mate."

"What? You mean we can do this clothed?"

"If you keep the clothes on, then the erotic feeling is much reduced, and you will emerge just as clean, as the cleanser works at a molecular level. Actually, doing it clothed will clean your clothing as well."

"Wait, you mean we didn't have to get naked to get clean?"

"No, but I think this was much more pleasurable for us both, don't you?"

What could she say? Her alien had a point. But, that kind of erotic subterfuge needed to be punished. And once they made it back to the cabin—clean this time—using her lips and teeth along with some knot skills she'd learned in Girl Scouts, she made sure he apologized, or at least she assumed his mumbled response was an apology. It was hard to tell since he had his mouth full at the time.

Sated again, he groaned when she brushed her fingers down his chest. "Mercy," he said with a laugh. "I need time to recuperate."

"Pity," she murmured. Her body felt pleasantly sore, and she snuggled into his body, enjoying this newfound intimacy. "Okay then, since you're not up for another round, then maybe you can answer a question instead."

"What?" he asked, lazily twisting her ebony curls with his fingers.

"What happened to the aliens who kidnapped me? They won't come back to hurt us, will they?"

"Oh no, they've been taken care of permanently," he replied grimly.

"But how?" she asked, leaning up on an elbow to look at him, frowning. "We've been together pretty much the entire time since you rescued me."

"But I haven't," said a smug Alphie from a hidden speaker. "Those pirates were no match for the firepower we've got on board. They are now just galactic dust."

Diana knew she should have been shocked at the violent reaction, but instead she felt satisfaction knowing those pigs wouldn't be kidnapping and raping anyone else. What did shock her was how she'd forgotten about the nosy computer. God only knew how much he'd seen or listened to in the last little bit.

"Any more questions?" asked Kor.

Diana knew she should just shut up and bask in the afterglow, but her mouth had a way of running away before her brain could catch up. "Actually, I want to know more about this Oracle. Like what did she tell you about me? Did she just hand you a slip of paper with my name on it or what?"

* * * *

Kor chuckled. His mate had such an interesting way of putting things. But he knew her curiosity needed sating.

"First I had to be found worthy."

"How did you do that?" she asked, snuggling into the crook of his arm, her thigh draped over his while her hand lightly stroked his chest.

Distracted, Kor had to form his thoughts before he could answer her. “With so many males and few females, even considering the other races we’ve been drawing on, not all can be blessed with a mate. Thus a reward system of sorts was established.”

“You mean I’m a prize?” she huffed indignantly.

“The very best,” said Kor, silencing her with a kiss.

Mollified, she signaled for him to go on.

“Males can distinguish themselves through hard work, courageous deeds, those kinds of things.”

“Let me guess, you did something courageous.”

“You could say that.” Actually, Kor had yet to fail on any of the missions he’d been assigned.

“Once you become noticed, then you are tested physically to ensure you have no genetic abnormalities.”

“Oh, I’d say you passed that with flying colors, nothing wrong with this body,” she murmured against him, her nails scraping down his chest lightly, a highly erotic sensation that made him shiver.

The three moons blessed me indeed.

“Then we filled out a questionnaire.”

“Yes, the famous shopping list,” Diana grumbled, but she stayed snuggled to him, and Kor let out an inaudible sigh of relief.

“Then, after moons of waiting, I was called.”

Kor had pretty much forgotten about the whole mate application, it had been so long since he’d filled it out. And after all, not all who applied had mates chosen for them. Thus his surprise when he’d been told he had an audience with the Oracle had been great. He’d bathed and dressed ceremoniously for the occasion. After all, the whole course of his future could change on the basis of that one meeting.

Arriving at the temple, he’d been blessed by the acolytes before being led to a dim and smoky room. Small, soft hands had pushed him down to his knees ’til he knelt on a woven mat, with his head bowed, waiting for the words of the Oracle, his inner turmoil masked by his iron control. A part of him waited eagerly for the honor of being chosen to have a mate, while his warrior side yearned to run and remain free to enjoy his bachelor ways.

The sweet, smoky scent of incense swirled in the air around him, making his head feel light, his senses deadened. They said the incense helped the Oracle keep from being overwhelmed by the visions. It just gave him a headache.

Finally, he heard a whisper of movement, the slide of silken robes across flagstones, and he found himself holding his breath.

“Welcome, son of the third moon. The spirits of your ancestors have spoken.”

And? Kor didn’t speak aloud, he liked his head on his shoulders, but he could have done without all the dramatic buildup and suspense.

“For a long time they wavered in choosing your destiny, judging your worthiness. As a warrior you’ve proven your bravery and loyalty. As a son you’ve been exemplary to your parents.”

Kor felt like rolling his eyes, but resisted.

“The decision has been made. You have been tasked to collect your life mate from the planet Earth.”

Yes, he’d been chosen! No more warrior life for him. Instead he’d get to enter the coveted ranks of the mated. A much safer—albeit more boring—life with many perks,

including sleeping in a soft bed every night. The biggest benefit, though, was getting his very own mate instead of relying on a Galaxian whore in a brothel.

Kor bent his head lower. "Thank you, Oracle. The wish of my ancestors is my command."

"The full coordinates for the location of your betrothed will be given to you. Prepare for departure immediately. And good luck."

With those odd parting words, the Oracle left, and he'd departed the smoky temple to prepare himself for his last voyage as a single male.

Trust Diana to latch on to the last part of the Oracle's words. He should have omitted them in the retelling.

"Good luck? What did she mean by good luck?" said Diana sitting up, her splendid full bosom heaving.

Kor smiled lazily at his new mate, his vigor renewed and ready for action. "Can you do that move again?"

"What move?" she asked, brow creased.

"Like this." Kor palmed her breasts and made them jiggle, his eyes latched on to their motion in fascination.

Diana gaped at him for a second, then laughed. Her throaty mirth was contagious, and he joined her, turning what could have been a serious moment into one of fun—then exploration as he used his fingers to find all her ticklish spots and attack them.

"No more," she panted.

She changed her mind quickly and begged for more when his hands caressed her intimately. Once again, he joined his body to hers and exploded when he felt her sheath convulse around him.

Mine.

Chapter Nine

Diana paced the command room, naked—lucky him. They'd just tested the captain's seat springs. They were satisfactory, but the seat itself could have used another inch or two in width.

"What do you mean we arrive in a few hours?" she said, flinging her arms up, making her boobs jiggle in a hypnotic manner that never grew old.

"Well the ship has been heading there since we left your planet, so it was only natural we'd arrive eventually," he said, baiting her.

She whirled and glared at him, her ebony locks flying, and looking so desirably annoyed he wanted to take her up against the view screen with the backdrop of the stars at her back. But judging by her look, perhaps now was not the best time to attempt that. He braced himself for her outburst.

"That's not funny, Kor. I am not ready yet. There's still so much I don't know."

"So you'll learn," he said, shrugging. "My mother will be happy to help you." At the word "mother," Kor saw her cringe, and in a moment of understanding—a rarity for males anywhere in the universe where females were concerned—he suddenly realized what was really bothering her. "You're afraid to meet my mother."

"Am not," said Diana too quickly.

Kor quirked a brow at her.

"Maybe a little. What if she doesn't like me?" she wailed, pacing nervously. "I mean, I'm sure you told her how difficult I was to mate with and I argue all the time and . . ."

"My mother will like you fine," said Kor, finally getting up and wrapping his arms around her tight. "She'll especially like the fact you're willing to stand up to me."

Diana grumbled something under her breath that he didn't quite catch—something about mama's boys that he didn't understand the meaning of. Instead of arguing further, Kor decided to give in to his earlier thought and the one surefire method of making her forget her ire. He kissed her and let his hands slide down her body to cup her buttocks. Unable to resist the temptation, he gave them a squeeze.

When she responded back and ground herself against him, he lifted her up and pressed her against the glass screen that displayed the space they traveled through. As he pounded into her willing flesh with the galaxy as her vertical bed, Kor once again found himself exploding like a supernova. He'd lost count of the times they'd done this, and marveled that each time could be as powerful and fulfilling as the last.

And for the moment at least, he'd made sure his argumentative mate, who lay breathless in his arms once again, forgot what reality would soon bring.

* * * *

The moment had arrived—or rather they had arrived at Kor's planet—and Diana's stomach felt like a herd of butterflies had taken up residence. She clutched Kor's hand tightly, her face taut with tension while she prayed she wouldn't throw up on anybody's shoes.

Kor pulled her death grip loose and hugged her in his arms. "Why are you so nervous?" he asked.

"Hmm, let me see," she said sarcastically. "I'm going to a new planet full of woman-hungry aliens where the only thing familiar will be my face in a mirror, not to mention meeting your mother for the first time. Gee, nothing to worry about at all."

"I know how I can get you to relax. Let's go back to bed," he whispered in her ear before licking it.

Diana gasped. "Kor, that's not funny. How can you think about sex at a time like this?" *Well that's a dumb question. After all, he is a man, and to be honest, hiding under the covers sounds mighty good right about now.*

The jerk, of course, chuckled. "What?" he said in mock innocence. "It's the first thing I intend to do as soon as we get into our new home. Actually," he said, dipping his face down to nibble her neck, "I was thinking we'd *explore* our new home, room by room, 'til we make it to the bedroom. A welcome present to our new home, so to speak."

"Oh, Kor," Diana whispered, feeling her tension melt at his naughty suggestion. She molded herself against his body as his lips found hers.

"Ahem."

Diana felt her cheeks burn as Kor lifted his head to face their audience. Embarrassed, she buried her face in his chest. As usual, she forgot everything around her when he kissed her. Damn his magic blue lips.

"Mother, I should have known you wouldn't wait for us," said Kor wryly.

"You were taking too long," said a tart voice with humor. "Now aren't you going to introduce me to your mate?"

"Mother, I'd like you to meet my mate, Diana. Diana, my mother, Ele'Anor Vel Menos."

Diana, biting her lip nervously, turned from the comfort of Kor's chest to greet her new mother-in-law, a woman who, if not for her very light blue color, would have appeared human in every way, right down to her brown hair and eyes. She also didn't appear old enough to be Kor's mother, making Diana wonder just how young they made their women marry.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, daughter. I see you're both getting along better now than the last time we spoke," said his mother pointedly at Kor, who smiled sheepishly.

"I meant to call, but," he said, shrugging, "we kind of became busy."

Diana felt her smile freeze on her face. *Oh yes, we've been busy, all right, christening his ship in every position imaginable.*

The knowing look in Kor's mother's eyes didn't help Diana's embarrassment.

"Oh goodness, child, don't look so mortified," said Ele'Anor with a laugh. "I was once in your position too."

Diana didn't understand and said so. "What do you mean? You were obviously born here."

Ele'Anor chuckled. "Wrong. My birth name is Eleanor Jones. I was also taken from Earth as a mate, just like you, many moon cycles ago."

Diana blinked. "But you're blue."

"As you will be after you've spent some time here. The suns on this planet project their own version of UV, one that, instead of causing a tan, turns our skin a bluish tone."

Diana stored this disturbing piece of info away for later when she and her new husband were alone. Kor had some explaining to do, and she might even let him try after she vented on him. *Why did he not tell me his own mother was human? And blue? I don't want to be blue. I like my peaches-and-cream complexion. I wonder if I can get a heavy-duty sunblock to prevent it?*

While Diana pondered what UV rating she'd need, Kor, with an arm around Diana's waist, guided her off the spacecraft she'd finally gotten used to into a bustling terminal. Reminiscent of an airport back home, humanoids of varying shades of blue with a bit of mauve, yellow, and green thrown in wandered around with piles of luggage while video displays flashed words and numbers.

"Your accommodations only came through yesterday," said his mother over her shoulder. "I managed to get some basics sent over, but you'll have to do some shopping to pick up the rest."

"Is there a bed?" asked Kor mischievously, not even grunting when Diana elbowed him in the ribs.

"Of course there is. I had that delivered first thing."

Diana wanted to die of embarrassment as Kor and his mother chuckled at her prudishness. Diana had grown up in a household that did not talk about sex and certainly never joked about it. This was so unnatural. *So alien.*

"I've also booked Diana's appointment with the family physician for a full workup."

"I don't need a doctor. I feel fine," interjected Diana.

"Even so, it's best to get checked out in case the ship diagnostics missed something."

Diana swallowed her arguments. *I get the feeling I might not win.*

Reaching a busy curbside with little saucers zipping down and up to pick up and drop off passengers, Kor's mother stopped her talking and walking to give them both a quick hug.

"I know you're anxious to see your new home and christen it," she said with a wink that had Diana staring at her toes again.

"How about you both come over tomorrow evening for dinner? Your father will be there too."

With a wave, Ele'Anor left them, hopping into a waiting saucer that zoomed off as soon as it sealed its door shut.

"My mother can be somewhat overwhelming," said Kor at the still-stunned look on Diana's face.

"You think?" said Diana sarcastically.

Kor laughed and kissed the tip of her nose, which made Diana warm and lose some of her ire. With a hand in the middle of her back, he guided her to a waiting saucer and ushered her in.

"Are these things safe?" asked Diana nervously, looking at the plush interior for a seat belt of some sort.

"Very," said Kor with a chuckle. "They are piloted by computers and have been accident-free since before I was born."

Somewhat reassured, Diana relaxed and watched the zipping scenery outside, only to turn away as the blurring speed they were moving at made her feel motion sick.

"What's your dad like?" she asked, trying to take her mind off the stomach she'd left behind a few miles back.

"Not as talkative as my mother, so you needn't worry about him embarrassing you."

"So he kidnapped your mom too?" Apparently abduction ran in the family.

"Yes, but she didn't argue as much about it as you did."

Diana stuck her tongue out at him, then giggled at the look on his face. "Why didn't you tell me your mom was human?"

"Would it have made a difference?"

Diana thought about it for a second. Would it have made things easier? "No, it wouldn't. But if she's human, how come you're so oblivious about our culture?"

Kor shrugged. "My mother embraced her new life here and left her old one behind. She didn't want me to feel less than Xamian, so they didn't even tell me I wasn't a full-blood 'til I'd reached an age where I could understand I was no different from anyone else. And as Mother also explained, there was no point in her teaching me about a culture that I would never be a part of."

Diana frowned, for she had a different perspective, it would seem, from Kor's mother. When she and Kor had children—a thought that didn't make her want to faint in shock anymore—she fully intended to tell them about their human heritage and mother's birthplace.

"I take it you don't agree," he said, noting her silence.

"I think being multicultural is a blessing and should be something to be proud of and not hidden. Just think, had you known more about my people, your mother's people, then perhaps we wouldn't have had such a rocky start." Kor just tilted a brow at her in response, and Diana laughed. "Okay, I might have still given you a hard time, but at least you would have better understood where I was coming from."

"You fought against a fate chosen for you. I have no problem understanding that. What I don't understand was how you were able to resist me." Kor said this so seriously that, for a moment, Diana just gaped at him. Then she noticed the twinkle in his eye.

Kor burst out laughing, and Diana joined him, pleasantly surprised by this more relaxed and humorous side of Kor that she hadn't seen much of on board the ship.

When the taxi-style saucer stopped, Diana didn't have a chance to look out the window, as suddenly Kor's hands covered her eyes.

"No looking yet," he ordered, helping her out of the vehicle. "Welcome to your new home," he whispered, standing behind her.

He dropped his hands, and Diana opened her eyes and stood for a moment in shock, staring at the residence in front of her.

This is our house, she thought looking at it a little tearily. *And I love it already.*

A cross between an igloo and a Mexican adobe, the house looked like a dome with a circular door and porthole windows. The exterior looked like sand blocks interlocked together. The walkway leading up to a rounded door looked to be made up of thousands of glittering crushed stones. The only thing that took away from the cuteness of her new home was the fact that her front lawn seemed to be dry dirt—purple dirt, mind, but still dirt. Judging by the neighbors around her, though, Diana realized she could plant and landscape depending on her taste. *I can have my own garden.*

But Kor seemed little interested in the front yard. Sweeping her up into his arms, he strode to the front door of the house.

"Kor, what are you doing?" giggled Diana, torn between embarrassment if neighbors were watching and arousal.

"Alphie says it is an Earth custom to carry a new mate over the threshold of her home."

"It is," she said breathlessly, "but I never read the part that said the husband would be groping me while doing it."

"I adapted it," he growled in her ear. Her sweet scent caught him, and instead of moving away, he nipped her lobe with his teeth. They barely got the door shut before he began caressing her in earnest. Pushing her up against the wall, his strength holding her steady, he fumbled with his pants. In hurried times like these, Diana welcomed the loose garments the women of this world favored, as he simply swept the fabric aside and slid himself into her willing body.

Diana wrapped her thighs around his lean waist, locking him deep inside. His hands cupped her plump buttocks, and he squeezed her smooth flesh as he pounded her. His breathing came jaggedly against her lips as he alternated licking and sucking her lower lip. Diana held on to him for dear life, thrilled at the strength he exhibited and the sensations his rough lovemaking evoked.

She'd never had a lover so impassioned for her, so impatient to take her. The feeling made her blossom. *He makes me feel so beautiful and wanted.*

When his grip tightened, Diana knew he'd reached the brink, and she closed her eyes, waiting—not long. With a bellow, he buried himself deep between her thighs, the tip of his member touching her womb and that other spot that made her scream in response as her body convulsed around his. Wet, trembling waves spread through her, making her momentarily black out in pleasure overload.

As she slowly regained consciousness—a hard task with her body languorously refusing—she smiled. *Elusive G-spot, my ass. Funny how it took an alien to find it unerringly every single time.*

Kor kissed her on the forehead and, still holding her by the cheeks, carried her into the next room and groaned.

“What is it?” asked Diana, unwrapping her legs from his flanks.

“No furniture,” he said, disappointment clear in his voice.

Diana remembered his plan to seduce her in every room of the house. Her eyes widened—surely he hadn't meant all in one day.

Before they could explore any further, a knock sounded, and they looked at each other.

“Who could it be?” she asked, hurriedly straightening her clothes and hoping she didn't smell of sex.

Kor shrugged as he did up his pants. He took her by the hand, and they went to answer the door as a couple. Diana had to hold back the giggles. Two reasons—one, she still had sticky thighs from their quickie in the front entrance, and two, these were their first guests they'd be meeting in their new home as a married couple. *I'm a Mrs. now.* Diana couldn't help the little giggle that popped out, and Kor looked at her oddly before pressing a flat square that slid the front door open. Diana made a mental note of its location and purpose. It wouldn't do to get stuck in her own house.

A mismatched but smiling couple stood outside. Diana looked up to see a towering blue giant with a platinum crew cut and then down again to see a petite, curvy thing with a bouncy blonde ponytail.

As soon as the blonde saw them, she smiled and thrust something at them, which Diana accepted with a grin, because judging by Kor's face, he had no idea what was going on.

“Welcome to the neighborhood,” said the perky blonde. “I'm Lisa, and this big guy here is Ror'Andorian, my hubby. I just call him Rory, though, for short. We live in the house right across the street. I'm so glad to see new folk moving in. This neighborhood is still pretty new, so not all the houses have folks in them yet, and gosh, it's so nice to see another Earth girl here.”

Diana giggled at the stunned look on Kor's face and the forbearing one on Rory's as Lisa babbled.

Finally managing to slip in a word edgewise, Diana said, “Nice to meet you, Lisa and Rory. I'm Diana, and this is Kor. He's got a longer name, too, but I'm still not sure how to pronounce it, so I won't try. Thanks for the casserole.”

“No problem,” said Lisa, beaming. “Nothing like a taste of home, well, kind of, with adapted ingredients, to say welcome. I know cooking is an option around here, but, well, I like to keep busy.”

Cooking an option—Diana wondered what that meant. Having few cooking skills herself, she looked forward to finding out.

The giant rumbled finally. “My mate is overeager and filled with joy to see another of her people move in. Perhaps when you have settled in, you would join us for a repast.”

“That would be our pleasure,” replied Kor.

With a nod, the giant Rory picked up his petite wife, who it seemed might have kept talking all day, and carried her squealing with laughter back across the street.

Kor shut the door and looked at Diana with a shudder. “Well thank the silvery moons that my Oracle didn’t deem her my perfect mate. I think I would have gone deaf.”

Diana laughed. “Oh, she’s just energetic and a bit lonely for something familiar, I think. I have a feeling she and I will get along famously.” And Diana found herself greatly relieved that she wouldn’t be alone trying to figure out this new world.

“Now where were we?” murmured Kor. “Ah, yes.” He scooped up Diana and strode through the house. “We were looking for some furniture.”

Diana barely got to see their new home, as Kor had only one thought in mind—finding the bed. And when he found it, he made sure they put it to good use, twice.

Chapter Ten

Hours later, sexually sated again, Diana heard her stomach growl to her intense mortification, a sound that Kor, who snoozed lightly beside her, thankfully didn't hear. Diana crept out of the room and decided to finally check out her new home. She wandered down the hallway outside her bedroom and found two more bedrooms, somewhat smaller than hers, but each with a window overlooking a virgin backyard with a lone yellow tree. *I see a garden and a patio in our future. And maybe even a swing set for the kids eventually. While I'm at it, I might as well put on an apron, heels, and pearls and call myself Martha Stewart. Geesh, could I get any more housewife-y?* Diana couldn't seem to stop the flow of thoughts and ideas that kept popping into her head. Apparently her mind had accepted her new status and was already looking ahead. As for her heart, thinking of her blue hubby, Diana knew her heart had already been lost.

Trying to ignore her almost epiphany, she kept exploring and found the bathroom, thank goodness, a bright white room that she put to use immediately, emerging feeling more refreshed. She hadn't seen a tub, though, a fact that made her a little sad.

Padding down the hall again toward the front of her home, she noticed the casserole dish still sitting on a shelf by the front door, and she grabbed it, continuing her exploration.

A step down to her right, and she twirled around the large living room area. *This room is huge!* The floor had been patterned in a colorful mosaic of stars within stars, prettier than anything she'd ever seen, and the lack of curtains over the large window made this room bright, something Diana vowed not to change.

She crossed the airy room and went up a few steps into what had to be the eating area, with a small bistro-style table and two chairs. Then she found the kitchen. At least she assumed it had to be the kitchen judging by the cupboards she found filled with exotic bowls, plates, and glasses. A long counter stretched in a U shape around this room, smooth and unblemished, making her wonder where the sink and stove were.

Opening one tall cupboard, she found the fridge or, as she'd heard Kor call it, the cooling unit. Diana eyed the casserole dish in her hand and debated whether to put it away for now or heat it. *Let's see what it looks like first.* Diana pulled off the cover and made a face. This didn't look like any casserole she'd ever eaten. With something purple shredded on top, green layers, and a lumpy white sauce, Diana wondered if this was an extraterrestrial version of a lasagna.

Diana's stomach growled again, and she realized that a hungry tummy couldn't be a picky one. She hadn't found any other food, so picking up the dish, Diana looked around for an oven and ran into her first roadblock.

What the hell constituted as an oven in this pristine place? She put down the dish and began opening and closing cupboards looking for the elusive stove. Surely they cooked their food somehow.

"What are you looking for?" asked Kor, standing in the kitchen doorway looking rumpled and sexy wearing just loose trousers and no shirt.

"Cooking dinner, or trying to," she mumbled, opening another door to find tall vases.

"You know you don't have to," he said, gliding into the room to wrap his strong blue arms around her.

"Why? Are you cooking?" she asked, smiling up at him.

His brows shot up, and he laughed. "Me? No, why would I do that when we have a brand new Culinary 6000?"

"A what?"

"Let me show you instead," he said with a sexy grin. "Name a food you'd like to eat."

Diana thought for a minute, chewing her bottom lip. Then her eye was caught by the purple casserole. “Lasagna.”

Kor grabbed two metallic blue plates from the cupboard and said, “Meal request. Earth lasagna for two.” A slot slid open in the backsplash that bordered the counter, and Kor slid the two plates in. The slot shut, only to reopen almost immediately with a ping. Kor pulled out the plates, now steaming with—and here Diana blinked—what looked like lasagna.

“What is that, like, the world’s fastest food delivery ever?” she asked in disbelief.

“No, just the most current food synthesizer.”

Diana looked at her steamy plate and sniffed the steam coming off of it. “You mean this isn’t real?”

“Yes and no. Samples of dishes have been analyzed at a molecular level and entered into an enormous database of foods. Using this molecular knowledge, the synthesizer recreates the meals. It is not always as exact, or should I say the food isn’t quite like something made with true ingredients. However, especially with foreign foods whose ingredients can’t be found, it’s an adequate substitute.”

Diana’s tummy growled again, and she shrugged. Fake food or not, she was hungry. Then she thought of something—actually two things. “The food on the ship, was it synthesized too?”

Kor nodded. “That was a Culinary 5000, an older model.”

“Does it make garlic bread too?”

To her delight, it did, and while not as good as Gino’s back home, it tasted a heck of a lot better than anything she’d ever attempted to cook. *Well at least we won’t starve*, she thought happily. Diana also made a mental note to see if she could get a menu of things the Culinary 6000 could provide. A whole new gustative horizon beckoned her healthy appetite.

When dinner was over, Diana picked up the plates and carried them over to the counter to wash them, but again stopped, stymied. “Where’s the sink?” she asked, perplexed.

Kor, with a chuckle, took the dishes from her. He opened a drawer she’d thought was empty, dropped them in, and shut it. Thirty seconds later they heard a ping, and opening the drawer, Diana almost wept, for there were the spotless dishes. No more dishpan hands for her. Heck, she didn’t even have to rinse them or scrape food off.

I think I’m going to like this world. Already they have taken two chores I disliked and turned it into a dummy-proof and laborless miracle. I love it!

But now what to do? Diana’s body felt too full from eating to make love, and she wondered what married folk did here for entertainment.

“How about a walk?” suggested Kor.

Diana eagerly agreed. She dressed quickly in a clean veil outfit that Kor produced for her from a hidden closet in the bedroom. From another hidden closet in the front hall, Kor pulled out a silvery cloak for her and a black jacket for himself. Holding hands, they walked out of their home into the cooler evening air, and for a moment Diana held her breath and stopped, absolutely stunned by her first view of a night sky so different from her own.

For one thing, three pale moons shone in the sky above her, two small and one large, each an antique white that glowed. And the stars! My God, the times she’d managed to see the ones back home—an hour or so drive out of town—they’d seemed plenty, but out here they took over the night sky, blinking and twinkling and shooting, a constant ever-changing tableau.

“Is the sky always so busy?” she asked, craning her head to watch a particularly bright star zipping across the sky.

“Some say we live at the very edge of the universe, where worlds, stars, and even galaxies are constantly being born and dying.”

“What do you think?”

“I think the sky isn’t half as interesting as you are.”

Diana blushed in the dark, both surprised and pleased by his compliment. “I forgot to ask on the ship. Does your planet have the same time setup as us? You know days, hours, minutes.”

“Yes and no. We do have days divided into cycles. Our cycles correspond to the movement of the moons in the sky and are similar to your concept of hours, but longer. Like your planet, we also work and play when the sun’s shining and relax and sleep when darkness falls at night.”

“I feel like a child trying to learn to read time again,” Diana grumbled.

“Why not ask Alphie to teach you the things you need to know?”

“Isn’t Alphie still on the ship?”

“All of our planetary computer systems are all conjoined. The Alphie persona I deal with is one specially adapted to interact with me and is accessible to me wherever a computer can be found. And by that extension, accessible to you as well. So in space or on land, we can be subjected to his debatable form of humor.”

Diana found herself quite happy to know her computer friend would still be around. She’d quite enjoyed Alphie’s sarcasm and wit. “But how do I talk to him?”

“Just say his name in our home or on any vid comm to speak to him.”

“Vid comm?”

Kor unclipped a small box from his waist and showed it to her. Similar to an iPhone, with a screen but no buttons, Kor spoke to it. “Alphie, can we have a vid comm delivered for Diana by tomorrow?”

“Sure thing,” replied Alphie, his familiar voice coming out of seemingly nowhere.

“Thanks, Alphie,” said Diana, amazed at the technology Kor kept showing her.

“I don’t understand one thing, though,” she said after Kor put the vid comm away. “If you need that to talk to Alphie, then how come when we were on Earth and those other places, you could talk to Alphie without it?”

“Ah,” said Kor, grinning. “Noticed that, did you? When in space, especially when visiting planets other than our own that aren’t as technologically advanced, we use an implant in our ear to speak with the ship computer. This prevents our technology from falling into hands that might not be ready for it.”

“Why not just use the implant all the time?”

“Well for one thing, the implant can only speak to us and hear what’s going on, as well as pinpoint our location. The vid comms can do much more than that. I’ll show you when you get yours.”

“Sounds good. But you know what I’d rather see right now?”

“What?”

“You naked in the bathroom for some *cleaning*.” And with those daring words, Diana, with a laugh, turned around and ran back up the street to their house. She laughed even harder when her new husband, with his longer stride, scooped her up as he ran past, not stopping ’til he held her naked body panting in the bathroom.

It took two attempts to get clean, but damn, it was worth it.

* * * *

The next morning Diana, clearing off the dishes from the little table, nearly wet herself when a slot by the floor opened up and a whirring robot zipped out.

“What the hell is that?” she exclaimed, resisting an urge to hop up on a chair and tuck up her feet.

Kor barely glanced up from his vid comm, where he browsed the news. “It’s the house cleaner.”

Diana, realizing this little tin bucket on wheels was considered normal, watched it zip around on the floor and, yes, sucked up dirt. Jane Jetson eat your heart out—she had her own collection of robots that did it all.

Kor put aside his vid comm and looked up at her. “I was thinking perhaps we’d go shopping today. Alphie says Earth women enjoy that type of excursion.”

“I’ll get dressed,” said Diana, already hurrying out of the room. She couldn’t wait to see what wonders could be found on this planet.

In no time at all, they found themselves in front of a large edifice with wide glass doors.

“Is this like a mall?” she asked, looking up at the building that lacked signs.

“I’m not sure what you mean. Inside we will find a collection of vendors with goods that we may select from.”

With an arm around her waist, he guided her inside. Diana looked around in curiosity, for instead of a venue lined by boutique fronts, they instead found themselves facing a counter with a screen sitting on top.

A face appeared on the screen, startling Diana. “Welcome to the Emporium. Please state your name.”

“Kor’iander Vel Menos and mate.”

Diana frowned at him. “I have a name, you know.”

“Yes, but no money to spend. The purchases we make today will be deducted from my credit account, hence the use of my name only. I’ve already sent in a request for you to have your account set up with funds of your own to spend.”

Diana blinked in surprise. “You did?”

“Let’s just say I had a feeling.”

“You thought right. And once I get settled in, we’ll have to talk about what I can do to bring in some more money to help out.” Seeing him about to open his mouth and probably spout something hugely male and arrogant, she shook her head. “Nonnegotiable, buddy. Until the kids come along, I want to do my part. Humor me, okay?”

With a nod and a sigh, he agreed. A door opened to the side of the counter, and a slick-looking blue guy walked out.

Kind of looks like a used car salesman back home. Diana had to bite her lips so as to not giggle. They followed him into a windowless room with just one large plush bench in the middle. Kor seemed to think this was normal, but Diana’s brow creased as she looked around. *I thought we were shopping for furniture.* At the salesman’s urging, they seated themselves on the bench.

“What would you like to see first?” asked Kor.

Diana chewed on her lip. “Um, couches.”

The blank wall in front of them immediately showed them a large picture of a sofa. Diana shook her head. The couch looked stiff and uninviting.

Kor spoke up. “Deep-cushioned, medium-backed, with armrests and . . .” He looked at her. “What color?”

Diana thought of their bland living room. “Red,” she blurted.

The image on the wall changed to eight couches that looked a lot more comfortable in varying shades of crimson. One in particular caught her eye, and she pointed it out to Kor.

Kor tilted his head at the salesman, and Diana had to restrain a gasp as the couch she'd selected suddenly materialized right in front of them. Kor helped her up and went to look it over, an incredulous Diana by his side. They bounced on the cushions, and Kor, to Diana's blushing embarrassment, yanked her onto his lap to make sure it was comfortable for snuggling. Then, to make matters worse, he demanded she lie across it so he could see how she looked. Diana thought about arguing, but the light in his eyes had her captivated, and besides, it seemed their slick salesman had seen it before, as he paid them no mind.

Finally Kor said, "We'll take it." Then he whispered in her ear, "I can't wait to see you naked on it later." An instant erotic rush infused her, and she knew her cheeks were burning bright.

Diana picked out the rest of their furnishings, only hesitating a few times wondering how much it would all cost, but Kor just smiled and nodded at her to continue 'til they had furnishings and accessories for the whole house.

Shopping done, they went for food, but what a restaurant. The building floated above the clouds with windows all round in the dining area. Diana kept forgetting to eat so dazzled was she by the pillowy soft beauty of the sky around them.

At Kor's chiding laughter, she ate a few mouthfuls of food, then found herself distracted again when she noticed how many humans sat at tables throughout the dining room. Only a few of the women were blue. The rest spanned most of the nationalities from Earth, it seemed. And then there were a few who didn't look human or Xamian.

She leaned over and whispered to her husband, "The pink lady over there? Is she an abductee too?"

Kor winced. "I wish you wouldn't use that term. But yes, she is a chosen one as well from a planet in another star system."

"How come I haven't seen more wives like her? It seems most of us are from Earth."

"Their species doesn't seem to adapt as well to the mating ritual. Their females tend to be very dominant."

Diana giggled. "Don't like being told who to marry, do they? I didn't see that stopping you."

"You didn't have a four-foot dagger to prove your point."

Diana perked up with interest. Now these were some ladies who sounded interesting.

She pestered him with questions, which he patiently answered. After their meal, they visited some more shops, a few with delicacies that couldn't be reproduced from other planets. The hour growing late, and the dinner with his parents fast approaching, they finally went home. Fatigue made her yawn, until she walked into their living room and saw their big, new red couch. Remembering Kor's words from earlier, she flushed with heat.

Kor came up behind her and nibbled the soft skin of her neck. "I want to see you naked on the couch. Now."

Diana shivered. "Don't we have to get ready to go to your parents?"

"Not 'til I have you," he growled in her ear. He nipped her earlobe, and Diana shuddered. "I've been thinking about being with you all day." He punctuated his words with a rub, the hardness in his groin evident against her backside.

Diana's knees trembled as she walked over to the new couch. Turning to face him, she undid the clips that held her clothes together, and they fell in a silken heap on the floor. With glowing eyes, he regarded her, and her nipples puckered at his look. Sensual longing filled her veins. She draped herself on the couch, one leg bent with her foot on the floor,

exposing her to his view. His eyes immediately turned smoldering, which, in turn, made her wet. With quick strides he came to her, his impatient hands ripping his own clothing away 'til he covered her, skin to skin. He kissed her roughly, his sinuous tongue darting inside her mouth and seeking her own. His fingers found the juncture of her thighs and toyed with her, sliding into her moistness easily. She moaned and arched against him. As impatient as she, he sheathed himself between her thighs, his curved organ unerringly finding her sweet spot and stroking it. Diana wrapped her legs around him as he turned her so that he could kneel on the floor and grip her by the waist. He pumped her, his smooth, hard length welcomed by her wet cleft. She looked up and gasped. Kor watched her intently, his eyes aglow. With his wild black hair ruffled from her hands, and his vivid blue skin, he resembled a demon lover. *My demon lover.* His magic touch and cock didn't belong to reality, the pleasure he gave too intense and surreal. As she screamed her pleasure, it came to her that she loved her blue alien, so different from her and yet totally devoted to her happiness and pleasure. But did he feel the same way?

* * * *

Diana fussed with her hair and tugged at her karimi, the official name for the garment all the women wore.

"Are you ready?" called Kor.

"Almost," she said and bit her lip. *What am I so nervous about? I already met his mother. This is just dinner. And meeting his dad for the first time.* Diana sucked in a deep breath, still not understanding why she felt so nervous. Kor stuck his head around the doorframe. His eyes brightened with appreciation.

"You look beautiful. Maybe we should stay home," he said, coming into the bathroom and placing his hands on her waist to pull her in close.

Diana pushed him back. "Hands off. It took me an hour to get my hair to cooperate, and I am not letting you mess it up 'til we get home from your parents'."

Kor smiled at her mischievously. "Come on, Diana. They won't care. My mother might even applaud the fact that we're taking this grandchild-making business so seriously."

Diana laughed and slapped at his groping hands. "You are incorrigible. Don't worry. I'll remember this and make you pay later."

"Promise?"

Diana just smiled wickedly in response. Their afternoon tryst had been wonderful, but where Kor was concerned, she never seemed to get enough.

She finished her preparations, and a short time later, a saucer deposited them at a house similar to the one they owned but on a grander scale, made of glossy white blocks.

The front yard exploded with color as various plants fought for supremacy with blooms of every imaginable hue. Diana, delaying the inevitable, stopped to smell several of the flowers.

Soon, though, she found herself ushered into the brightly colored home of her in-laws. Ele'Anor greeted her warmly, and then Kor was introducing her to his father, a stocky dark blue man whose hair leaned more toward gray but whose smile was warm and welcoming.

To her surprise, Diana enjoyed herself. Ele'Anor pestered her with questions about Earth and then regaled Diana with tales of Kor as a child. It seemed he'd had a fetish for being naked as a child, and his mother had documented his many streaking escapades. Kor took the teasing good-naturedly, his pose relaxed and his smile warm as it lingered on her.

When the evening came to an end, Diana and Ele'Anor made plans to meet the following week. As they settled into the saucer to take them home, Kor pulled her onto his lap and hugged her.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"For being you. My parents approved of you."

"I quite liked them." Diana still felt surprise at this fact. *Isn't it tradition to hate one's in-laws?*

"Do you think you can be happy here?" he asked, his voice serious.

Surprised, Diana turned in his lap to see his face. His expression looked grave. She brought her hands up and cupped his cheeks. "I think I will be very happy here," she replied and kissed his lips.

And she meant it.

She should have known that, even halfway across the universe, Murphy's Law would exist and, of course, decide to ruin it.

Chapter Eleven

Kor woke her early to claim her body sexually, his actions slow, but his kisses and body so hot. She watched him as he dressed in his uniform, and Kor hated that he had to leave her to return to his duties. Her eyes teased him with sultry lowered lashes, and she'd let the sheet slip, exposing her bountiful bosom.

"Don't look at me like that," he growled.

"Like what?" she said, slowly sliding a finger down between her breasts, a seductive move that made his cock twitch.

"Like you want to undress me and eat me."

"But I do," she said, her eyes alight with mischief.

Kor cursed, then kissed her hard. "Keep those thoughts for later. I must check in with my regiment."

"Fine, I'll just play with myself while you're gone." Diana howled at the look of pained anguish that twisted his face, and an erection he hoped would subside before he arrived at headquarters.

Kor had been away for many cycles and would have a lot of catching up to do. But the thought of leaving Diana alone made him wish he'd asked for more time off. It frightened him to realize how much he'd come to care for his mate since he'd found her. She consumed his thoughts. His actions now all seemed geared to pleasing her. He especially enjoyed seeing her smile. When her face lit up, his whole being became imbued with . . . what? Kor had to wonder if perhaps he'd fallen for the elusive earthling emotion, love. What else could explain the insanity that had overtaken him? The worst part, Kor couldn't speak to anyone about it. What if what he felt was abnormal? Maybe he'd caught an alien sickness, one he never wanted to be cured of. He wondered if he could broach the topic with his mother, but his mother told his father everything, and Kor didn't want to face his father and find out that there was something wrong with him. Something that would make him unfit as a mate. What if he was sick in the head and they took her away?

He would allow no one to touch Diana. She was his. Whatever this feeling was that he couldn't control, he'd keep it to himself.

* * * *

Alone for the first time since their arrival, Diana prowled her new home looking for something to do, but she couldn't even find one speck of dust to clean. Their robot maid had already done all the work. Sighing, Diana dropped onto the cushioned couch that had arrived yesterday and now held a position of prominence in their living room—and a fond memory that still made her blush.

Now what do I do with myself? I wonder if they've got any Earth books I can read. But then Diana remembered something the robot hadn't done yet, the front yard.

She could get started on making their own statement in the blooms and design she chose.

Rummaging through her closet, she cursed, realizing the only thing she had to wear were the stupid veil dresses. *I can't garden in those.* Diana thought about knocking on Lisa's door across the street to see if she had anything appropriate but then had a better idea. She raided Kor's closet and found a dark-colored shirt and pants to wear. The shirt clung a little snugly to her overly endowed bosom, and the pants hugged her bottom like a second skin, but Diana deemed them adequate for gardening.

Twisting her hair up in a loose bun, Diana felt ready to tackle the dirt.

Diana had her hands deep in the dirt and her round ass up in the air when the shadow fell over her. Startled, she looked up quickly and, of course, lost her balance and fell over, strands of hair coming loose and flopping into her eyes.

A firm, calloused hand helped her up, and Diana, flinging her hair back, said, "Thank you," then had to stop herself from jerking her hand away from the stranger who still held it. Facing her with cold eyes and a leer was Kor's almost twin. But where Kor's skin shone a healthy blue and his smile made her heart warm, this unknown male in front of her evoked the opposite with his sickly green-colored skin and chillingly clear eyes with slitted yellow irises.

"Well, well, what have we here?" he said in a gravelly voice that gave her goose bumps, and not the good kind. "You must be the whelp's new mate."

Diana, screwing the niceties, yanked her hand out of the stranger's grasp, his touch making her feel ill at ease, and she had to restrain an urge to wipe her hand. "Can I help you?" she asked coolly, not liking at all this stranger's manner. It made her skin crawl the way his transparent eyes roved over her figure.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" he said, smiling, not a reassuring look on his face.

"No," she replied bluntly. *Whoever this guy is, he's bloody creepy.*

"Now is that any way to treat your new brother?"

Diana tried not to react to his words. Surely Kor would have mentioned a brother, but she couldn't dispute this stranger had familial ties to Kor, given their resemblance.

"Sorry, but Kor never mentioned a brother."

"Then let me introduce myself, Kil'iander Vel Menos. Elder brother of your mate. You mean he hasn't mentioned me?"

"We've been busy," said Diana, trying not to blush as she thought of what they'd been busy with.

"I'm sure you have," he said with a smirk that made her feel like washing in scalding water.

"Now be a nice sister and show me in, why don't you?"

Diana hesitated, not wanting to be rude, but at the same time unwilling to go into the house alone with him. *There's something not quite right about him. And it's odd Kor hasn't mentioned him.*

"Maybe you could come back later when Kor is home, and then you can catch up with your brother at the same time."

But Kor's brother didn't seem to like this idea. His sickly eyes began to glow, although Diana was pretty sure the effect didn't come from lust, and she began to wonder about running away when a cheerful voice broke the impasse.

"Diana, are you ready?" said cheerful Lisa, her neighbor from across the way.

Relieved at the interruption, Diana smiled and stepped around Kor's scowling brother, glad for the distraction. "Of course," said Diana, playing along with astute Lisa's act while keeping a wary eye on Kil, who did not look happy at being interrupted. "Just let me wash up."

"Going somewhere?" growled Kil.

Lisa turned her perky smile on him and, to her credit, didn't blanch at his scowl. "Hi there, I don't think we've met. I'm Lisa. My husband, who should be out in a second, is Ror'Andorian."

The mention of Lisa's husband's name seemed to register with Kil, who took a step back from the ladies.

“Don’t let me interrupt your *planned* shopping trip, humans.” Then in a lower tone that sent a shiver up Diana’s spine, Kil said, “I’ll be back at a later date to resume our conversation, *sister*.”

And with that he stalked off, leaving behind a slightly scared Diana.

“Wow, is he ever creepy. Sorry if I barged on over, but things looked pretty intense. Who is that jerk?”

“Kor’s brother, apparently. He just showed up here and kept wanting me to take him in the house. I’m sure glad you came over when you did. I don’t think he would have taken no for an answer.”

“No problem. Now what do you say we actually go shopping? I’ve seen the most gorgeous flowers for both our places.”

“Sure,” said Diana, needing the distraction. “Just let me change and wash off the dirt.” Diana only wished she could wash off the icky feeling Kil had left behind. That and the shadow of fear he’d cast on her new life.

* * * *

“I met your brother today,” Diana finally told Kor after they’d made passionate love when he came home, skipping dinner to taste her.

Kor froze in the process of pulling on his breeches. “What did he want?” he asked, his face carefully neutral.

“He wanted to come in and get to know me. I’m afraid I might have been a little rude. He kind of took me off guard. I told him to come back when you were home.”

Kor’s face turned glacial, and he grabbed her tightly. “Don’t ever let him in when I’m not home. Do you understand?”

“I don’t intend to let him in. Like I said, he was creepy, but I don’t understand. Isn’t he your brother?”

“Half brother, and very dangerous. I’m sure you noticed how he differed from others around here with his greenish-cast skin.”

Diana nodded her head. How could she not notice, especially his freaky eyes.

“His mother was pregnant with him when the sickness struck. She survived but died giving birth. The disease though affected the baby. It affected all babes in the womb during that time. Most died in childbirth, but a few, like my brother, survived even if his mother didn’t. But they’re not quite right. And it goes deeper than their skin tone or eyes. They’re violent, uncaring . . .”

“So he’s a psycho?” said Diana, shivering, hugging her knees to her chest tightly.

“I’m not sure what you mean by that, but if you’re trying to say dangerous, then that is accurate. He is not to be trusted, ever.”

“What am I supposed to do if he shows up, though?”

“Call me right away.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s going to work real good. Hey, Kil, hold on a second before you kill me while I call your brother.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that. Kil hasn’t really done anything yet to prove he’s lost it. I’ll have my father speak to him and have him stay away.”

Diana shivered, though. Someone was definitely walking across her grave, and she didn’t like it one bit. And she’d just bet his name was Kil.

* * * *

After Diana went to sleep, Kor called his father, who answered brusquely. "What is it?" "Kil visited Diana today."

Kor's father's face aged in a moment, his strength of will sapped by those simple words. "Did he hurt her?"

"Not this time," Kor replied tightly. "But he frightened her. You need to do something about this, or I will."

Kor's father looked suddenly haggard on the view screen, and he rubbed his aging blue face with a big hand. "I'll talk to him. If he shows back up again, let me know, and I'll talk to the institution."

Kor felt a moment's regret that it had come to this, but truth was they should have done something about his brother a long time ago. There was something not right about the plague children, and it went far beyond their different skin tones and looks. Their entire psyche seemed damaged. Kil had remained free of the madness longer than most of his ilk. However, Kor finally gaining a mate, it seemed, might be the catalyst that finally pushed him over that edge, the violent edge that all of them seemed to hit at one point. After a few horrible cases, they'd finally learned that, painful or not, these special cases needed to be institutionalized, for their own good and the safety of society.

Although perhaps there was still hope. Perhaps Kil would listen to their father and keep his distance. Kor hoped so for both their sakes. Kor had lost most feelings for his brother long ago. It was respect for his father that made him keep trying.

But Kor would not allow Diana to be harmed. He'd kill his brother first.

Chapter Twelve

Diana sat nervously in Lisa's living room whose turn it was to host the monthly mates' tea. Diana had giggled when Lisa told her about it.

"Tea? Seriously?"

Lisa had laughed too. "I know it sounds dumb, but apparently this is a long-standing Earth wife tradition. A way of bringing us together to help us cope with our new lives and to find friends so we aren't so lonely for home."

"Does it work?"

"I guess, although to be honest, most of the chosens didn't leave much behind. It's like their ancestors look for women who have no real close family or friends. Someone who would welcome a fresh start."

A chiming sound ended their deep discussion, and for the next while, a parade of women of varying styles and personalities came through, but the one thing they all had in common, make that two things they had in common, was they were all plump—nothing smaller than a size twelve, it seemed—and they all adored their husbands. All, that is, except for one woman who arrived late.

She kept to herself, and when Diana tried to introduce herself, the pinched-faced woman said she had no interest in making friends with someone who had caved to the male doctrine.

Someone had her panties in a twist, and Diana frankly found her too depressing to make an attempt to find out why.

Although she wished later that she had.

A subdued Lisa came knocking the next day.

"What's wrong?" asked Diana, ushering her ashen-faced friend in.

"You remember Claire?"

Diana thought back to the luncheon and remembered the sallow-faced woman who had made disparaging comments about everything, it seemed.

"Yeah, what about her?"

"She killed her mate, then killed herself!"

"What?" Diana sat down, shocked. "But how? Why?"

"She's been here almost a year and has made it quite plain she wasn't happy about it. Rumor is she found out she was pregnant and lost it. She took a dagger to her husband when he came home and then drove it into her stomach."

"I don't understand," said an ashen Diana. "The way Kor explained mating to me, the spirits find soul mates, people who should be compatible in every way."

"And they might have been," said Lisa, shaking her head sadly, "had Claire allowed herself to get past the fact that he was an alien and that he kidnapped and forced her into marriage."

Diana could understand Claire's turmoil, having fought against that very aspect herself in the beginning.

"Didn't anyone try to help her?"

Lisa shrugged. "I'm not sure. I didn't know her that well. For all her talk about hating aliens, she kept a lot to herself. I think she only showed up to the teas because her husband made her."

"Does that type of thing happen a lot?"

"What, you mean the killing thing?"

"That and the fact that some of the chosen mates aren't happy."

"The murder-suicide cases are few from what I understand. Unhappy mates aren't too common, too, but they do exist. I do know, in some cases, that it takes a bit longer for them to adapt and accept their situation before they find happiness. Sometimes the birth of the first child is the catalyst."

"There's got to be something better we can do. I mean, I know this whole scenario is kind of freaky, especially for us modern gals from Earth, but still I have to say I'm glad Kor found me."

"And I love my Rory. But I know what you mean. I wish we could do something extra to make it easier for the girls. But what?"

What indeed? Diana felt the gears in her mind turning. There had to be something they could do.

* * * *

When Kor came home for dinner, Diana threw herself on him and clung to him desperately. He hugged her tightly.

"What's wrong?" he asked with concern. "Did Kil come back?"

Diana shook her head against him, then, her voice breaking, told him, "Claire killed her mate and herself. She was pregnant, Kor. How could she do that? I know she was unhappy, but why?"

Kor said nothing, just scooped Diana up and carried her to their living room area, where he sat down with her cuddled on his lap. Diana shook in his arms and cried. She couldn't have even said why. She barely knew Claire. She obviously didn't feel the same way about her marriage as Claire had. But Diana cried anyway. Cried for the loss of the life she knew, cried for the loss of the child who wasn't wanted, cried because she loved her husband, but he would never say the words back because his culture didn't have a word to say love.

And Kor, understanding her need to release, it seemed, just held her. He said not a word as he stroked her hair and kissed her temple. He wrapped himself around her, giving her the shoulder she needed, and when she'd finally cried all her tears, Diana felt both relieved and embarrassed.

"Sorry," she mumbled against his neck. "I don't know what came over me."

"Death is always a shock," Kor said. "Even with strangers, the sudden ending of life, especially in such a horrific way, can be threatening, even frightening. It reminds us of our own mortality."

"And the what-ifs," said Diana unhappily.

"In this case, there are no what-ifs, Diana," he said, tilting up her tear-streaked face. "You met this woman once. If anyone should have done something, it was her mate. He must have noticed her unhappiness, but instead of addressing the issue, he chose to ignore it. As did the rest of his family."

"But there was no help for her," said Diana. "Not really. Claire wanted to go home. She hated her life and husband. How many other women out there feel the same way?"

"You cannot save the world," said Kor. "And it's not our problem. We are happy, and that's all that matters."

They made love, or—as Kor liked to say—mated. And when she lay beside him after, her body cooling from the intensity, Diana reran their conversation in her mind.

But I want it to be my problem because, even if I'm happy, don't I owe it to others, women like me who've had so much change in their lives? I'm not asking to save the world. Just help prevent tragedy. I need to do something. I can't wait for this to happen again.

Chapter Thirteen

Diana rubbed her tummy and smiled as she pictured what grew inside. Her visit to the doctor with Lisa had confirmed it. *I'm pregnant.* Diana almost giggled as she pictured the headline back home, boldly displayed in a newspaper tattle. *Woman Gives Birth to Blue Alien Baby.*

The physician who'd examined her had been unable to confirm the sex yet—that would have to wait a few more weeks—but the baby so far seemed healthy with a strong, rapid heartbeat, and Diana herself felt great. She couldn't wait to see Kor's face when she told him. She'd even set the romantic scene for her announcement. She'd picked flowers from her garden, not too many because her garden still was in the baby growth phase, but enough for some color. Then she perused her electronic cookbook looking for dishes that Kor's mother had mentioned were his favorites so she could order them with her built-in culinary chef. And finally Diana dressed in a soft pink veil gown, a color he said made her skin look rosy and edible, something he seemed to delight in.

She hadn't found candles, though. This planet had abolished them long ago as too much of a fire hazard, so Diana had to content herself with dimming the lights instead and playing some soft instrumental music she'd discovered when listening to some music with Lisa.

Standing back to survey her work, she clasped her hands together, pleased. *Now if he'd only hurry up and get home so I can tell him. Heck, maybe we'll skip dinner and go straight to dessert.*

When the doorbell rang, Diana wondered who it was and skipped to the door to answer, eager to get rid of them because Kor would be home soon. A quick peek at the security screen showed Kor's mother, her face tear-streaked, on the steps.

Diana felt an icy chill descend over her as she slid the door open. "What's wrong?" she asked woodenly.

"It's Kor. He's . . . he's . . . There's been an accident," stuttered Ele'Anor. "He and six others were caught in a cave-in trying to rescue some miners. Their communicators aren't responding, and they can't locate them with the thermal scanner." Kor's mother broke down crying, the tears flowing copiously while her shoulders shook.

"No," said Diana, backing up. "He's not dead. He can't be. I made him dinner," she said inanely.

Ele'Anor's devastated face denied Diana's certainty.

"No," Diana whispered. Then more loudly, she cried, "No. No. *No!*" Diana screamed the last part. She needed to get out of there to go find him. *I need to show them how wrong they are.*

Ele'Anor's face turned even more ashen as she stared at something over Diana's shoulder. Diana pivoted and stopped, frozen, the flickering images on the video screen drawing her attention. Morbidly riveted, she could not turn away as she watched the video showing Kor and his men entering the caves. She jerked when she saw the mountain quiver and a billow of smoke come rushing out of the cave entrance. Heart leaden, she stared woodenly at the images of the men they flashed on the screen, those who had entered and gotten trapped and who were now presumed dead. When they flashed Kor's face staring at her from the screen, she fainted.

Diana dreamed. In her dream, the doorbell rang, and when she answered, it was Kor, his arms full of flowers, his beautiful blue face smiling. Arms full of blooms, she dreamt she told him about the baby, their baby, and he swung her around joyfully. Laying her down on a fragrant bed of flowers, he made love to her, gently. And when they both climaxed, he looked her in the eyes, his laden with such sadness, and said good-bye.

Diana awoke screaming, her life now a living nightmare.

A parade of people—alien and human—streamed from her home, trying to comfort her. But Diana walked about in a daze. She refused to believe what they all seemed so certain of. *How dare they presume he's dead? He can't be dead. I'd know if he were. I'd feel it.*

Diana rubbed her lightly swelling abdomen and knew with a certainty that had no rhyme or reason that Kor lived. But she also felt sure that this was no accident. And she knew who had to be responsible.

When the crowds finally dispersed to leave the widow alone to grieve, he finally showed up as Diana had known he would. She, of course, did not answer the door—she wasn't that stupid—but something like an electronically locked door didn't stop him.

Using thieving methods, he came into her home and found her in the kitchen area brandishing a knife.

"You killed him," Diana spat, not yet revealing the truth that she knew he'd failed, even if Kor still remained missing. She just needed to be strong long enough for him to make his way back to her.

"Kill my own dear brother?" Kil mocked her, his blank eyes wide and hands raised. "How could you say that? After all, we're family." He shook his head at her, then fixed her with a predatory glare. "It's a tragedy, but never fear, *sister*. I have come to reassure you that you and the baby have nothing to fear."

Diana stumbled back from him, her grip on the knife slick with sweat. Her heart thumped faster than a rabbit's in the raptor's sight. "How-How do you know about the baby? Kor didn't even know yet."

"I know everything about you." He sneered. "Computers are a wonderful thing, especially when you can manipulate them to give you the information you seek. You have no secrets, Diana St. Peters, formerly of Earth. I even know how you scream when my brother ruts with you."

"You've been watching us?" she whispered. Diana felt ill with the knowledge that her tender moments with Kor had been witnessed by someone so foul. It made her feel dirty.

"I quite enjoyed the show, but I'll enjoy even more being the starring actor. You see, I shall take my dear brother's place as your husband, a comfort to you, I'm sure, in this confusing time. And no one, not my father nor the Oracle, can gainsay me, for you see, it's the law."

"You lie," said Diana, fear clutching her at the certainty in his tone.

"Why would I lie? I've planned this moment since I heard of my brother's choice. I have to say the fact you are already with child is unplanned for, but a baby will be very useful, I think, in ensuring your good behavior."

"Never," Diana snarled, suddenly angered at the implied violence toward her still-unborn child. "I'd rather wed a snake. Get out of here. I don't need or want you."

"That's not your decision. As head of the family now, it is my duty to ensure you're cared for. After a suitable mourning period, you will become my mate. You won't have a choice. It's the law."

"What are you talking about?"

"Females are much too rare still to allow them to remain unattached and roaming. So the law states that females, once they reach the age of bonding, with the exception of a mourning period of three moon cycles, must bond with a male deemed suitable by the head of her family."

"No." Diana shook her head. "I'll marry someone else if I have to."

“As head of your family, I decide who you marry. So get used to the idea. Oh, and don’t even think of running, or I’ll really make it hurt.”

Kil left her with ice running through her veins and a choking fear in her heart. How could she escape? There had to be someone who could help her. Someone who could bend the law. But who?

Chapter Fourteen

Diana didn't even register the splendor of the Oracle's palace, too intent on her mission, a purpose that the acolyte in front of her was impeding.

"I want to speak to the Oracle," said Diana, tapping a foot impatiently. "Now."

"But," said the flustered, veiled attendant, "you do not have an appointment. One cannot just show up and expect admittance. It's simply not done."

"I don't care. I need to talk to her. She's the reason I'm on this goddamn planet and more miserable than I've ever been in my life. She owes it to me to at least speak to me."

"Go home, and we will relay your request. If the Oracle chooses—"

A voice interrupted the infuriatingly calm acolyte. "She does choose," said the heavily veiled figure that appeared from seemingly nowhere.

The acolyte gasped and dropped to the floor, head bowed.

"You can take me to see her?" asked Diana.

"I am her, child. Come and walk with me. Let us speak of what disturbs you so."

The Oracle, a slight figure gowned head to toe in layers of veils, turned and walked to the bronze doors, which opened before her as if by some unseen signal. Diana scurried after her, surprised, in fact, that the Oracle had agreed to see her.

Catching up to the quick-walking Oracle, Diana held her tongue, unsure now that she'd found her what to say.

They met no one as they passed through the various ornate rooms until finally, through some glass-paned doors, they exited the palace into a splendid garden. Life and color abounded in the form of foliage, blooms, and the buzz of insects. The sounds were so mystifyingly similar to Earth that, for a moment, Diana's eyes flooded with tears as she remembered home.

Then she remembered she'd never see her home again because of this person, this so-called Oracle.

"Why?"

"Why what, my child?" asked the Oracle, her face serene as she sat on a cleverly carved bench that blended into the scenery.

"Why choose me? Why show me love only to take it away?"

"I didn't take your mate away, and I did not choose you either. The spirits did that."

"So whose fault is this?" exclaimed Diana. "I didn't ask to be kidnapped and fall in love with an alien. And now he's gone, and his brother, that sick thing, says by law he can claim me for my own protection. It's not fair. I don't want this anymore. I want to go home. I want to forget."

"You are right. It isn't fair, but let me ask you first. Is Kor truly gone?"

"What do you mean?" asked Diana, her voice almost a whisper as a flicker of hope ignited. "Is he alive?" Diana, over the last few days, had found her own certainty wavering.

"Look at your wrist, child."

Diana looked at her wrist, the smoky band around it a constant reminder of Kor.

"The mating band is still there, is it not?"

Diana, about to say yes, stopped as understanding washed through her. "The band would have disappeared if he died. He's not dead," she almost shouted.

"No, but the danger from Kil'iander is still quite real."

"I'll just tell him Kor is alive. He'll have to leave me alone."

"Will he?" said the Oracle questioningly. "Or will that knowledge merely make Kil'iander more rash?"

"I don't know. Surely he wouldn't . . ." *Oh, but he would. I've seen the way he looks at me. And the way he talked about Kor's accident, what if it wasn't an accident? What if Kil had something to do with it? I can't let him know. I've got to hold him off 'til Kor gets back and can deal with him. Kor's alive. Oh, thank God.*

The Oracle spoke softly. "I see understanding. Just be patient, my child, and all will turn out well."

"For me this time, but what about the others?"

"The others?"

Diana forged ahead. "I understand your people need us to help continue your race. It's a necessity, but the way we are treated, it has to change."

"Change how?"

"Well, for one thing, you can't just abduct women and expect them all to be hunky-dory about it. Secrecy is one thing, but forcing a woman, that's wrong. There must be a way that we can give them a choice without revealing your secrets."

"I see."

"And if a woman's unhappy with her mate, she needs to be given help. Not impregnated like the only thing important is her ability to reproduce." Diana mentioned Claire's story to the Oracle. Maybe if someone had stepped in to help her, the tragedy could have been averted.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, this stupid law of widows being the property of the brother or next male heir, it's got to stop. You don't want single women running around, fine, but you can't just let them be taken against their will."

"I agree."

Diana, about to argue, heard the words and felt her face slacken in surprise. "You agree?"

"Absolutely. In the beginning of the rebuilding, these laws were needed to avoid chaos and violence, but many moons have passed, as have those restrictions. It is time to give the women of this planet back some of the freedoms they enjoyed before the tragedy. And I think you should be one of the women who helps us reform the laws."

"Me? But I'm not even a Xamian."

"All the more reason. Earthling females amount to the largest percentage of our new female population. Who better to help lead the charge to change? Think about it. You will not do it alone. I and others will stand to help you."

Diana closed her mouth thoughtfully. What if she could help? Make a difference? It was certainly something to ponder once Kor was safe at home. *Please let him come back to me.*

* * * *

Diana watched the newscast and cried. They'd found him. Kor was alive! He looked battered and worse for wear, but he lived, and that was all that mattered. Diana smirked as she imagined Kil's reaction to the news of Kor's resurrection.

Diana answered the vid com and saw a jubilant Ele'Anor.

"He's alive," she squealed, and Diana, too overcome, just nodded, her own eyes wet.

"Do you want me to pick you up on the way to the hospital?"

"Yes, please."

Diana switched off the screen and, smiling, dressed in her best karimi. She paced, waiting for Ele'Anor, elation bubbling through her. When she heard the knock, she flew to the door

and opened it, expecting to see her mother-in-law, but Kil hulked menacingly on her step instead.

Diana's smile faltered for a moment before she injected steel into her voice and spine. "You need to leave. Kor is back."

"His return changes nothing. You will be mine."

Diana felt a flutter of fear at his snarled words. But even Kil wasn't stupid enough to try something here and now. Although perhaps a reminder would be a good idea. "Ele'Anor is on her way to pick me up. You've lost. Now please leave."

"No." With brutish hands he grabbed her and dragged her to his waiting vehicle. Diana struggled and screamed once before one meaty hand slapped over her mouth, choking the sound off.

This can't be happening. Someone will see what he's doing and stop him. Someone help—

Another cuff on the side of the head and Diana slumped unconscious.

Chapter Fifteen

Kor suffered the attentions of the healer, barely. He felt a desperate urge to see Diana.

His mother came in a rush of veils, her face a mask of panic. "Kor!"

"I'm fine, Mother. Now calm down. Where's Diana?" he said, peering around her robust form, looking for his mate.

"I can see you're fine. It's Diana who's not. He's taken her, Kor."

"What? Who's taken her?" Fear and anger gripped his heart in equal measures.

"Kil. Lisa, your neighbor, saw him."

"Where did they go?" asked Kor, ripping the tubes from his arms that were rehydrating him.

"I don't know. Kil has somehow slipped the video relays."

"I need some clothes," said Kor, realizing his state of undress when he pulled back the covers.

His mother, ever one step ahead, opened her bag and dumped out pants and a shirt.

"I don't have boots," she said, shrugging apologetically.

Kor quickly dressed and cursed the fact he didn't have an earpiece so he could contact Alphie. His mother, though, had her vid comm, and Kor quickly got in touch with him. Racing out of the hospital, heading to the spaceport, Kor only hoped he'd arrive in time.

* * * *

Diana anxiously paced the confines of the room Kil had locked her in. She seemed to be aboard an older style spacecraft, one with a door that shut manually and locked from the outside.

Diana cursed and railed and kicked at the walls and door to no avail. The only person aboard was Kil the psycho.

Diana sank to the floor and drew up her knees to lean her head on. Closing her eyes, she felt the tears leaking from the corners as she thought of Kor, who waited for her in the hospital. A wait that would never end. *Not to mention a child he will never know*, she thought, hugging her hardened tummy.

"Psst," came a whisper.

Diana brought her head up off her knees. "Who's there?" she whispered back, a tiny thread of hope in the sound.

"It's Alphie. Lucky for you I've been keeping an eye on Kil here, and I made sure to hop on this ship before he shut down communications."

"Can you stop the ship from taking off?" she asked hopefully. Alphie could control all the electronics on a ship. He could save her.

"I wish," said the disgruntled machine. "He deliberately chose an older manual model."

"What's that mean?"

"It means, while the ship has a basic computer system and whatnot, all ship procedures are done by hand, from navigating, to doors, to everything."

"So what can you do?"

"I managed to send out a message just before he closed down the comm units. Actually, by the sounds of it, smashed them. I've activated a low-level beacon that I hope he won't notice that should help Kor to track him."

Diana found herself torn. On the one hand, she wanted to be saved by Kor and reunited with him. But on the other, a confrontation between the brothers could mean Kor's death.

One thing she knew for sure, if and when Kor saved her, she wouldn't deny her feelings for him anymore. She'd tell him she loved him, even knowing he could never feel the same way. She would love enough for the both of them.

* * * *

Kor felt his comm unit buzzing on his hip and ignored it. He had more important things to attend to. But what if it was news of Diana?

Not breaking his stride, he flipped the unit open and found a message from Alphie, of all people—er, machines.

Kil has Diana on board craft S0014533. Charted course the third moon. Will attempt a low-level radiation beacon.

Kor boarded the spacecraft that he and Diana had arrived on. That voyage still seemed so clear and yet so far away now. Programming in the coordinates, he prepared to follow his brother.

Kor knew the smart thing would be to wait for his father to arrive with some of the clan warriors, but his brother had Diana. *My mate*. Kor just imagined how terrified she had to be. She could even be injured. *For that he dies*.

Chapter Sixteen

The craft landed with a thud that reverberated throughout the vessel. Diana looked frantically around for something to defend herself with, but the stripped room she'd frantically searched earlier still contained a whole lot of nothing.

Determined to at least try, though, she stood to the side of the door and waited, her palms slick with sweat. When Kil opened the door, Diana swung her clubbed hands at his head. To her surprise, he staggered, and she darted out the door. She took two steps before the steel vise closed around her arms and ribs, lifting her off the floor. Diana wanted to scream in frustration, and she did when Kil chuckled maliciously in her ear.

"There's nowhere to run, little Diana."

He threw her hard over his shoulder, digging it painfully into her stomach. Diana cried, her silent tears running down her face even as she pounded uselessly at his back. She heard the cranking of metal followed by a hissing sound as a seal was broken. Cool, musty air wafted into the ship. The dusty dead breeze tickled her nose and made her sneeze. Kil's heavy tread clomped down the metal ramp from the ship's doorway onto a gray, pebbled surface.

He righted her and dropped her to the ground in a heap, and she scrambled back from him, eyes darting around, 'til in shock she stopped moving. Kil had dragged her onto a nightmare landscape. Judging by what she could see, he'd brought them to one of the gray moons she'd learned about, littered with tombs and mausoleums.

Diana felt a crazy urge to giggle. *Lucky me, I cross an entire galaxy only to get killed in an alien graveyard, and other than the location, it looks like something you'd find back home. Who'd have thought tombstones, flowers, and stone vaults would be a custom that spanned the galaxy?*

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked, eyes darting around anxiously, hoping to see Kor while praying he stayed away.

"I think it only fitting that Kor die surrounded by the same spirits that denied me. Let them see what their choice has wrought."

"You're insane. You mean you're letting a bunch of dead people make you do this."

"No, I'm doing this because I want to. The location is just for fun."

"So why the accident?" she asked, stalling for time. "Why not just kill him?"

"I thought about it. But then it occurred to me. Why not take everything he has? Wouldn't that just drive his spirit mad? Killing him meant I'd have to leave or be killed myself. After all, his stupid spirit would have tattled to the Oracle. But if I arranged an accident, one that couldn't be traced back to me, well then, his spirit would have no proof, and I'd win. I'd truly hoped the pirates would be less inept."

Diana gasped. "You told them where we were?"

"Of course. Figures they'd get distracted by a female instead of doing the job I paid them to do."

"You're sick."

Kil smiled at her, his sickly eyes alight with maliciousness. "Yes, I am. Sick and tired of seeing that whelp get what should have been mine. No more. Now he dies. And then, while his helpless spirit watches, I am going to take you on the ground beside his body. I'll show all the spirits what I think of their choice."

He's completely insane, she thought, staring up at him. There would be no reasoning with him. He was like a rabid animal, and there was only one thing you could do with that. Put it down.

Would Kor be able to kill his brother, though? If Kor showed up to save her, that is.

Oh, who am I kidding? I know Kor will come. Hasn't he told me enough times I am his? Not to mention he'd never let his brother get away with this.

"There will be no defiling. This is where it ends."

Diana's heart sped up when she heard Kor's cool, calm words, and she wanted to run to him when his figure, somewhat gaunter than she remembered due to his accident, appeared. But Kil had moved forward and pointed a laser gun at her, its red guiding light centered on her tummy.

"Brother, so kind of you to join us," said Kil, sweeping a mocking bow while keeping his eyes trained on Kor. "I was just telling your mate here how much I was going to enjoy taking her again. Oh yes, I quite enjoyed my taste of her on the ship. Quite the little screamer, isn't she?"

"You pig," she spat. "You—"

"Quiet, little Diana, or I'll poke another kind of hole in you," he said, wagging his gun menacingly.

Kor shook his head. "I know you haven't touched her, Kil. Another sad fact of the plague is the children born during it are impotent. You're as useless as a eunuch."

Kil screamed in rage and spun the gun on Kor, firing. But Kor had already moved, and Diana heard the whistle as one of his daggers flew through the air and hit Kil high in the shoulder.

Kil grinned evilly at his brother. "I don't have to kill you to hurt you. I'll just kill your mate."

Kil swung to Diana, and then it was as if everything slowed down. Diana could see his trigger finger pulling back, and she wanted to close her eyes so she wouldn't see her death coming, but she couldn't. Instead she watched, wide-eyed, unable to even scream. Thus she saw only too clearly the smoky hands that shot up from the gray soil, the fingers elongated and curved at the end like claws. The emerging cocoon of smoke and shadow wrapped around Kil, and, horrified, he looked down. He opened his mouth to scream, and the dark mist flowed into him. Kil's eyes bulged in terror.

With a slight tremor in the ground, Kil began to sink, the soil beneath his feet suddenly liquid. Eyes wide with panic, Kil was absorbed by the spirits in the graveyard. Diana's gorge rose, and she turned away, feeling a moment later Kor's arms around her as he scooped her up and held her shaking body.

"Are you all right?" he asked, finally releasing her enough so she could breathe.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" she retorted, pushing away from him to look him over for signs of injury. Other than a new gauntness from his forced diet underground, he looked fine, better than fine, actually.

Diana burst into tears.

* * * *

Kor, seeing his mate, his beautiful moonflower Diana, burst into tears, felt panic.

"I thought you were uninjured," he exclaimed, scooping her up and jogging back to the spacecraft he and Alpie had appropriated.

"I am," she sniffled.

"Then why the tears?" he asked, confused, slowing his pace as he came into sight of the waiting vessel.

"I'm so happy you're back," she sobbed. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again. And I was so scared and lonely."

Kor listened as she recited all of the things he'd found himself feeling too. He didn't understand it. Were these emotions normal with one's mate?

"I'm back now, and Kil's gone. You don't need to be afraid anymore."

Kor walked up the ramp to the ship and carried Diana straight into the decontamination center. Stripping her soiled clothes from her, he ran his hands over her body to reassure himself that she was unmarked.

Of course, even something simple like that aroused him. It had been many cycles since he'd last been with his mate.

Kor felt possessed of a powerful urge to join with her. He needed to feel her clasped around him, screaming his name. Reassured she sported no injuries, he began caressing her smooth skin even as the tickling sensation of the decontamination lasers made Diana's flesh tremble. He buried his face in her stomach, kissing it. Then, laying a trail of light caresses, he made his way down her soft skin to the thatch of curls that hid her sex.

He parted her with his fingers, and Diana sighed. Noticing her trembling legs, he lay her down on the pile of their discarded clothing and parted her thighs. Her pink wetness invited him, and Kor, parched for her taste, buried his face into that sweet heaven. He used his tongue to lick the ambrosia that was hers alone. His cock swelled thickly at the mewls of pleasure and tremors in her limbs. He continued to tease her with his tongue, unwilling to move from her.

He debated for a moment when he felt her muscles tightening, letting her orgasm against his mouth, and he tasted the nectar as it flowed from her, but his body ached terribly. *I need to be inside of her.*

Sliding up the length of her body, being sure to kiss her erect nipples, he buried himself deep inside her. He sighed at the hot, slick feel of her sex clenching tightly around his spear, the heaven he needed after the nightmare he'd been through.

He pumped his sweet mate, her pliant flesh moving with him, squeezing him tight, and driving him to the brink 'til, with a bellow, he came shouting her name. She wrapped her legs tight around him and echoed his cry as she orgasmed, her wet flesh pulsating and prolonging his own pleasure 'til he thought he would die in her arms.

Collapsing beside her on the hard floor, Kor vaguely realized where they were. While they'd satisfied their carnal need, the cleaning process had finished.

Scooping her boneless body up—a sure sign she'd enjoyed his attentions, Kor thought with a grin—he carried her to the cabin where they'd first joined and become mates.

When he laid her on the soft mattress, Diana opened her eyes and smiled at him, her eyes heavy-lidded and her lips swollen.

"I'm so glad you're home," she whispered huskily. "I love you, Kor. I know you don't have a word for love in your people's language, but I know that what I feel for you is real. I don't ever want to be without you. I'm so glad you're back. Me and the baby I carry," she said, stunning him as she grabbed his hand and placed it on her abdomen.

Kor felt the new hardness through her flesh, and he stood speechless long enough that Diana got an anxious look in her eyes.

"Aren't you happy?"

Calling himself stupid for causing her to doubt, he lay down beside her and held her in his arms and spoke the words he found in his heart. "My people might not have the word 'love' in their vocabulary, but even without that word, this is how I feel. You are mine. And in return, I belong to you. I would cross the universe to be with you and die a painful death to protect you. The thought of being without you causes fear where fear was never known.

When you smile, I can do anything. When you cry, I would fight the world to make it stop. What is this, then, if not this love you seem to speak about.”

* * * *

What indeed, thought Diana, her eyes wet and her throat tight. All this time she should have seen it, recognized, not gotten caught up in the Hallmark version of love that required those three specific words. Love was an emotion, not a word. And if love could be seen, it would look like Kor. If love could be felt, it would feel like Kor.

As she snuggled next to her mate—*yes, mine*—Diana smiled. It might have been ghosts and an Oracle who initially brought them together, but it was love, an emotion that transcended the boundaries of space and differences of their species that bound them now. Forever.

The End

About the Author

Eve Langlais, who is in her mid thirties, has been married ten years to a wonderful man who gave her three beautiful—if noisy—children aged nine, six, and four. She works as a webmistress from home, and in her spare time--of which there is tragically too little—she likes to write, read, and Wii. She was born in British Columbia, but being a military brat ended up living all across Canada. She and her family currently reside in the historic town of Bowmanville, Ontario where she's discovered writing is the perfect outlet for her vivid—sometimes twisted—imagination and hopes you enjoy the result.