GALAXY GLADIATORS

Book 6.5

Sirius's Prequel

JAX — XON

Alana Khan

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series

Book 6.5 (Novelette)

Jax-Xon

Twenty Years Ago
In Space on an Unknown Alien Vessel

Chapter One

Tara

I've barely let my four-year-old out of my arms since ugly aliens abducted us from our bed on Earth three days ago. We're imprisoned on a spaceship in a tiny cell, maybe six feet square. It's big enough for a twin-sized cot, a toilet, and a sink. Surrounded on three sides by glowing, red laser bars that can cut you into pieces, there's a solid wall behind the cot.

I've been terrified not only for what will happen to us, but I'm worried the lasers will slice through Aliyah if she forgets for one second the bars can kill her.

Six other cells flank me in either direction. They're all inhabited by Earth females. I assume the aliens who stole Alliyah and me out of the bed we share didn't expect a twofer when they abducted us.

It's lucky we're alive and still together, but I'm terrified we'll be separated —or worse—when we arrive at our destination.

Our jailers mostly leave us alone, preferring to watch us through cameras. They only enter our cell block to feed or threaten us. Thank goodness they haven't hurt any of us since our arrival.

Anxious silence presides over the cell block night and day. The porcine, tusky aliens who imprisoned us and equipped us with subdural translators made it clear they'd punish us for talking.

A loud explosion pierces the quiet. The spaceship pitches at an odd angle, then rights itself. The lighting abruptly switches from normal to eerie, blinking red lights as klaxons blare.

Aliyah wakes in my arms, terrified and crying soundlessly. She took the aliens' threats seriously when they told her to be quiet. Her little fingers

squeeze into my upper arms and she clutches me tightly, her wide, terrified eyes proclaiming her panic.

Pressed onto our bed by gravitational force, I lean back against the one solid wall in the cell. Using all my strength, Aliyah still in my arms, I crawl under the bed.

I urge Aliyah, “Hold on to the bed leg with all your might. Don’t slide into the bars.” Thank God the legs are bolted to the floor.

“Like Mommy,” I urge, tucking one arm around a bed leg and gripping my elbow with the other hand.

Both of us are wrapped around the metal bed legs as tightly as possible. The gravitational force becomes so intense the skin on my cheeks presses against my bones. I can’t hold Aliyah and keep either of us safe, so I pray she can clutch firmly and stay far from the deadly laser bars.

Through the other women’s piercing screams, I hear the unmistakable zap of at least one of them being sliced to pieces as they slide through the bars. My stomach clenches in terror and repulsion.

The G-force accelerates then slows as the vessel jerks and shudders.

“Momma loves you, sweetie. Momma loves you more than life. Whatever happens, remember that.”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up when I hear the eerie groan of bending, grinding metal. The G-force is impacting the vessel as harshly as it’s affecting my body.

Wrapping my thighs around my daughter’s waist, I keep her from sliding into the deadly bars as the pressure becomes too much to bear.

Then we crash. There’s a bone-shuddering impact, a long skid, and then a rumbling explosion. Whatever powered the laser bars flickered out, so I grab Ally and run.

The acrid smell of chemical fire assails my nose. It's dim in here with only red emergency lights pointing toward the exit. Toxic smoke billows through the tight hallways.

I press Ally's head to my chest as I avert my eyes from the carnage I'm stepping over. There are dead bodies scattered wherever I turn—both human and alien.

"Don't look, sweetie."

Putting one foot in front of the other, I don't know where I'm going. Locked in the bowels of this vessel since I woke up here three days ago, I have no concept of how big this ship is. I certainly don't know the floor plan. I just keep running.

Light streams in from my right. It doesn't seem artificial, is it actual daylight? My mind flashes me a few scenarios of horrors that might await us if I'm lucky enough to escape this ship. From hungry animals to bloodthirsty savages to poisonous air that liquefies skin.

But from the sound of things—the creaking metal, the raging fires—this ship will explode in minutes. Staying inside is not an option.

Clutching Ally tighter, I run toward the light. Arriving at a torn edge of the ship, I see it's lying on its side on the ground. The unnatural hole in the vessel's skin is jagged and faces up to the blue sky of a planet. We're fifty feet above scorched soil.

"You have no choice, Tara," I whisper, "we've got to leave." I sit on the edge of the opening and notice the vessel curves out and around toward the ground. Hesitating for a moment, a shuddering explosion erupts from the belly of the ship.

Knowing I don't have one more second to waste, I hold Ally close and propel myself over the edge. We slide along the rounded metal exterior of

the vessel until the curvature arcs back under itself. This thrusts us out and away from the ship and we free fall the rest of the way.

I hit the ground and roll into a ball, trying to absorb the impact and protect Ally. As soon as I come to a stop, I stand. I hurt everywhere, but I'm not so badly damaged I can't run, so I dash away from the ship, my daughter still in my arms.

Thick, black smoke billows out of every crack and ragged edge in the hull. If the ship explodes now, a fireball or flying debris will kill us. There's a bloody gash in Ally's leg, but I'll have to deal with that later. I run through tall, green grass in a straight line away from the ship.

A gust of heat blasts me before I hear the explosion itself. The scorching ball of energy pushes me to my knees, so I cover Ally with my body and ride out the wave of blistering air.

My back feels like I just suntanned for forty hours straight, but when I look over my shoulder, my clothes are intact. Luckily it was a surge of heat, not fire—we survived.

Standing, Ally and I look back at the sight of the huge, silver vessel in a million pieces on the ground, shimmering in raging flames.

"Can you walk?" I ask. She nods.

We have to keep moving. I don't know what lies ahead, just that if any of those tusky assholes made it through that crash, the first thing they'll do is capture us again. Without the ubiquitous cameras that seemed to keep them in line, who knows what they'll do to Ally and me?

"Halt!" It's one of them. I stop, assuming he's armed.

When I turn, I see two of them, both pointing weapons in our direction. I put my hands up; we have no defense against their guns. Ally's arms surround my thigh, as if clutching onto me will save her.

“Come!”

While I try to disentangle Ally’s hands from my leg, I notice movement far off to my right. Tusk guys notice it, too. Their attention shifts from us and focuses on the group of beings running toward us.

Although I don’t know what’s happening, I keep my hands raised in surrender. Glancing down, I look long enough to see my daughter’s little face plastered to my body as if the act of not seeing makes her invisible.

Tusk guys use the tactic of shooting first and asking questions later. Their laser rifles discharge for only a few seconds before they halt and collapse to the ground. Were they just shot by arrows?

I see green aliens running toward Ally and me. Are my eyes deceiving me? How tall are they? I don’t even try to run. If these guys just killed two aliens armed with long-distance laser-powered rifles, my daughter and I have no chance of escape.

My heart hammers in my chest as I focus my thoughts. I have one goal—protect my daughter.

“Put your hands up like momma,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice calm, but failing miserably. “Do whatever they say, baby. Just like we did on the ship.”

There are twelve of them. And the closer they get, the taller they look. They’re humanoid with green skin and spotted magenta markings. They draw their bows, arrows nocked, but Ally and I are still alive.

As they approach, one guy takes the lead and lopes straight toward us. He drops his weapon, lifts Ally up and rushes toward a stand of trees to our right.

“NO! You can’t take my baby!” I scream, but he’s off at a run, Ally clutched to his chest. I hurry after the kidnapper, hoping his pals don’t kill

me for this. He snatches several huge, emerald leaves off a plant as he hurries to the bank of a lazy creek.

Setting Ally down with great care, he calmly talks in a language my translator doesn't recognize, as he dips the leaf in the water, saturating it. Then he tears the leaf to the proper proportions and gently wraps Ally's leg from ankle to knee with one large swatch of leaf. He smoothes it over her injured leg, inspects his handiwork, then looks at me and smiles, nodding his head.

These people are primitive. This guy's wearing a couple leaves the same color as the one on Ally's leg he's fashioned into a loincloth. They're armed with bows and arrows. Their shoes are made from hides.

But it seems they mean us no harm. Even though all he did was wrap a leaf around her calf to stop the bleeding, he tried to help. That's got to count for something, right?

Most of his friends are searching through the rubble, maybe looking for survivors? What if the vessel explodes again? They could all be killed. With all the toxic black smoke billowing out of the ruins, and that final huge explosion, as much as I don't want to admit it, no one else will escape that disaster alive.

"Um." I touch his thickly muscled bicep with one finger. When I have his attention, I mimic an explosion with my hands, making crashing noises, then point at his comrades, shaking my head with a worried look.

He nods his head in understanding, then calls to them. They jog over to us just as another blast from deep in what remains of the vessel cracks apart the remains of the hull and spews shrapnel in every direction.

I realize my ticket off this planet just expired. No one is coming to get me. I'm a million miles from home and never going back. The good news is the air is breathable and the big, green guys have been harmless so far.

Jax-Xon

I scoop up the smaller of the two children and place her on my shoulders. We'll take them back to the village and find a home for them. I lodge the little one's hands in my hair so she can hang on, then grab the other's hand to make sure she doesn't stumble.

In all the stories of my people, there's never been an event like this before: a crash, a fireball, two animal males with firesticks, and the gift of two children to the tribe. We've vanquished a threat and brought new life to the village. The Gods are certainly smiling upon us.

We have a day's quick-march home. I sing a song of my people to keep us moving at a steady pace. The little one on my shoulders hums along with me. I slow my words and soon she's singing with me. She's fearless—and smart.

I glance at the older one. Her brow is furrowed in worry and she keeps eyeing the little one as if the babe might fall. I lean over to show her the youngling is fine. Are those breasts on her small frame? She has the stature of one who's only seen eight winters.

Her features aren't rounded and soft like a child's and there are two soft mounds of flesh on her chest. This small thing must be an adult female of her tribe.

When we pause for water at a stream and a quick bite of jerked meat, the elder tends to the younger as if it is her babe. Could this be? I have no language to ask, the best I can do is bring them back to the village before full dark.

When we're close to home, a thought takes hold in my mind. I can't shake the desire to keep these two in my hut tonight. The decision is up to my father, the chief, but he yields to my wishes lately. If I suggest it, he'll agree.

I should take them to one of my aunt's huts, but I stubbornly decide I'll care for them myself.

Chapter Two

Tara

I'm tired, my back is on fire, and I've run-walked what feels like a hundred miles since I survived a spaceship crash. But what's upsetting me the most right now is we were escorted to the jolly green giant's house in this primitive village.

He doesn't have a wife, at least I don't see any sign of one. What I do see is that Ally and I are in this mud hut alone with a big, strong man who's been eyeing me funny all day.

There are two raised sleeping platforms covered in thick gray-and-black pelts. One bed is the size of a single, one the size of a double. He motions us to the larger bed and my heart slams in my chest. Is this monster going to abuse us both?

Attempting to calm myself, I notice he's busy cooking. I've never watched an episode of *Criminal Minds* where the sadistic psychopath cooked for his victims before he skinned, tortured, or raped them. Then I remember *Silence of the Lambs* and my heart gallops in fear again.

He sings while he makes the fire and boils water in a rawhide bag hung above the flames. Aliyah chimes in with him. She knows the words to his songs already? How'd that happen?

He shot and skinned two little rabbit-looking things. Now he's skewered them on a stick and placed them over the flames like a rotisserie. My stomach's rumbling; I hope it's edible.

A hundred structures made of wood and covered with hardened mud and bark comprise this village. Every member of the tribe lined the walkways, gawking at our approach. Their eyes were wide in disbelief as they chanted

and sang upon our arrival. None of them looked angry or intent on harming us.

They were certainly welcoming, although they were amazed to see us. Well, the feeling was mutual, thank you very much. A village of spotted, green giants is an amazing sight to behold—and scary enough to curdle my blood.

But I try to act nonchalant. I have no control over whether or not this guy will kill us tonight. What I do have control over is if Aliyah is calm or scared to death before it happens. I'd prefer she believes this is all a great adventure and not be in fear for her life.

"Jax-Xon's a nice man, isn't he Momma?" she says as she swings her legs from the edge of the three-foot-high sleeping platform. Where was I when she learned his name and his songs and decided this mountain of a man was nice?

"Absolutely," I reassure her even though I'm trembling inside.

"Momma?" he asks, leaving the partially-spitted rabbit-things lying on a clean rock. "Momma?" he asks again, his eyebrow cocked as he motions between Ally and me.

I nod, eyes wide, wondering what new level of hell this might bring. But he grins and nods and sets the spit between two vertical notched branches on either side of the fire.

Sitting on the sleeping platform across from us, he watches us with a half-smile as if we're the most fascinating things on the planet.

Jax-Xon

It's hard to believe I'm looking at a tiny adult female, a mother no less. But now that I pay better attention, I see those are definitely breasts at her chest. There are subtle aspects of her face, like brackets at the edge of her mouth, that show she's not a child.

Having spent the day with her, now I can see beyond our differences and appreciate her beauty. The contrast of her pink lips with her light skin draws my eye to her full mouth. Her black hair and deep, blue eyes are an attractive combination. Her rounded chin, so unlike the People's square ones, accentuates her femininity.

Here's the family I was denied two winters ago when Kam-La died. She and I followed all the rules of courtship. I gave her presents of small game and carved an ornate bowl for her family's table. We walked together to the spring to fetch water. She invited me to her family's hut to eat.

Our friendship blossomed and I planned to ask her to be my mate. I prepared to compete in a *rockshun* to impress her father. Then one day a *brantin* beast attacked six females bathing in the stream. The beast grabbed my Kam-La, pulled her into the bushes, and devoured her.

Not only did she perish, but my dreams of a mate and a family died that day. Chernan, the shaman, declared I am bad luck. Even though I'm the chief's son, none of the females will allow me to court them.

It took me many turns of the moon to forgive the Gods, but they have an interesting way of playing with people's lives. Two winters ago they stole my Kam-La. Today right in front of my eyes they produce this pretty little female and her daughter as if a gift from heaven itself.

Little Aliyah and I have already developed a bond. Although I must seem huge to her, she doesn't shy from me and gives me genuine smiles. Her momma, though, looks like she'd kill me if she could. I must remember to carry my weapons next door to my father's house before I sleep tonight.

Aliyah scrambles to my side and points at the *warux*, asking questions like a child who's seen four winters. Perhaps that's her age. Although I don't understand her questions, I explain everything, giving her names for things and telling her what I'm doing as if she can understand.

Her wits are quick, she names things as I show them to her. Her eyes shine with pride as I smile and nod at her.

“Jax-Xon,” I point at my chest as I glance at her Momma.

“Tara.” She doesn’t attempt a smile.

“Tra,” I repeat.

“Tara,” she exaggerates, but still no smile.

My mind leaps ahead and I picture these females as my family, living with me. All I’ve ever wanted was a female to care for and protect. At night, when feeling bold, I’ve dreamt of younglings laughing and filling my hut with happiness.

Now, these two drop into my life, a gift from the Gods. I’ve won over half the pair. How hard could it be to coax a smile from the little momma?

Tara

I don’t think rape or murder are on the menu for tonight. Nope, Jax-Xon is being a perfect gentleman. Ally’s sitting on his knee as he perches on a stump next to the fire and feeds her the choicest morsels of *warux*.

I’ve never eaten a wild animal before, so I have nothing to compare this to. It’s gamey but edible. If I could get used to the bland nutrition bars the tusk-guys fed us, I can definitely tolerate this.

Jax-Xon sweeps through his hut, accumulating what appear to be all of his weapons. I see him collect bow, arrows, and knives of various sizes and shapes. He ducks through the doorway and returns a minute later empty-handed.

Did he confiscate the weapons to protect himself from me? That’s funny. I’m the one who’s been sitting here all evening wondering if he’s going to kill us.

Ally launches herself onto his lap as he sits by the fire. He cradles my four-year-old and sings to her, then rocks her to sleep in his arms.

He looks calm and caring and thrilled to be cuddling my kid. I need to overcome my fear he'll kill us. Murderers don't rock children to sleep.

I have a great view of his profile and notice that although his jaw is a bit too square—and green—for human standards, his profile is… handsome. He's maybe eight feet tall and in perfect human proportion. And I do mean perfect. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, trim waist, thighs like tree trunks, and not an ounce of fat.

He sets Aliyah toward the wall of the bigger bed and motions for me to share it with her. He sits on the edge of the smaller one and talks to me. His voice is deep, reverberating, and mellifluous—like the galaxy's sexiest radio announcer. It could lull you to sleep like a baby.

He's talking slow and steady and gives the impression he wants me accustomed to having him around. Now and then a word translates into English. I don't know what's more shocking, that the translator can learn new languages, or that the rotten bastards who kidnapped me installed such advanced tech under my skin.

Wouldn't it be amazing if I could understand half of what he's saying?

I point to everything in the hut, have him tell me what it is, then repeat it. The device behind my right ear now understands every word he just taught me. I flap my arms like a bird and he says a word in his language and I say, "bird." When I have him repeat the word, my translator says it in English.

By the time I'm too tired to learn one more syllable, I've got the beginnings of the People's language—that's what they call themselves.

The translator is like training wheels; it reminds me of a word when I forget it. Otherwise, I'm learning his language fast.

The whole time we've been learning each other's vocabulary, he's been smiling at me and giving me gentle encouragement. He doesn't look odd or scary anymore. He just looks like Jax-Xon—the nice male who rescued my daughter and me.

If he and his tribe hadn't come along, we'd be in the clutches of the tusk-guys. Instead, we're safe around a fire and I'll be snuggling in this soft bed with my daughter tonight.

Chapter Three

Tara

I think handsome Jax-Xon has a crush on me. That is if males of his species react at all like Earth males. There are a hundred little tells from the way he eyes me up and down when he thinks I'm not paying attention, to the way he tries to include me and make me feel comfortable when others are around.

But the biggest giveaway, and I do mean big, is that leaf loincloths don't hide much. And they certainly aren't capable of hiding giant penises. Or giant's penises. Whatever the correct form of grammar, this man is a giant and his penis is of gigantic proportions. And when he's erect—which is happening with increasing frequency—it's not subtle.

Which is a bitch, because Aliyah and I have gotten comfortable in his cozy little hut. I was trying to be a glass-half-full kind of girl, and I'd concluded that if we had to be stranded a million miles from home on a strange planet with giant, green people, we lucked out being in Jax-Xon's hut because he's so darned nice.

But if he has desires for anything other than the kind-benefactor/nice-uncle variety we're all out of luck. Because I don't do men. Not human men or the People men. Not beige men or black men or yellow men or brown men or green men. No. Men. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt. Or rather, got Aliyah.

Don't get me wrong. My daughter's a blessing. I love her. I don't regret one moment of having her. But her dad on the other hand? Daily regrets. Damn, I hate it when I slip and use the word 'dad'. Sperm Donor is so much more accurate. He never met her. Never came to the hospital. Never bought a box of diapers. Never called to see if she's dead or alive.

So… nice, handsome giant or not, there will be no dilly-dallying with Jax-Xon. None.

“Guess what, Momma?” Aliyah torpedoes into the hut and leaps onto my lap just like she does with Jax-Xon. It’s adorable when she does it to him, painful when she does it to me.

“Oof. What?”

“Sorry. Jax-Xon’s going to take us to see Loraxes.”

“Who is he, Dr. Seuss?”

“No. It’s something like that. It doesn’t translate. But he says it’s fun and we get to go on a trip one sleep each way. And he says I’ll love it. And he says you will, too. And he says they’re pretty. And he says he’ll keep us safe. And he said…” She cuts off, looking sheepish.

“What?”

“I wasn’t supposed to say the last part.”

“What did I tell you about keeping secrets? Surprises are good. Secrets are bad. Did Jax-Xon ask you to keep a secret?”

“Well... he really wants the three of us to go and he thought you’d wanna come if I told you how fun it will be.”

“We’ll see about that,” I snap.

A minute later I find him sitting outside his father’s hut efficiently chipping rocks into arrowheads.

“What’s a Lorax, and why are you…” I have no words in his language to ask why he’s manipulating my daughter.

“*Lorinx*. Water.” His hands mime a fish swimming and then darting above the surface. “Pretty. Fun.”

“You want to take us on a journey to see fish? What’s the catch?” I’m certain he has no idea what I’m asking.

“Fun. I’ll keep you safe.”

It sounds harmless. If he wanted to do something nefarious, he would have done it weeks ago.

I’m part of this tribe now. After being here several weeks neither I nor my daughter have done anything but suck up the tribe’s resources. I haven’t killed an animal or caught a fish or cooked a meal. It’s time to get off my ass and help. Nobody likes dead weight.

This weekend getaway will be fun, and will allow me a few more days to acclimate before I dive in and figure out how to become part of the tribe.

“Three days then come back to the village?”

“Three sleeps, then back. See pretty fish.”

“You’ll keep us safe?”

“Jax-Xon keep Tara and Liyah safe.” He holds up several of the arrows he’s making.

“Okay,” I say, surprising myself.

Jax-Xon

We leave the next morning. Over the last few days I’ve made them both suede clothes; what they were wearing won’t last a day on the trail. The two females carry small packs with provisions. I carry a large pack with everything else we’ll need. I also carry Liyah, who loves to ride on my shoulders. She points and asks questions and when she’s bored she commands me to sing the songs of my tribe. I’ve ever met a child who’s been through so much yet remains so happy.

I'm a cunning male. I've planned this out and it's going according to strategy. Tara will see my strength and enjoy my company. I'll prove I'm a good provider and ask her to be my mate. She'll say yes, and I'll perform the *rockshun*. This will be easy.

~•~

The trip to the big salt water took longer than I expected; Tara's strides can't keep up with mine. We didn't arrive at my favorite tree near the water's edge until almost dark. I killed and skinned two *waruxes* and helped the females up into the tree just as the last fingers of the sun faded.

Tara said trees where she comes from aren't this tall or wide. They both seemed surprised at how comfortable it is up here.

Over the years, the People hollowed out a living space halfway up the trunk. The wooden floor is smooth from years of safely harboring so many of my tribe. It's safe from predators, and we always leave provisions for the next travelers.

Animals rummaged here since last I visited, so I clean and sweep and neaten. It pleases me when Tara pitches in.

I often catch her staring into the distance, her shoulders slumped. I've heard her crying at night when she thinks Liyah and I are sleeping. It's good to see her busy and productive; it lightens her mood.

Between the two of us, it isn't long before the treehouse is neat, I've made a fire, and spitted the *waruxes* on a stick. Warm heat fills my chest when I glance up and catch the two females watching me.

In the last few days I've pictured this with increasing frequency—having a family. All I want is a mate who looks at me with affection, and a cheerful little girl who believes I filled the sky with stars.

My mate won't have green, spotted skin like the others of my tribe. But I'd be ecstatic to have a family and the love of a good female. Especially one as

beautiful as the dark-haired beauty sitting on my furs.

The hollowed-out tree has only one living area. The People stay here when we're hunting or fishing nearby. It has no bedding platform, just a pile of furs on the wooden floor.

We'll all lie together in the warmth of the pelts. Perhaps I can wrap my arm around Tara and feel her back mold to my front. I've yearned for that every night since she dropped into my life.

I'd never touch her without her permission, never do anything in front of Liyah. But to be close to her would make my heart sing.

Tara

Jax-Xon's tenderness and patience surprise me. I've never received a great deal of kindness from any man, but to have it directed at me by this big guy is astonishing.

After dinner, he showed us the basics of arrow-making, then gave us a quick demo of how to shoot.

"You're smart," he tells us both. "You'll learn how to live with the People. I'll keep you safe. You'll learn to hunt and cook and sew. I know…" He's looking for words. "Everything is new here. Scary. But Liyah and Tara will be fine." He nods.

In the matter of these few short weeks, the translator has created a dictionary of his words and I can understand most of what he's saying. Somehow I believe him when he says it will all be fine.

It's a little alarming when he lies down behind me and doesn't face the other way. His hot breath caresses my neck.

He reaches around me to grab Aliyah, then hitches her toward me, dragging me next to him. We're a green giant sandwich. Aliyah giggled at first, now she's jabbering away about seeing the Loraxes tomorrow.

I'm still as a statue because Jax-Xon sleeps nude. Well, I knew that from the hut, but it never mattered when he was under the furs across the room. Now? With his cock pressed against the small of my back? Yeah. It matters.

Aliyah talked herself to sleep, and now it's just Jax-Xon and me pressed against each other in this snug, safe treehouse. He's definitely not asleep—can guys even get hard-ons in their sleep? His breathing's raspy.

"You awake, Tara?" he rumbles.

Okay, no doubt about it; he's awake.

"Almost asleep," I lie.

"Can we talk?"

No, no, no, no. Shit. "Sure."

"Turn? So I see your face?'

Double shit. How do I squirm out of this? Maybe he has a simple question like...I don't know, why is the sky blue? All I can think about is his gigantic cock pulsing against my back.

"You're naked," I state the obvious.

"Yes."

I forget this is a different culture. Half the people in the village walk around wearing nothing but leaves.

I grab the extra pelt I was using as a pillow and flip toward him at the same time I smash the pelt between me and his man-bits. In my haste, the back of my hand grazes the length of Mr. Happy. For a moment I hoped I was wrong, but his sharp intake of breath confirms the fact.

Now we're face-to-face, and my genitals are separated from his. Let's get this conversation over with so I can turn over and forget this ever happened.

My mind may not be a willing participant, but my body is responding to every inch of his warm, green flesh. It's been a long time since I've been with a man, but it's like riding a bicycle--my nipples are beaded into hard points, and my mouth is dry with desire.

He's staring at me. I've never been on the receiving end of a look like this before. It's appreciation and longing and expectation. It makes my belly do a happy little somersault even though my belly and I have had long conversations about how I don't do men.

I want to snap, "what" and have him say whatever inane or insane or inappropriate thing is on his mind. But his gorgeous jade eyes are roaming over my face as if he's watching the most beautiful sunset he's ever seen.

He wants to kiss me. I've seen this look before on other men. But this is different somehow. As if he wants it so much it hurts and yet he could wait a hundred years for it if I just asked.

Since when did magenta lips and strong, square jaws become handsome? Because they are. His face is so gorgeous I want to drown in its strong cheekbones and deep green eyes.

Breathe, I tell myself. I don't know when it happened, but somewhere along the way, I forgot how to suck air in and blow it out.

His Adam's Apple bobs, and I realize everything is moving in slow motion. His pink tongue slips between luscious, burgundy lips. Without conscious thought, my tongue mimics his.

Lifting his hand to my shoulder-length hair, he twirls a strand around his finger then leans toward me so slowly I wonder if time is standing still. He sniffs, closing his eyes halfway through as if my hair smells like the galaxy's finest perfume.

He says nothing. Smart. Words would break the spell. He just keeps his gaze glued to mine—that's conversation enough.

My heart pounds, my lips are parched, and liquid arousal flows through me for the first time in a long while.

He reaches under my curtain of hair, lodging his palm on the back of my neck. What is it about this spot that makes it so sensitive? My breath catches in my throat.

He breaches the space between us in tiny increments. I could stop him at any moment. I *should* stop him at any moment. But I don't.

My breath comes in soft, little pants. My stomach—and below—clenches in need. I want this kiss even though I don't do men. I want this kiss even though my daughter is sleeping and cuddled against my back. I want this kiss even though Jax-Xon is green and huge and alien.

But I'm not going to get this kiss—at least right now. His massive hand lifts and his palm lands gentle as a butterfly wing upon my cheek. His fingers trace every millimeter of my skin as if he's memorizing each hill and valley. As if he's going to render a topographic map of my skin in the future just from memory.

Then thumb and forefinger slide against the bone of my jaw. They follow the column of my throat. He breathes in through his nose as if he's memorizing my scent.

Sliding his thumb along the seam of my lips, he wills me to open to him.

A tiny voice in the back of my mind screams at me to stop this right now. It admonishes me about the faithlessness of men. It begins a litany of reminders of why I don't do males.

I don't listen. Rather, I pay attention to the sound of the waves of the great salt water less than five hundred feet away. I listen to his ragged breathing...

and my own. I fixate on the desperate need in the aching tips of my breasts. And I focus on the look of boundless appreciation on his face.

I breach the scant inches between our lips. He rumbles a sound of satisfaction deep in his throat, then bestows soft, sensual kisses.

“Tara.” On his lips, my name sounds like devotion and approval.

His kisses aren’t desperate. They’re not a race to the finish line or a means to an end. They’re sufficient just as they are. The kisses are sweet, tantalizing. They ramp up my desire.

Why did I put that pelt between us? It would be heaven for his jutting cock to pulse against my belly. To notice every time it kicked or responded to me. If I felt bold, I could wiggle just a few inches south and suck him into the welcoming warmth of my mouth.

Perhaps he can read my mind, because those big, strong hands slide behind me, one hand lodges at the small of my back, one cradles the back of my head. I’m not going anywhere.

His tongue slides between my lips, requesting admittance. Yes, please! I open to him and he owns me. Jax-Xon the shy gentleman has left the building and a big, green alpha male has taken his place.

He slings his leg over my hips and hauls me closer with it. The piece of fur that kept our flesh separated is scrunched between us, but not doing its job at all. The suede halter he made still covers my breasts, but they’re smashed against his chest so hard I’m sure he can feel my pebbled tips ready to pierce his skin.

His cock is riding my naked midriff. His hips rocking in a rhythm old as time. And his tongue is penetrating my mouth, delving my depths, tasting me as I’m tasting him.

I have no desire to pull away. In fact, my hands slide around him, grab the luscious globes of his perfect ass, and pull him even closer. I wrestle my leg

from between his so I'm open to him. Even though I'm wearing the panties I was abducted in, it's as if there's no fabric between us as I ride his rigid cock.

I'm drenched, dripping for him. I want him to fill me so badly I can't think straight. And then little Aliyah stirs mere inches away while her mother practically impales herself on a man—no not a man, an alien.

Leaping up, I check on my daughter to confirm she's still sleeping. I'm wearing panties and this triangular suede halter Jax-Xon made for me. I wonder what I look like, silhouetted in the faint light drifting in from the planet's two moons.

My body still on fire, I can't contain the urge to look at him. He's on his side, naked from head to toe. His cock pulses in rhythm with his heart.

His gaze doesn't waver from mine. It's full of unapologetic, raw desire. I walk to the open doorway hewn into the tree. We're two, maybe three stories up. The saltwater smells sharp and briny. Moonlight ripples on the waves. The sea sings its rhythmic song as it washes to shore, then recedes, leaving only foamy bubbles behind.

He pads over, slips his arms around my waist from behind me and leans his chin on top of my head.

I plan to write a long, strict memo to my traitorous body, reminding it I don't do men. Because every muscle, cell, and fiber is happily content to have his naked body close to mine, humming with contentment in the clutch of his warm embrace.

"I should have asked, Tara. I should have waited. My desire is strong for this." He lays a soft hand on the swell of my hip. "Every male wants the joys of the flesh. But I want more. I want you." He pets my hair with his palm. "You and little Aliyah."

"I'll sleep by the fire. Tomorrow I'll show you and the youngling the *Lorinxes*, and then we'll go back to the village. If you hate me for what I

just did in the furs, I'm sorry. I'll keep you safe even if you move to another hut.

"If you don't hate me, I'll do everything in my power to show you I can be the best male for you and the best Poppa to Aliyah."

I'm unashamed as I watch him walk naked to our pile of furs. I notice every muscle in his body slide and bunch under his skin. My fingers itch to caress the hard, firm globes of his ass. If his picture was in the encyclopedia, it would be under the words 'power' and 'grace'.

He bends to retrieve one pelt, then stalks back to the fire, near where I'm standing.

"Don't be sorry Jax. I was a willing participant. It's just...my world's been turned upside down. You understand that, right?"

"Life surprises us. It gives us awe and heartache and joy. When it offers joy, I snatch it and savor it for as long as the Gods allow."

He wraps himself in the fur, then closes his eyes.

Chapter Four

Tara

"Wow!"

Jax-Xon didn't lie when he promised something wonderful. The *Lorinxes* are beautiful and graceful. It makes me wonder if we had similar animals on Earth millennia ago, and if that's where the stories of mermaids originated.

The porpoise-like mammals love leaping into the air, much to our delight. Sometimes they do simple jumps then slide back under the water. Sometimes they spin, then pierce the water without making a splash.

Their cobalt blue scales shimmer in the sunshine. Their faces are more human-shaped than the elongated faces of dolphins. What made me do a double-take, though, is the luxurious hair on their heads. It makes them even more beautiful and gives them all different personalities. After an hour of watching, Ally and I've given them nicknames and made up stories about their pasts.

"Velvet and Chandler are going to get married," Aliyah says with finality as she points to the pair who jump up and back into the water in a graceful duet. "They love each other are going to make a baby."

"I think you're right, honey. They seem to have fun together, don't they?"

"Yep, just like you and Jax-Xon." She seems thrilled with her pronouncement.

A jolt of fear flashes through me. Did she see Jax and me making out last night?

Jax snakes his arm around my waist and pulls us together tightly as if Ally's statement gave permission for him to court me. I'll wriggle out of his embrace soon, I decide. Just let me bask in it for a moment more.

We have front row seats on the ledge of the treehouse. Jax and I are sitting on the edge, our legs dangling. Aliyah's happily nestled on Jax's lap. He doesn't seem to mind her constant wiggling, or her nonstop chatter.

When the *Lorinxes* move down the beach to other waters, Jax-Xon helps us climb the sturdy vines to the ground and we walk the beach for miles.

Aliyah's so full of energy she trots up ahead, finds a fabulous shell, and runs back to show us. We have nothing to carry the shells in, so Jax promises to bring us here another time so Aliyah can start a collection.

While Ally darts ahead, Jax leans down and scrapes into the sand near the water's edge to unearth a fabulous shell the size of my daughter's palm. It's a thin disc, perfectly round, with exquisite designs etched into it—almost like a sand dollar, but far more intricate. The colors are shimmering blues, purples, and greens. When he swivels it in the sunlight, the colors swirl like a hallucinogenic dream.

"Beautiful." It's a fascinating, never-ending display of fireworks.

"Like you, Tara," he breathes, pegging me with an adoring stare.

I shake my head to shut him up. I'm not used to men showering me with pretty words.

He grabs my chin with infinite gentleness and leans in. "I'm not a perfect male, Tara, but I never lie. I have no need to. When I call you beautiful, I mean it."

Our gazes meet, then lock. My center-of-gravity dips and I feel unsteady. Then Aliyah runs up the beach, pushes between us, and leaps into Jax-Xon's arms.

"I tricked you," she giggles, and smashes two little handfuls of sand into his long, lustrous, black hair.

“You’ll regret that,” he threatens as he runs with her into the sea-green water. “It’s safe,” he calls to me over his shoulder, never missing a step.

I don’t feel at home on this planet. I barely know any of these people except Jax-Xon. There have been few waking moments where I haven’t yearned to go home, although I’m not sure what’s pulling me back, my life there was full of heartache.

But nobody gave my daughter the ‘you need to be miserable’ memo, and she’s having a blast. She’s bonded to the big, green guy and obviously he’s bonded to her or he would have spanked her for that little shenanigan. Instead, they’re having the time of their lives out in the water.

It’s like a switch flips in my head. I’ve seldom had an experience like this before where one moment I believe one thing, the very next second I’ve completely changed my mind. But right here, this minute I feel the shift from the top of my head to the soles of my feet.

I’m here. On this planet. It doesn’t matter what’s happened in my past. It doesn’t matter what might happen in the future. This moment, right here, right now, is the only thing that’s real.

I’m not going back to Earth. That ship has sailed, or to be more accurate, that ship has crashed. It doesn’t matter that I made a promise to myself that I don’t do men. Maybe I just need to amend that to the staunch belief that I’ll never do another Earth man.

The only time I have is now. I’m going to grab it.

I set the precious present on the fine, pink sand near the tall burgundy grasses. I’ll treasure it. It’s my first present from Jax—I don’t want it to be the last. Shucking my clothes where I stand, I laugh and run into the waves to join them.

Jax-Xon

Something changed for Tara that day at the beach two handfuls of days ago. She joined Aliyah and me in the water and seemed unashamed of her body. And happy. She laughed and smiled for the first time since I met her. Her sadness disappeared like magic.

Since then the three of us have been like the family I've always dreamed of. She knows everyone in the village and has made a few friends. Cooking has captured her interest and she's pestered her friends with questions so she can learn more quickly.

She's preparing to serve us her first stew.

"Let's see if you like it. Seasoning it with seaweed was a bit of a stretch, but La-Donna promised it would be yummy. What do you think?"

"Good, Momma," Aliyah announces, but she likes everything we put in front of her. She's a happy, easygoing child.

Tara looks at me, waiting for my pronouncement, her mouth scrunched to the side like she does when she's worried about something.

"Very good," I say after my initial taste. It's far better than I expected for a first effort. "What's the best word for very good food?"

"Delicious!" Aliyah shouts between bites.

"Very good delicious food." I nod.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Tara says as she sits near us on a tree stump, "La-Donna invited Aliyah over for a sleepover tonight. The kids have been getting along so well we thought it would be great fun."

Soon Aliyah's ready to go and in joyous spirits. "My first sleepover, Jax-Xon. Will you miss me? I'll miss you."

"Come hug me before you go." I reach to give her a good squeeze. She's almost my height with me sitting on a low stump and her standing, so she

jumps up, throws her arms around my neck and gives my cheek an enthusiastic, childish kiss. I rise, step away from the fire, hold her under her arms and twirl her around until she squeals with delight.

Will Tara scold me? Was this too forward? But when I look at her, she's beaming with pride.

"You guys are adorable together," is all she says as she banks the fire.

The three of us stroll to La-Donna's and watch the younglings play. When Aliyah arrived, she acted as though she wasn't used to rough-and-tumble games. Now, she's worked up a sweat playing bladder ball with her friends. It's good to see.

"Can we make a detour?" I ask Tara as we walk home. I want to take her to one of my favorite places. It's not far from the village.

Tara

He leads me to a little clearing in the woods. This would be a lovely spot in the sunlight. But now, the shadows cast by the full moons are peaceful and romantic.

An almost-perfect loop of trees surrounds this little circle of grass. On the ground is one large log. We sit on it and I enjoy the quiet in the gloam.

The evening insects begin their nightly chorus. We're far from the prying eyes of our tribe. It's nice to have a respite from mommy duties. It's just Jax and me. We gaze at each other for a moment. Sometimes I want to get lost in those jade green eyes.

At the very moment I think he's going to kiss me, he leans back and grabs something off the ground. He must have hidden it behind the thick log, waiting for the perfect time.

Without breaking the connection of our glance, he puts a wooden flute to his lips and plays. The melody is rich and full and primitive. I close my

eyes and it evokes images of the male who carved it. There's no rush to his music. The tune meanders, lilting high, then dipping into deep, mellow tones.

Every time I hear him play this flute—and I hope it will be often—I'll remember this moment in this clearing. It will conjure the humid smell in the air, the call of the birds in the distance settling down for the night, and the raw desire in my male's eyes.

My male. I've been calling him that in my mind since the great salt sea. This male is everything a female could want: raw power, unabashed lust, soft kisses, belly laughs, and innumerable kindnesses to me and my daughter.

I can let my old vows go. In the olden days, on Earth, I was correct to declare "I don't do men." Here I can turn over a new leaf. I'll just change the saying a bit to "I'll just do one man, but he has to be terrific, like Jax-Xon."

He's in no hurry. We both know we'll end up under the same fur tonight. But we can spend time here, surrounded by the silent sentinel of this circle of trees. I can let him woo me. He can be proud knowing all the hours he practiced this instrument were put to good use courting the female he wants to impress.

The reedy sound of the flute reverberates in the trees and leaves above, then dies in the still air. My eyes are closed as I memorize every detail of this moment.

His strong arm slips around my waist and he tips me toward him so my head rests on his bicep. I move my head and listen to the steady thump of his heart, then place my palm there.

What a perfect time and place to be alive. With Jax-Xon.

He kisses the top of my head; his lips move as he whispers in the hushed quiet of this magical circle of trees.

“You’ve stolen this hunter’s heart, Tara.” He reaches for my hand and rests it on my thigh, our fingers entwined. “And made me happier than I ever imagined.”

Everything is slow and quiet here—there’s no rush for anything. “From the blue of your eyes to the curve of your neck, I find you beautiful and endlessly fascinating.”

A bird coos high above our heads.

“You and your daughter bring me joy. Will you stay with me? Will you become my mate? Can I be a father to Aliyah? I can never replace her real father, but I’ll do my best to be worthy of you both.”

I don’t want to interrupt this wonderful moment to tell him about Ally’s sperm donor, or that he’s far exceeded expectations on the father front. I want to bask in his offer.

“Mate?”

“We’d be together forever. As long as the Gods allow. I’ll care for you the best I’m able. I’ll provide for your needs and allow you the freedom to find your own place in the tribe. I’ll love you and Aliyah with all my heart and soul.”

I’m basking in his words. Letting them flow over me and warm my heart. My head’s still on his chest, my ear pressed to his beating heart.

“If you don’t want me, Tara, I’ll take you and Liyah to my father’s house. He’ll keep you safe—”

I didn’t realize my silence would give him that impression. I pull away to look him in the eyes—and smile.

“Of course I want to stay with you. You’re the most eligible, loveable male on this or any planet.”

I sling my arms around his powerful neck, pull him toward me, and kiss those magenta lips. A noise rumbles up from deep in his throat. I'm not certain whether it's happy satisfaction or pure lust. It doesn't matter—it's sexy.

He pulls me onto his lap and kisses me warm and sweet and slow. He imbues this kiss with all the love and longing a male can articulate without words.

My palms bracket his huge, beautiful, green face and I pull back before we get carried away.

"I love you, Jax. I don't know how the universe operates, or who to thank, but that I was dropped here with you on this planet? I'm the luckiest girl in the universe."

"We're both lucky," he husks, looking at me as if he could tear my clothes off and make love to me right this minute.

All the warm, loving emotions squeezing in my chest are crowded out by the insistent drumbeat of need pulsing at the vee of my thighs. I want him. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I need no more words. I want to show him the depth of my emotion... and my desire.

"Take me back to your house, Jax." I trail my hand from the ropey cords of his neck, down the thick muscles of his pec, to his washboard abs, and try to sneak under his loincloth—with no success.

He stands with me in his arms and strides toward home.

Jax-Xon

I realize now why Tara arranged for Aliyah to sleep at La-Donna's house. She'd planned for us to share touch under the furs tonight. Smart female.

“I want to see how the firelight plays on your skin,” I tell her as I untie the triangular top that hides her breasts. A hiss escapes my lips as I expose those beautiful pale globes. What’s more beautiful, her breasts or her tempting smile?

Cupping one mound in each hand, I notice their weight and smooth softness. “Perfect.” I thumb her nipples until they stand hard and proud for me, then pluck them. Her eyes drift shut and she makes a quick, little noise in the back of her throat.

Her open desire for my touch hardens my cock.

“The tribe doesn’t consider us mated, Tara. We shouldn’t…”

“We shouldn’t what?” She cups my cock through the *doram*-leaf covering and gives me a penetrating gaze.

“We shouldn’t do any of this.” My lips mean these words, but my cock and balls don’t agree. I feel as if the scorching suns burn in my blood. I want to rut her right this moment without doing her the honor of a *rockshun*. I focus on my love for her instead of my desire, but it does nothing to quench my need to sheath myself in her.

She presses my hands to her breasts. “Not do this?” She looks hotly into my gaze.

“Or this?” She wriggles her hand under my loincloth and her determination pays off. She grasps my cock in her small, cool hand. My cock kicks. It’s never been so eager.

“Not this?” She strokes as much of my length as the tight binding will allow. “None of it?” Her eyes pierce mine in a bold tease.

I shake my head. “I need to compete in the *rockshun* first. You must accept me in front of the entire tribe. It can be arranged for tomorrow.” My need is so strong I wonder if I’ll make it until tomorrow.

“No touching at all Jax-Xon, or just no touching that can make babies?”

“No babes.”

She smiles wider than I’ve ever seen. “Let’s get busy under the furs, love. The possibilities are almost endless.”

Tara

It’s sexy my big guy wants to play by the rules. And it’s also sexy we’re going to ride the line and almost break every single one of them.

We’re both naked, my knees are straddling his hips. My core is dripping wet just watching the firelight play over his muscular body. His cock is pointing at the roof, bobbing in anticipation. There’s already a bead of liquid glistening at the blunt tip.

His thumbs and forefingers roll my nipples, then pinch, then pluck—it’s driving me insane with pleasure. Every tweak up above elicits a corresponding twinge down below.

“Jax-Xon.” Dear God that feels so good. “Make me come.” I hope I sound breathless and sexy, not needy and demanding.

“It’s forbidden.” His brow furrows in his pinched face. He looks seconds away from breaking his own rules.

“Learn me, Jax. Learn me down there. There are things we can do with fingers and tongues that will let us share bliss. And no babes.”

A smile lifts his lips, his eyes spark with desire. “Clever Tara.”

Flipping me on my back, he straddles me and sits back on his heels while his gaze slides lasciviously down my body. His rough hands follow the same path, riding my curves, then stop at my hips, gripping me firmly.

He settles down in the cradle of my thighs, then presses them wider so I'm exposed to him. Sucking in a huge draft of air, he exhales in a hiss through clenched teeth.

"Beautiful," he says as his thumbs spread me open. His body stills for a moment as if he's strategizing an attack.

"Tongue, Tara?"

"Oh, yeah." Something tells me he'll be a quick learner.

The tip of his tongue laps at my entrance and he moans in pleasure. He delves deeper until his nose hits my clit. When I circle my hips to enhance the feeling, he presses harder, then tongues the little button.

My deep moans guide him to just the right spot and just the right rhythm. As he alternates sucking and pressure, I fly over the edge in a matter of moments. My muscles quiver in ecstasy, flying to the heights of bliss.

But this is about more than my body, my mind is so happy. It's magic being in this male's arms. Basking in his love.

Nipping and nibbling up my body, he faces me now, smelling like me and looking proud of himself.

"So quick?" he asks, his eyebrows dipping. "I wanted to pleasure you more."

"Said no man ever," I quip, then realize I said it out loud. "No worries, big guy. On my planet, women can experience endless satisfaction."

"Endless?"

"Yep, as in All. Night. Long. Lucky us."

He slides back down and explores. His large, talented fingers learn when to tease and when to penetrate. How did it take human men over two millennia

to discover the G-spot when my primitive, green guy found it in the first half-hour? He's so pleased with himself it borders on cocky.

Then he discovers the combination of fingers and mouth and makes me orgasm so hard I cover my mouth with both hands and bite down on my palm.

I finally ask for a brief pause in the action and haul him up to lie next to me.

"Too much, need a moment."

"Too much? Did I hurt you?" His serious concern tugs my heart.

I kiss him hard on the lips. How did I ever think his green skin wasn't attractive? His verdant flesh and strong jaw could star in the movies. I wonder how many years it will take me to memorize every vermillion spot on his body.

"No, you didn't hurt me. I need a moment's rest. Maybe now's a good time to show you how good it feels to have my mouth on you."

His eyes widen as if he never gave thought to this part of the equation. But his wide smile tells me he's excited to try.

I press his thickly muscled shoulders to the furs so he's lying on his back. Gazing into those gorgeous green eyes, I lie on top of him. We're both sweating, and my slow slide down his body awakens every nerve on my skin. I'm certain his attention is captured by the trail my pebbled nipples make.

Now my knees are on the platform between his, and my mouth's at cock-height. It's a deeper green than the rest of him, it's emerald, and so hard the skin pulls tight enough to look painful.

Living in close quarters with a male wearing little more than a leaf, I've seen his cock dozens of times. Now that I'm about to put my mouth on it,

however, I pay attention to its size for the first time. The words ‘monumental’, ‘prodigious,’ and ‘no way’ come to mind.

I’ve never been a planner, so I figure I’ll just go by the seat of my pants and see what works.

I tongue the head’s rim. Just one languorous swipe around the ridge and his ass levitates off the bed at the same time he throws his head back, moaning in appreciation. Circling the head with the flat of my tongue, I can’t wait another moment to taste him. I swirl around, then sweep the droplet of liquid into my mouth. He tastes sweet and earthy—a heady combination.

His hands lodge in my hair as if he wants to press me down the length of him, but he’s disciplined and just follows my movements. I plunge down, enveloping him as far as I can go, which isn’t far. Not only is his cock long, it’s got girth.

Putting all my weight on my knees, I use both hands stacked on top of each other to provide coverage to the rest of him. My mouth develops a rhythm and my hands follow suit. I slick up and down his length, then tighten my lips and swivel my head until my big, green male sees fireworks.

Maybe he forgot the part of the rules where it’s a big secret, because he comes with a loud, extended, deep groan of satisfaction. I take it as high praise.

He pulls me up by my armpits and settles me on his chest. Nipping my lips with his, he strokes my back from ass to shoulders as his breathing slows from panting to calm.

“You want to be my mate?”

“Mm-hmm.” I’m getting tired, I mean really, how many times can a girl come before she’s spent?

“You’ll let me be a father to Aliyah?”

Let him? He's already more of a father than Sperm Donor ever was. "She thinks you hung the moon—I mean moons—Jax. She accidentally called you Poppa the other day. I'd love for us to be a family."

He cups my belly. "We might make a youngling together, Tara. Could you love a green babe?"

I'm wide awake now. This is serious. I don't want him to worry that he, or anyone in this tribe, or most certainly any babies we might produce will be 'less than' in my eyes. Pressing my palm to his cheek, I pierce him with a deliberate gaze.

"I love you, Jax-Xon. I love everything about you. I love your huge heart, and your protective instincts, and your kind soul. I love the affectionate, indulgent way you treat Aliyah and the lusty way you look at me. I love you because of your beautiful green skin, not in spite of it. Never doubt that."

He's quiet for a moment as if he's taking all of it in. Does he believe me? Is he questioning my feelings for him?

"I'll be the best mate to you, and Poppa to Liyah you could ever dream of. If you say yes, I'll be your mate for as long as the Gods allow. Get some sleep. You'll need it for energy because I'm going to wake you in the middle of the night and lick you until you scream."

~•~

When he fulfills his promise and wakes me a few hours later, I'm energized for more lovin'.

"You're going to do this *rockshun* thing today?" I ask.

He nods.

"So we'll be mated today?" I just want to confirm.

He nods.

“So...” I roll onto my side and grab his magnificent cock with one hand and cup his balls with the other. His sharp intake of breath tells me I have his full attention. “So, just how much of a rule would we be breaking if you just slipped this…” I stroke him firmly from base to tip, “into this?” I sit up and straddle him, sliding my dripping wet core along the blunt head of his cock.

Leaning down, I moan into his mouth, all the while riding him until we’re both slick with my cream.

“Is it a crime punishable by death?” I wheedle as I press onto him until his head is inside of me. Bliss. “If you’re going to say no, Jax, do it now. Because pretty soon I’m going to slip you all the way inside of me. You don’t want to leave your mate desperate and wanting, do you?

Jax flips me over, his cock still partially inside me. “You’re a very convincing female, Tara.” He bites along my jawline as he penetrates me slowly. When he’s fully seated he releases a long, low moan filled with all the desire and fulfillment a male could express.

“I don’t think the Gods will mind if I make you mine a few moments early. We’ll have the rest of our lives together.”

This sex is more than flesh and friction. It’s a symphony of love. A banquet of desire. A pledge of forever.

My heart bursts with love for him, and I feel his devotion for me dripping out of every pore.

He begins with a gentle rhythm, then follows the insistent pressure of my hands on the perfect globes of his ass until he’s powering into me, stretching me, filling me. I feel taken and loved and owned by my precious male.

My nails scrape the skin of his shoulders when he finally pushes me over the edge into spasms of ecstasy so powerful I cry his name into the dark

night. His release jets into me as I cling to his sweat-slickened biceps, then we spiral back down to reality together.

“I love you, Jax.”

“I love you, Tara, but those words aren’t strong enough. We have the rest of our lives for me to show you just how much I love you.”

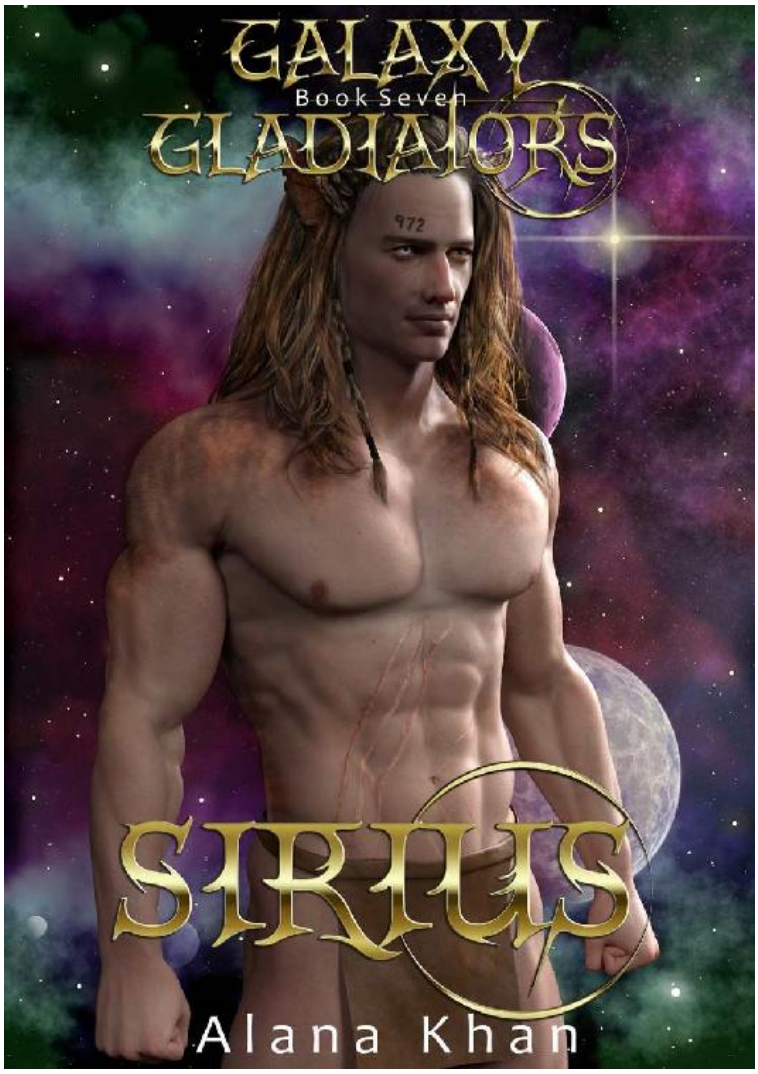
I nestle next to him, my head on his pec, my thigh slung over his. I put myself to sleep making a list of all the things I’m thankful for.

The End

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Jax-Xon and Tara’s story. I wanted to write a sweet (well, sweet and sexy) romance about Aliyah’s parents with the backdrop of this beautiful planet. This is a prequel to Sirius, Book Seven in the Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series. For a very limited time you can pre-order Sirius for $.99, on sale from its $2.99 price.

Here’s a Sneak Peek:


GALAXY
Book Seven
GLADIATORS
972
SIRIUS
Alana Khan

Sirius Sneak Peek

Present Day
Somewhere in space aboard the vessel *Lazy Slacker*

Chapter One

Sirius

"Emergency, emergency! All souls to the bridge. Emergency, all souls to the bridge!"

The urgent sound of Captain Zar's voice wakes me. The klaxons blare insistently and the blinking emergency light in my cabin bathes everything in startling red tones.

I'm up and out of bed, then running down the sterile metal hallways along with my shipmates. No one's talking or asking questions. They all look panicked—wide-eyed and alarmed.

All twenty-six people on board cram into the bridge, waiting to hear what's guaranteed to be distressing news.

"Please sit," Zar's tone is polite, but the muscles in his feline/humanoid face are rigid and tense.

Many sit in the small jump seats ringing the rear of the bullet-shaped room. Several of the women sit on their male's lap. I stand, my back against the exit door. I'm still an interloper. We all know I don't belong—I'm a geneslave. They rescued me a standard lunar cycle ago, but they don't trust me.

"We received this communication a moment before I called you here. Callista, please play it in its entirety."

Every other one of the floor-to-ceiling windows ringing three-fourths of the room flicker to life with a vid of a humanoid male in a black-and-red Federation uniform. I glance out the windows and see three Federation warships: one port, one starboard, one straight off our bow.

"Attention *Lazy Slacker*," the male says. "You are in the sights of three Federation warships. Stand down immediately. If your engines are still running in thirty *modicums* we will consider it an act of sedition and follow war protocol."

The steady drone of the engines has ceased. Zar must have turned them off before his command to assemble on the bridge.

"Our three ships are engaged in a little...off-the-books activity. We're confident you won't report us because it's clear, with all your recent name changes, you're engaged in illegal activities as well."

As he pauses, I realize the room is silent. Every eye is on the screens. I can smell the terror. My genetics don't allow me to experience emotions like other beings. I feel no fear, just an enhanced state of alert.

"Our intel indicates there are ten trained gladiators on board, which is perfect for our needs. You have sixty *minimas* to send us one fighter of your choosing. If you do not hail us back within that time frame, we will use our matter transporter to commandeer all of your fighting flesh, then destroy the vessel and all other beings on board."

He appears to look straight at us. "Sixty *minimas*, not a *modicum* more." The vid goes dark, making it easier to see the three warships, their prows pointing menacingly at us.

The room erupts in a buzz of fearful murmuring. A female is crying, but without stepping forward, I can't make out who it is.

"Please, I know this is frightening and disturbing. We now have…" Zar consults the computer screen on his comm unit, "fifty-one *minimas* to make this decision."

“Can we make a run for it?” Huge Dax asks in his deep, rumbling voice.

“As you heard, they made us shut down our engines, it would take *minimas* to power them back up. We’ll be dead long before we escape,” Zar answers.

“We can fight back,” scarred Stryker says, his face fierce as his hand absently strokes his female’s back.

“Three well-equipped Federation warships versus ours? We’d be lasered to char before our first volley is complete. I’ve only known these facts a few *minimas* longer than all of you,” Zar says, “but neither fighting nor running are options. One of us needs to volunteer.”

“I’ve never run from a fight,” Shadow says, the look on his face thunderous, “but I have my female to protect.” He hugs the tiny female on his lap even tighter.

“We all have a female to protect,” Zar says evenly. “If no one volunteers, I’ll have the computer randomly select one of us.”

I’m a geneslave, the last to join this band of runaway slaves. I have no female, no family—I was bred in a test tube. I’m such an aberration I don’t call anyone on board a friend.

I wait a moment for one of them to point to me and not-so-tactfully suggest I should “volunteer.” I give them credit, not one of them even slides their eyes in my direction.

“It’s obvious I should volunteer,” I say as I step forward. “I have no female, no purpose on board. I’m the most expendable. I’ll go.”

The relief in the room is palpable. I can feel them all stand down.

“Sirius…” Brianna’s face pinches in sadness. Perhaps she was going to tell me not to volunteer, then thought better of it. After all, she has two males to

protect. The computer's random program would make her twice as likely as the other females to lose a mate.

"That is generous," Zar says. "Admirable. But they demanded a gladiator."

"I'm a geneslave, built by the Feds to be stronger, faster, and better equipped to fight than any existing species in the galaxy. I've gained weight since you rescued me—it's all muscle. Every one of you has sparred with me in the *ludus* over the last lunar cycle, teaching me new fighting techniques to add to what the Feds taught me. I'm as formidable an adversary as any of you.

"We all know whatever the Feds have planned for me is not going to be a fair fight. Every being in this room knows whoever goes out that door is walking to a certain death. I understand that—I accept it."

"This isn't fair," Brianna says. "Sirius, you were born a slave. You're finally free, about to embark on a new life."

"You're right, Brianna. It's not fair. But I'm the right choice. Thank you all for accepting me onto your ship. I'm ready." I nod to Zar.

"Dr. Drayke," Zar says, "can you insert a tracking device under his skin? He may be new to our ranks, but he's one of us now. He's saving the life of every soul on board." He turns toward me and says, "We'll do everything in our power to save you, Sirius."

After the doctor inserts a tracker under the skin of my bicep, Brianna approaches me and throws her arms around my neck.

"Sirius, you're such a good male. You saved my mate when you could have run the other way. I'll be forever grateful. Now you've saved us all." She leans back, her eyes pooling with tears. Concern for me? It's hard to grasp.

She hugs me tight. I've never been touched in kindness before. Never experienced a hug. It takes me a moment to figure out how to receive it. I tentatively reach up and gingerly pat her back.

“You deserve happiness, Brianna,” I whisper, then pull away and look at Zar. “I’m ready.”

Every male on the bridge slides their female off their lap as they stand and turn to me. They each press their fist over their heart as they solemnly nod to me. It is the gladiators’ highest tribute, a salute of honor.

Brianna’s hug, these males’ salutes, are the closest I’ve come to affection, acceptance, or appreciation in my life. I nod to the room, uncertain what emotion I would feel if I possessed them.

Zar comms the Federation captain, and a moment later I’m matter-transported to his ship. I’m greeted by six males, all pointing lasers at me. My hands shoot up, although I know I won’t be harmed. I’m nude, unarmed, and they’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to acquire me. Whatever they’re going to do to me is breaking Federation law. I imagine it will net them plenty of credits.

The ship jolts into hyperspace lurching me back, then forward.

“Hands on the back of your head, *drackhole*,” a mottled brown male shouts as he menaces his gun at me.

After I comply, they swift-march me down narrow, brightly-lit hallways to the brig where I’m left alone in a small cell lit by a single red sign near the doorway. I sit on the only item in the room, a thin, dirty mattress on the floor.

I’ve spent most of my life in captivity of one sort or another. Created in a test tube by Federation scientists on planet Malego, I was raised in a barracks of single cells with my fellow “products,” as we were called by our makers.

We were forced to exercise, trained to fight, fed scientifically formulated sustenance, and allowed to read approved material on the Intergalactic Database. I was occasionally pulled from my cell and tested—both physical

and intellectual tests. The scientists showed little interest in any of us as individuals until they discovered my blood contained healing properties.

At that point, they began to suck me dry. I believe they were selling my blood to line their own pockets. I became progressively weaker as they made more money off my blood.

It was during transport to the home planet of a wealthy recipient that I made my escape, only to go from one form of slavery to another.

Homeless, without a credit to my name, an unscrupulous male snuck a pain/kill collar around my neck and used me for unsavory illegal dealings for several years.

Through a miracle of circumstance, Brianna rescued me and brought me to her ship. That was a lunar cycle ago. One lunar cycle of freedom in an entire lifetime, and it appears I'll be put to death soon by a new cadre of sadistic Feds.

Having spent my life in a cell, I know how to lie back, shut off my mind, and let time pass, so I have no idea how long it's been before a male barges into the cellblock.

"Stand, gladiator," he commands. The markings on his uniform indicate he's the first mate.

I follow his order. I've assessed my situation. There's no escape from this Federation ship filled with armed soldiers. If I don't comply they'll kill me.

"A geneslave." He nods, looking pleased. "Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue."

I comply while I assess him. He's tall and well-built, but with my genetic enhancements, I could snap his neck in less than thirty *modicums*. He's on the other side of the laser bars, though, and his death would give me little satisfaction.

“Look at those fangs. Impressive. You have a lot of canine in you. What luck. You’re better than a gladiator. How’d you escape your genefarm?” he asks, but I know he doesn’t want an answer, he’s talking to me like one would speak to their pet.

“The captain of your ship said we’d be receiving a male named Sirius. Is that what you’ve named yourself number 972? Or did your gladiator captors dub you that? That’s rich. Calling yourself Sirius after the Altherian word for canine.

“All the sayings are true, aren’t they? Dumb as a canine, ugly as a canine. Tell me Sirius,” he says the name with supreme disgust, “can you lick your balls, too?”

He laughs derisively, then murmurs into his comm. A moment later two males in uniform join him. One is carrying a sturdy metal rod that looks like it belongs in the engine room.

“Keep your weapons trained on the prisoner,” the first mate barks, then kicks the bar along the floor through the laser bars. The bar creates hissing sparks when it glances off one of the lasers. He points his pad at me, recording this. “Show your teeth,” he commands, “bend that bar.”

It angers me to be put on display. I’m a freak to them, to the whole galaxy in fact, but only the most perceptive observer would notice my jaw tighten in protest.

I step forward and snarl menacingly into the recorder. A provocative move, but not punishable because I’m complying with his request. I could bend the bar easily, but conspicuously struggle with the task. I don’t know what’s in store for me, but the more my enemies underestimate me, the safer I’ll be.

“You’ve exceeded expectations, geneslave,” he says as he taps something into his computer pad, then looks at me. “There’s a party of Galerians, ten at last count, meeting us off planet Nativus. They’re paying enough to make this unpleasant excursion to the far end of the galaxy worth our while.

However, this little vid will net us four hundred thousand additional credits, maybe more. You're quite a find; you'll make their experience more exciting."

He sneers at me, gleeful at the prospect of making me squirm.

"It will be a little hunting party, number 972, and guess what? You're the prey. Eat well tonight, it will be your last meal." He turns on his heel and leaves the cell block, his two lackeys following behind.

I've been groomed from birth to fight and die for the Federation. It was only the healing quality of my blood, an anomaly, that allowed me to live as long as I have.

I'm not afraid of death, part of me welcomes it—what do I have to live for? But it's not my nature to die without a fight. I'll do as that *drackhole* said, I'll eat heartily at my last meal. I'll sleep if I can conjure it. And tomorrow I'll kill as many Galerians as I can before they kill me.

Chapter Two

Sirius

"We'll be transporting you to the surface momentarily," the first mate says. "You'll have ten *minimas* before the hunting party arrives. No one will be monitoring the hunt. There are no rules. The only thing in your favor is they've paid a great deal of money for this opportunity. My hunch is they won't use their long-range weapons at first. Why spend good credits and travel to this primitive planet at the end of the galaxy only to kill you in a *minima*?" He shrugs.

"We'll be taking our payment and going on about our business. Expect no help from us." He walks away, then turns back. "May the Gods be with you," he throws in as an afterthought.

In a few *modicums* I'm on the surface of the planet. My brain kicks into high gear, my synapses firing at lightning speed. I instantly assess the

environment. I believe it's just after sunrise; the light is brilliant. The temperature is cool, but not cold. I smell no large predators nearby.

I'm on a savannah—flat rolling plains with tall grasses almost as far as the eye can see. In the distance are mountainous forestlands that will provide cover and perhaps natural weapons of some kind. I run in that direction.

My body is built for speed and stamina. I'll need it—they'll have long-range laser weapons. I don't believe the first mate's assertion that they won't kill me immediately. They came a long way and paid a lot of money for a trophy. A picture of my mounted head—mismatched eyes lifeless, mouth open, sharp canines glistening with artificial saliva—pops into my mind.

I turn my attention to the task at hand—reaching the relative safety of the trees in the distance. It's been perhaps three *minimas*, not the ten I was promised, when I hear the hunting party rustling in the tall grass behind me.

Dropping to all fours, I dart right and then left to make it harder for them to follow my movements. My canine DNA is an advantage. When I run on four legs I'm low enough to be obscured from watchful eyes by the high grass. If they're observant, they might be able to see the green grass rustling around me, giving away my location.

My heart pumps rapidly. Even though I'm racing, clearly on defense mode, my mind is analyzing information like the swiftest computer, anticipating what I can do once I reach the cover of trees.

The whine and whoosh of laser fire assail my ears a moment before a volley bursts about twenty *fiertos* away. The ground trembles beneath my bare feet. I seize the energy deep inside me and put on more speed than I thought possible.

I can't poke my head up to determine my bearings or it will be blasted off. I keep aiming toward the mountains, hoping I haven't accidentally changed course.

Their laser blasts are coming steadily now, maybe ten *fiertos* away. The acrid smell of charred vegetation assails my nostrils. Their shouted curses carry on the air, then I hear the unmistakable deep hum of a hovercraft motor. My eyes flare in terror as I realize they'll be on top of me in *modicums*.

My muscles quiver in pain; I've been running four-legged for over a *mille*. I'm panting, breathing in huge gulps of air. My heart is beating so fast and loud I wonder if the hunting party can hear it. All I can do is race to the imagined protection of the mountains.

The ground begins to slope upward, and the humidity increases because of the thick vegetation under the dense canopy of trees. I stand, still running, never missing a step, and enter a forest filled with towering trees. Their maroon bark and burgundy leaves lend an eerie cast to the sunlight.

I need to find a weapon and a hiding place. For the first moment since this started, I believe I might escape this alive. If I can pick them off one at a time using every skill I possess, I could possibly kill them all.

Spying an ideal club on the ground, I snag it and keep running. It's an old tree root--long and slim with an uneven ball at the end. It's weighty in my hand as I keep running, looking for the perfect tree to climb.

I find a tall tree with easy footholds and am thirty *fiertos* off the ground in *modicums*, the heavy club clenched between my molars.

When people see me, they're aware of my canine DNA, but it's my feline DNA that helps me climb and gives me almost-perfect night vision. I hope I don't need my night vision today. One way or the other, I hope this is over long before dusk.

I peek through the thick foliage as a hovercraft carrying three of them lands near the treeline. The males are humanoid with fat faces and tusks thrusting up from their bottom jaws. They remind me of the slaver who slapped his pain-kill collar around my neck after my escape from the Feds. He was a brutal sadist who treated me so poorly I almost died of starvation.

The other seven Galerians are beating through the thick, green grasses of the savanna. They're well-armed and organized, about ten *fiertos* apart, heads tilted downward. Do they think they might have shot me? Are they looking for my body?

A stroke of luck, the three from the hovercraft have spread out about twenty *fiertos* from each other and only occasionally glance into the trees. I'm so far up and so well concealed they'll never see me.

My distance above the ground, although it keeps me well hidden, will make it hard to jump to the ground without detection. It will hurt like *drack* and I'll rustle branches on my way down, alerting the Galerians below. However, there's no other choice.

With perfect timing, I jump from my hidden limb through the branches below and land on top of one of them. He grunts as I crash down on him, possibly alerting his comrades. To kill him, I perform the quickest, quietest maneuver I can—twisting his neck, severing his spinal cord before he can sound an alarm.

I sling his laser rifle over my shoulder, run about fifty *fiertos* farther into the forest, and scramble up another tree. A few *minimas* later I hear increasingly excited chatter drift upward from the dead male's comm—his comrades must have noticed he's gone silent.

It's hard to believe these males paid good credits to hunt humanoid game—they don't seem to be seasoned warriors. The dead male's two companions come crashing to their fallen friend's aid and stand under the very tree in which I'm hiding thirty *fiertos* above their heads.

I debate whether I should just use the laser rifle on them, but their seven friends would immediately find, surround, and kill me—after they finish torturing me.

I picture every move I'm about to perform, then launch into action as I jump down between and behind them. My enhanced nervous system takes

over, almost bypassing conscious thought, utilizing my lightning-quick reflexes.

I slam their skulls together so hard they both lose consciousness. Sliding a knife out of one of their boots, I slit first one throat and then another. My adrenaline is pumping so fast and my strength is so prodigious I slice all the way through their necks to their spinal columns, creating a macabre, red smile four *inces* below their mouths.

It takes only *modicums* to remove one of their utility belts and fasten it around my waist. I run on silent feet farther into the forest and perch on a perfect limb in a tall tree before the seven males beating the tall grasses realize none of their three friends are responding to their comms.

I take swift inventory of my possessions: one fully-charged laser rifle, one extra power pack, one twelve-*ince* hunting knife, one comm, and a pouch with nutrition bars and a canteen of water. I remove the pouch while shaking my head. It's ridiculous to take food and water on a quick hunt like this when speed is more important than comfort.

My sharp gaze darts through the foliage, keeping track of all seven hunters. If I'm smart, I'll use the butt of the rifle as a club for the next several kills. If I use my laser, they'll know my location and start shooting. I'll be reduced to ash along with this entire tree.

I throw the pouch about fifty *fiertos* further into the woods where it makes its noisy descent through the branches, then hits the ground with a soft thud.

Two Galerians lumber toward the source of the commotion, separating from their comrades. I leap and silently grab the limb above my head. It's only as thick around as my bicep, but it holds my weight.

Climbing in the direction of the two isolated males, I move hand over hand toward them. Just before the thin, flexible end of the branch breaks from my weight, I leap to the neighboring tree.

Scrambling closer to my enemy, I climb from branch to branch until I'm hanging directly over one of them. I fall to the ground behind him, grab him by his hair and chin, and instantly snap his neck.

His friend thunders toward him, glances over and sees me. As our eyes meet, every iota of my animal DNA comes alive. I shove the fact that this is a sentient being into the back of my mind. It's kill or be killed.

Gripping the blade of my knife, I throw it with precision into the male's heart. His legs crumble beneath him and he noiselessly falls to the forest floor.

Every cell in my body, every thought in my mind, focuses on self-preservation.

The five remaining Galerians are spread out among the trees, systematically searching for me. It takes one modicum to visually play out my next ten moves, then I perform the macabre dance I just imagined in my mind.

I isolate one at a time, slicing or stabbing, then move to the next and the next until all of them are dead.

I climb a tree and wait long *minimas* to see if others come to their aid. I've never killed before. My training began at birth and continued until the day I escaped. I sparred and practiced, but until ten *minimas* ago, I'd never taken a life.

It's good I have no emotions. Someone with a heart would experience remorse or sadness at a time like this.

Although an *houra* ago I was ready to face my death, I place all my focus on remaining alive.

The Federation first mate told me they were speeding off toward more civilized planets—they aren't coming to collect me. Between the Federation ship's cloaking device and its immediate jolt into hyperspace after I was transported aboard, there's no way the *Lazy Slacker* will be able to find me,

even with the tracker the doctor inserted under my skin. No device has a range this far.

No help is coming for me. This is nothing new, I'm been alone and on my own with no one to care whether I live or die since I was born—or hatched as the Federation guards used to taunt.

And the hunting party? The Galerians could have all beamed down and left their unmanned ship orbiting the planet. Or they could still have comrades up there who will come looking for them—and me—perhaps soon.

I need to hurry as far from this carnage as possible. Whatever the threat, whether it's more Galerians, hostile aliens from Nativus, or carnivorous wildlife on this planet; I need to find shelter. There's no refuge on the savanna; I'd be completely exposed. I need to seek cover in the woods.

I climb down and rummage through all ten males' belongings. I pull on clothes, socks, and sturdy boots from one of the dead. After putting my utility belt back on, I add one of their comms, some lighters, nutrition bars, and fuel canisters.

The sun isn't even high in the sky yet. Before nightfall, I need to put as much distance as possible between me and this killing site.

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I've alternated running and walking and have traveled maybe sixty *milles* from the dead Galerians. The terrain has changed from thick woods to tree-dotted mountain meadows. I saw a cave a few *milles* back that might have been an excellent place to make camp, but I wanted to travel farther from the dead bodies.

I've seen no sign of hovercraft, nor have I heard anything on the dead male's comm.

There's ample wildlife on this planet. I've spotted numerous small mammals that will provide a never-ending supply of food once I fashion a

bow and arrows. I'll survive quite nicely on nutrition bars until I settle in.

Leaving the cover of trees, I'm in a small, open mountain meadow. I slow down and tilt my head to the sun, soaking in the warmth and noticing the perfect blue of the sky.

This suicide mission might prove to be a stroke of luck. Nativus is beautiful, the game is plentiful, and there appears to be no large natural predators. If I can find a cave near a stream, I could thrive here.

I hear a growl behind me and whirl around to see a pack of four-leggeds traveling fast, loping toward me. Their wicked fangs flash white as they surround me.

I slip the laser rifle from my shoulder and spray as many of the threatening, brown-and-tan spotted beasts as I can. Ten more converge on me from a copse of trees to my right.

I laser the newcomers, only to see more taking their places. What kind of animals are these? They're cunning and well organized. Powerful jaws flash wicked, snarling teeth. Their shoulders are so powerful, their backs slope downward to their muscular hips. They're natural killing machines.

Other humanoids' hearts would slam in their chests, fear would race along every nerve and synapse. I simply narrow my attention and focus on survival.

By the time I slam a new canister into the gun, I'm completely surrounded by about twenty snarling, jaw-snapping creatures.

Pivoting in a quick circle, I shoot a continuous burst of laser fire. After one complete rotation, there are about ten predators remaining. Without a moment's hesitation, they pounce.

I press the trigger again, repeating my earlier maneuver, spraying deadly laser fire in an arc. Many are dead, but before I can reload there are three hissing, spitting, ugly beasts bounding toward me.

Aliyah

The eerie hum of laser fire awakens memories from many winters ago and chills the marrow in my bones. Crouching low, I nock an arrow in my bow and creep toward the edge of the forest.

There's a male in the meadow using a firestick. He's killing a pride of *mam'non* beasts. The stranger must smell delicious to them; I've never seen so many attack at once.

He's wearing clothes covering his chest and legs. His long, dark hair falls down his back in waves. He's short, only six hands taller than me. He's fierce and foreign and...beautiful.

His weapon is so powerful I press my back against a tree to ensure he doesn't see me and mistake me for a threat. I'm not fearful for him—his weapon will kill all of the mangy *mam'non* in the work of a moment. I'm fearful for myself. He's the enemy. If he sees me, he'll certainly aim that firestick at me and shoot me dead. My heart thumps loudly in my chest, my hands tighten around my bow.

The situation shifts instantly when he stops firing his weapon, then turns it in his hands and uses it as a club, swinging it at the remaining *mam'non*. The largest of the three pounces and the male cracks it on the nose with the weapon. Yowling in pain it continues its forward motion—fangs bared—aimed at the male's throat.

As the male beats the animal with his weapon, I leap from my hiding place and let fly an arrow that pierces one of the two watching beasts in the throat. I let a second arrow loose, puncturing the other spectator in the flank. He staggers but isn't mortally wounded. He turns to me, looking for the source of his pain, giving me better access to his throat. I shoot him again, felling him instantly.

I run toward the life-and-death struggle in the meadow. The one remaining *mam'non* is lunging at the male's throat, while the stranger chokes the

beast, his arms fully extended keeping those sharp, snapping teeth a few fingers breadth from his face.

The animal gives a high-pitched yip as the male squeezes the *mam'non's* neck more tightly. The two are so close to each other, so tightly entwined, I don't have a good shot at the beast.

As the *mam'non's* powerful jaw eases closer to the male's throat, the male ducks his head and bites the *mam'non's* throat. The beast yelps and scrambles to pull away, but the male's jaw grips him firmly.

My arrow's nocked and aimed. I'm waiting for an opening to let it fly. The *mam'non* is in pain and enraged. He twists and gains purchase with his back feet solidly on the ground; his front claws paw the male's abdomen.

This gives me the perfect opportunity to shoot the beast. Three shots, one after the other—one to the flank, one to the shoulder, and a final perfect shot through its eye when it turns to see his attacker—me.

I run through the carnage in the tree-circled meadow, making certain every beast is dead, then reach the male's side, not believing any two-legged being could live through such damage to his stomach.

His head is lolled at an odd angle, his eyes are closed, his skin is paler than when I observed him from the safety of the trees. But he still breathes!

The smell of the slaughter will attract every carnivore in the valley. It's dusk; nocturnal animals love to hunt this time of day. We have to leave immediately.

I pull my knife, squat at the beast's side, and skin him quickly. Placing the bloody side of the hide on the grass, I pull the male on top of the spotted fur. Quickly cutting a chunk of meat from the animal's haunch, I throw it on the male's chest, grab the hide's edges, and hurry toward my cave.

The male may be small, but he's heavy and hard to pull even using the hide as a skid. It will be even more difficult when we're off the grass and

traveling over dirt and root-knotted terrain in the forest. In order to move him, I'm bent over, pulling the edges of the hide, scurrying backward, and dragging dead weight.

I stop from time to time, assessing the environment and our safety as well as gasping from exertion. I have time for few breaks—I need to reach the relative safety of the cave before full dark.

Every so often, the male moans, probably when I drag him over uneven rocks and his head thumps on something hard. At least those noises reveal he's still alive.

For a while, the hide left a red trail behind us, but that was scraped off on the grass. Between the stranger's exposed entrails, the chunk of meat, and the hide, I'm certain we still smell like blood. We can't arrive at the cave soon enough. I fear we'll attract the attention of *brantin* beasts who are larger and more deadly than *mam'non*.

Even if my eyes didn't notice, the noises of the forest tell me it's dusk. The small, scarlet *ernock* birds call to each other high in the trees. The light has almost disappeared; the shadows are long. The air is cooler and laced with humidity. Luckily, we're almost there.

I breathe out in a huff through my lips and shake my head. I have no idea how I'm going to haul him the last bit of the way. I can't bring the bloody hide so close to the safety of my cave.

"Stay strong, Aliyah," I whisper. "You can do anything you put your mind to," I repeat the words my Poppa has told me so many times.

The male's clothes are saturated with blood—both his own and the *mam'non's*. I cut them off and toss them on the hide. I'll dispose of them in a few moments.

I know I should hurry, the sun is dropping like a rock, but I can't tear my eyes from his tanned flesh. His powerful shoulders are wide and taper to a slim waist. His muscular thighs look strong enough to run all day. His body

carries no extra fat, so I can see every sinew and tendon under his unusual skin. My fingers itch to touch the striped, furred patches on his flanks and back.

His face is peaceful. The nose and cheekbones resemble mine, unlike the people of my tribe. His teeth were pointed and sharp—I saw that in the meadow. I shiver thinking of this male's powerful jaws as he engaged in a life and death struggle, biting the mam'non's throat.

"Hurry," I scold myself. I need to get him inside the cave; it's more defensible than out here in the open.

Stepping behind his head, I lean down, slide my arms up to my elbows under his armpits, and heave him to a seated position. I scoot in front of him, lean down, and hoist him onto my shoulder. I grunt under his massive weight as I struggle to a standing position.

This is so physically taxing tears squeeze from my eyes, but I lumber to the mouth of the cave, teeth gritted against the pain. I make my way to the side wall where my bed of furs awaits, then ease him off my shoulder and onto the soft pile.

One quick check that he's still breathing, and I run back to the ruined skin several hundred paces ahead. I grab the pelt and his dirty clothes, then hurry with the filthy bundle far from the mouth of my cave. I dump it, hoping it attracts every predator within sniffing distance—it will keep them away from us.

I quickly complete other necessary tasks: I gather fresh water, add wood to the embers I kept warm throughout the day, and throw the chunk of *mam'non* into a rawhide bag hanging over the fire to make broth.

After using the gourd dipper to trickle water into the male's mouth, I hurry to the nearby stream once more with only moonlight to guide me. Nocturnal animals are enjoying their first drink of the day. We pose no threat to each other, so I take a quick dip in the chilly water.

Back on the bank, I pluck more of the huge, flexible leaves I use for clothes, and swiftly fashion my covering. I pick more so I can wash the male before I assess the extent of his injuries.

I was bent over him the entire journey from the meadow to my cave. I had the opportunity to see his injuries from a close distance. The *mam'non* claws cut deep and definitely tore open his stomach.

I've seen two tribesmen suffer grave wounds to the abdomen—both injuries far less severe than this male's—and they quickly succumbed to their trauma. Attempting to heal this male is a fool's errand.

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