



ALIEN MATE

EXPERIMENT

ZENOBIA RENQUIST

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Semeera needs a plan for starting her life over. After divorcing a controlling husband, she's ready to enjoy freedom at last. Too bad she gets abducted by aliens before she can decide her next move.

Captain Kader is an alien warrior trapped in a dead-end assignment where he will never see battle again. There are no more challenges to his life, no chances for glory. And then a dangerous experiment brings him an unexpected visitor who changes everything.

They are as different from each other as night and day, but those differences only entice Semeera and Kader into finding out just how physically compatible they are. What should have been a little fun causes the resurgence of a disease long thought extinguished.

If Semeera triggered it in Kader, will others succumb? And will the scientists be able to get past Kader to find out? Most importantly, can a beautiful black woman really love an alien male with scales, claws, and a tail?

CHAPTER 1



Finalizing the divorce meant Semeera could exhale at long last. She stared out over the chasm before her, in total awe of the Grand Canyon at dusk. The waning sunlight made the reds and oranges of the rocks more vibrant, and a slight fog had risen, winding through the passage like the river it had once held. Her breath caught as she witnessed a sight that matched the feeling in her heart. Freedom. Nothing but open air before her. As if she could sprout wings and simply fly into a bright new future.

Joyous, blissful freedom.

She blinked back happy tears. Her struggle with the world's most domineering and judgmental man had ended. No more snide comments about how much she ate. No more daily reminders to use that expensive gym membership he'd bought for her birthday. No more forced smiles at company dinners where he'd presented her as a trophy wife incapable of thinking and speaking for herself.

Just no more.

How had she even let it get that bad? Semeera wished she could point to a single moment in her seven-year marriage that should have been her red flag to run. She couldn't. There hadn't been one. Her ex had been subtle in his manipulation, making her think each idea to change herself and her life was her own.

Naturally she wanted to be healthy, so why not skip sugary treats and fried foods? That would make it easier to maintain her slim figure, which could always be a lot thinner. Why settle for a size ten when she could be a size six... or even a size four? No point fighting an uphill battle, right?

And wouldn't it be better for her to walk five blocks from the free parking lot than to pay the garage fee at her part-time job? She'd saved money and gotten exercise at the same time. Win-win.

Also, learning to do the upkeep on her waist-length black dreadlocks saved money and put her in control of how often her hair got done rather than working around the beautician's busy schedule. That meant she could tame her new growth more often, say every other week instead of every four to six weeks, thus showing her chosen style at its best at all times. Plus, she saved money.

Money. Always money. It was the only thing her ex cared about more than himself. Every manipulation had been to make sure she spent as little of it as possible.

He'd presented every suggestion as a benefit to her, so she'd missed the obvious. She'd fixated too much on the carrot to notice the yoke tightening around her neck. When she'd finally stopped to look back on her life, she realized just how little she enjoyed it.

She missed fried fish and apple pie. Her part-time job used to be full-time with a benefits package that had included a parking fee reimbursement. And doing her own hair was a pain in the ass. The water from washing made it so heavy she strained to hold up her head. By the time she finished twisting each individual loc, her arms ached, her fingers tingled, and she wanted a nap. But not with a wet head. She'd spent hours under the cloth bonnet hair dryer her ex had bought so she could do something productive—like cleaning—while drying her hair, which would have gone so much faster under a professional hood dryer in a beauty shop.

"Asshole!"

"Whoa. What did I do?"

Semeera shook her head and smiled at her long-time friend in apology. "Sorry, Mason. Not you."

"Ah." He nodded in understanding. His neck-length, black-and-brown dreadlocks waved over his shoulders, making her jealous she had gone with thick locs instead of thin like his. "Good, because you were about to be walking the rest of the way to the bonfire." He chuckled and gave her a quick glance, as if to check to see if she knew he was kidding.

"Thanks again for picking me up."

"*De nada*, Meer. You know you can call on me anytime."

"I appreciate that." And she hoped to repay him someday for all his moral and emotional support while she'd gone through her divorce.

Mason had been the one to drag her out of the shitty extended-stay motel where she currently resided, convincing her to go to the movies, an expense she really

shouldn't have been indulging in but couldn't bring herself to deny. And it had helped that Mason footed part of the bill. Not all of it. She wouldn't let him, no matter how much he'd insisted. Her situation wasn't that dire... yet.

If only she could stop dwelling on all the bills and financial responsibilities she had, but they loomed, ever-present. She worried most about the new credit card in her name with an almost maxed-out balance and a zero-interest introductory period that expired in a year. No matter how hard she worked, she wouldn't pay off the debt that fast, which meant the regular interest would bury her.

She heaved a defeated sigh, allowing herself a moment of self-pity.

Mason asked, "Do you have an ETA on getting a car?"

"I wish. There's nothing but buses and a lot of walking in my future. My savings is earmarked for the deposit and first month's rent on the shitty one-bedroom apartment I found."

Mason sucked his teeth, sneering and grumbling something she didn't catch. "How did the judge let him get away with not paying you alimony? That makes no kind of sense."

She gave a derisive snort and rolled her eyes. "My stupidity and falling, yet again, for more of the ex's reverse psychology." She twisted her wedding rings around her finger. The two gold bands—one a with a diamond solitaire and the other a woven gold circle with strategically placed diamond chips—were the only things she'd kept.

Her ex had almost gotten her to throw them at him in a fit of anger. The same anger that had caused her to tell the judge she didn't want a damn dime from her ex after the man had waxed noble about how a strong, independent black woman—his exact words, even if he hadn't meant them and had been smirking as he said them—was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, but he wanted to do the right thing and help her the way he always had since first meeting her as a poor graphics design undergrad in debt up to her eyeballs. A debt he'd paid off, by the way.

She'd barely stopped herself from throwing her chair at his head. Instead, she'd thrown his offer of money back in his face, relieving him of his financial responsibilities toward her. And then, piling onto her stupidity—or was it gullibility? or both?—by insisting she had no issue paying what she'd supposedly charged on the credit cards. Her ex had pushed all the right buttons, playing her like a game set on easy with all the cheats unlocked.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Suddenly Semeera no longer saw freedom stretched out before her. The sun setting had transformed the canyon into a yawning black abyss, and reality had clipped her wings. Living paycheck to paycheck, working part-time, and scrounging for freelance jobs until she could find a full-time position that paid what her talent was worth wasn't freedom. More like surviving and hoping stress didn't land her in the hospital. A sudden lack of insurance meant she couldn't afford to get sick.

She turned from the canyon and headed to Mason's car. "Let's get to the party."

Mason caught up to her and patted her back over her hair. "You'll get there. Keep your head up."

"That's the plan." She started to say more but Mason cursed and jumped back. "Mason?"

He'd gone statue still. His light brown skin turned ashen, and his wide-eyed gaze was glued to the spot several feet in front of them.

A black-and-white king snake glided across the path, winding its way to the bushes on the other side.

"It's okay," Semeera said in a soothing tone. "It's not venomous."

"Don't care. Get rid of it," he said through clenched teeth. Mason trembled as if he wanted to back up more but couldn't get his muscles to move.

Her friend was four inches taller than her, weighed at least forty to fifty pounds more, and had been her rock these last few weeks, but now he appeared ready to pass out. She approached the snake even though she would have rather avoided it.

Snakes didn't bother her. She even thought some were cute, but Mason had acute herpetophobia. He was deathly afraid of snakes and all other reptiles. She shuffled her feet and kicked up dirt, which put some hustle in the snake's movements. Thankfully, it hadn't gone on the defensive, choosing to run—as it were—instead.

Once it was out of sight and Semeera was sure it wouldn't return, she went to Mason and rubbed his arms. "Okay?"

He nodded jerkily, breathing fast. His eyes remained wide and spooked.

"Maybe we should skip the bonfire. I don't even know why you went along with the group to have it out here. There's bound to be other... visitors."

"Not..." He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing quickly. "Not near a fire and with all those people making noise."

"You sure?"

He gave a wavering smile and focused his gaze on her. "I'm good." He darted a glance at the direction the snake had gone. "Just... Just... Uh..."

Semeera moved to stand on his left, not letting him finish the request for her to shield him. "Let's go." She linked arms with him and urged him toward the car. "Want me to drive?"

Mason handed her the keys as his answer and used the short drive up the highway to compose himself. By the time she parked at the campsite where the bonfire was being held, he was calm and smiling easily again. "Before we get out there..."

"What's up?"

"Whenever you want to leave, I'm ready. Don't think you have to hang around for my sake. 'Kay?"

He was being considerate of the fact that she'd turned anti-social during the divorce, and she loved him for that. This bonfire reunion of the moviegoers club they'd formed in college was her first interaction with a large group of people outside of work. Part of her feared her friends wouldn't recognize her as the woman they'd once known, that her ex's manipulations had changed her personality so much she wouldn't be able to relate to them any longer.

Another part of her told her to stop being a fucking baby and live already. Even if she *had* changed, so had they. The entire purpose of the reunion was to reconnect. Social media had kept most of them in touch, but this was the first face-to-face meet in years. So many years. She refused to run away from the chance to reclaim a piece of herself.

She gave Mason a big smile and patted his knee. "Thanks, Mason. You're the best."

"Aren't I, though?"

"And so modest." She laughed, and he laughed with her.

A knock on the driver's side window startled them out of their mirth.

Gavin grinned at Semeera as he opened her door. "Hey there, Meer. Long time."

"You too."

"Come here." He grabbed her hand and pulled her from the car, barely giving her time to unfasten her seatbelt. Engulfing her in a tight hug, he said, "It's great to see you."

"Still a hugger, I see." She patted his back then pulled away, having to push gently on his rock-hard abs to get him to let go. Thankfully, he took the hint and backed up a step but kept one arm around her waist.

Same old Gavin. Personal boundaries? What personal boundaries? Who wouldn't

want to be up close and personal with a man as good-looking as him? Back in college she'd loved the attention, but now she was over it, needing a break from men with big egos.

She stepped to the side and kept her hand on his stomach to hold him back from following her. When his brow wrinkled in the first signs of annoyance she recognized well from seeing it on her ex so often, she said, "You look good." She pointed to the tribal tattoo circling his upper arm. "Like the ink."

Gavin's frown melted away, and he grinned. "Thanks. I was debating getting a full sleeve." He flexed his arm, making his tanned biceps bulge. "What do you think?"

"Impressive." She wasn't lying. If she'd been in the market, Gavin would be her first choice. "But maybe you should just stick to the tribal so you don't detract from the muscles."

"Nothing could detract from his muscles," said Josie as she joined them. The petite blonde slipped her hand into the crook of Gavin's arm and smiled up at him. "He'll look good no matter what he does."

Gavin's grin got bigger. "Right?"

Semeera exchanged a wry glance with Mason, who shook his head as he walked away. Almost a decade later and the same rivalry still existed. Except this time, Semeera didn't want to compete with Josie. Technically, she hadn't been competing back in college either. She's just failed to turn down Gavin's attention when he'd lavished it on her, which had made Josie work all the harder to get the man to focus on her, making Gavin preen at having two women squabbling over him.

If he wanted to relive the glory days, he was doomed to disappointment.

Semeera followed Mason.

Gavin quickly fell into step beside her, pulling Josie in his wake. "What took you two so long? Secret rendezvous?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

Josie hugged Gavin's arm tighter, pressing it between her ample breasts, and said, "You and Mason do look good together."

Semeera said, "We're just friends, and we stopped to see the Grand Canyon. It's a shame to come all the way out here and not go."

"Yeah, I went up there earlier." Gavin sucked in a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "Gotta love these wide open spaces. Having this reunion in some cramped reception hall would have sucked."

"Especially for you, being claustrophobic and all."

"I'm not!"

Semeera bit back a sigh at the defensive quality of Gavin's voice. If she never had to put up with another arrogant man and his fragile ego again, it would be too soon.

He snapped, "I just don't like being shut up inside. All that recycled air and germs floating around. Disgusting. Can't stand it."

Should she tell him that was the very definition of claustrophobia or just let it go? "Sure."

Annoyance filled Gavin's blue-eyed gaze, probably because he noticed her conciliatory tone. "I'm gonna get a beer. You want one?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

He grunted and walked away, again dragging Josie behind him.

Semeera wished Josie all the luck in the world and hoped the woman kept Gavin far away for the rest of the night.

Several of her friends who caught sight of her chorused, "Semeera!"

She waved both arms over her head. "Hey, everybody."

Danielle rushed over and wrapped her full sleeve, Egyptian-motif-tattooed arms around Semeera in a tight hug. Her loose, wavy brown hair brushed against Semeera's face and filled her nose with the scent of cinnamon. "Hey, girl. How you doing? You didn't return my call."

Semeera hugged her friend back. "I know. Sorry. The last few days have been super hectic with getting the papers signed. It's finally over." That earned her a tighter hug. "I'm okay," she whispered.

"Of course you are." Danielle pulled back with a serious expression on her face. "We need to get together after this. I've got a client for you. A big client."

"How big?"

"Your job issues would be over if they hire you."

Semeera's eyes got big. "Seriously? Shit! I should have called you."

"Yes, you should have." Danielle gave her a squeeze, grinning, with a wink. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"You know we will."

The sound of someone sucking teeth and an exasperated sigh brought Semeera's attention to Shanti, standing apart from the crowd with her face turned to the sky and her phone to her ear. "Hang up the damn phone!"

Semeera blinked quickly and looked at Danielle, who shook her head.

"Just hang... I'll get home when I get home." Shanti shook her head. Her nimbus

of auburn corkscrew curls bounced with the motion. "No, I don't know when. Stop calling!" She pulled the phone away and stabbed the screen with her finger, ending the call with an annoyed growl. After a moment, she faced the bonfire and Semeera's questioning expression and said, "The husband."

"Wow." Semeera snorted. "You need the number for my divorce lawyer?"

"Woman, don't tempt. I'm about two seconds from dropping his whiny ass like a bad habit." Shanti stuffed her phone in her back pocket, stalked over to Semeera, and hugged her. "How you doing?"

"I'm good," she said as they pulled apart. "Could be better, but from the sounds of it, Danielle is helping me with that."

Danielle snorted. "Not that she needs my help. Meer has some serious talent. The client I spoke to is eager to see more of her portfolio."

Semeera let out a derisive chuckle. "Portfolio. Wow. How long has it been since I had one of those?"

"Ladies!" Royce draped his arms over Danielle's and Semeera's shoulders and insinuated his skinny sunburned self between them. "Do I hear shop talk when you should be talking about the latest Marvel feature or the upcoming Star Wars movie?" He gave Semeera a squeeze. "There's also s'mores."

"Well hell, why didn't you say that sooner?" Semeera pulled out of his hold and headed closer to the fire where two people were building the chocolate treats. "S'mores me!"

Royce followed behind her. "There's also hamburgers and hot dogs and—"

"S'mores." She took the offered dessert and bit into it with a thankful sigh. After finishing it, she held her hand out for another.

"Is that all you're going to eat?"

"Maybe. I've been watching my girlish figure for too damn long."

Royce looked her up and down with an appreciative gleam in his brown eyes. "I would be happy to watch it for you. Did you pour yourself into those jeans? Because if so, bless you." He made the sign of the cross with his palm in the air and then kissed his knuckle.

Semeera was glad he thought her tight jeans were a fashion choice instead of the first sign that she'd ditched her exercise regime in favor of eating whatever the hell she wanted while sitting in front of the TV. She hadn't exercised in months, breaking from her routine while she recovered from surgery, long before the divorce had even been on the table, and then she'd continued her negligence as a way of rebelling

against her ex's insensitivity about her ordeal. Of course, she ended up with a few added pounds that made her once-baggy jeans cling to her curves, but she didn't care. And as soon as she had the money, she would update her wardrobe to match her new size. Until then, tight was her new look.

She was just about to bite into her third s'more when lightning flashed overhead. Purple lightning. A boom of thunder that reverberated in her chest followed.

"Damn! Did you feel that?" Royce put his hand to his chest.

Gavin, coming up behind them, said, "Feel it, nothing. Did you see it? I've never seen purple lightning before." He looked around and several people shook their heads.

Josie pulled out her phone. "I'm getting video of this. That is gorgeous."

Semeera agreed and pulled out her own phone. She doubted her camera would properly pick up the beauty of the lightning dancing cloud to cloud, but the recording would be a great way to jog her memory of the moment.

Mason said, "I thought the forecast said it was supposed to be clear tonight." He pulled out his phone, but didn't point it at the sky like the others, probably checking the weather.

"Don't worry, sugar." Shanti gave him a bump with her hip. "I've got an umbrella you can use to keep from melting."

"Ha. Ha."

A bolt hitting close to the bonfire ended all amusement. The air crackled and heat washed over them. The deafening roll of thunder that followed close behind knocked over a few people and backed up others.

Semeera saw her fear reflected back at her in her friends' eyes. Before she could suggest heading for cover, another bolt hit the bonfire, spraying burning wood and ash over the group.

"Holy shit! Run!"

She didn't know who had yelled the command, but the crowd scattered amid screams and more cursing. Her frantic flight propelled her toward Mason's car, which she hoped would be safe. Was a car safe in a lightning storm? She couldn't remember anything she'd learned back in school about avoiding strikes.

And then it didn't seem to matter as purple lightning rained around her. Strike after strike coming fast. Blinding. Hot. The air sizzled with electricity that made her ears ring and her muscles tense and lock up.

She tried to push through the pain, to continue running, even if she wasn't sure

she was running straight. She prayed to survive this. Prayed hard. She wasn't even religious. But damned if she wasn't begging God, Zeus, Ra, Odin, and anyone else she could think of for a favor right then. She didn't want to die.

The lightning didn't hurt when it hit her. It wasn't even hot. Probably because every single nerve in her body had burnt to a crisp in a second, cutting off all sensation. A blessing in disguise as she breathed her last.

And her final thought before giving up to oblivion—*why did it feel as if she was floating?*



KADER JAMMED his port control forward while firing, sending his fighter into a spin and spraying everyone on that plane with his fake ammunition. He caught several of his opponents by surprise. Their angry hissing curses through the comm made that evident.

He grinned as he dipped his controls and pulled his fighter out of the spin that would have made a lesser warrior dizzy enough to puke. Not him. He was dizzy but wouldn't puke. The dizziness didn't hinder him. He compensated the way his trainers taught him, chased one opponent, and tagged him with fake fire before his vision righted itself.

More cursing.

His blood sang through his veins. Exhilaration beat his heart instead of involuntary brain function. Only one thing would make this better—facing true enemies with live ammunition.

This battle was a training exercise with the captains of the other science vessels in the area. It was the only battle any of them would see while they commanded ships with barely any firepower and even less strategic value, which meant they would never see combat. Not that Kader would see combat even if an enemy engaged with the science vessels.

“Captain Kader, this is your ten-minute warning.”

Kader ignored the monotone voice of his ship's technician and chased another fighter who flew in erratic patterns to escape being hit. It wouldn't do the male any good. And to prove that point, Kader stayed with him, closing the distance between them, toying with his prey and almost tasting the fear in the air.

He flicked his tongue, knowing all he would scent was himself since he was

enclosed in the cockpit of his fighter.

“Captain Kader, did you hear my previous transmission? At your current distance—”

“Acknowledged!” Kader clenched his teeth with an annoyed hiss that turned into a roar of pure loathing.

He signaled his retreat and turned his fighter back to his ship, flipping the booster so he made it in time. A countdown appeared on his cockpit screen. He hissed at it and pushed his fighter faster. Reckless, for sure. But better to be reckless than caught outside when the countdown hit zero.

His mouth hitched up on one side in a deadly smirk as he imagined plowing into his ship and ending it all. Imagination only. He was a warrior with a duty. There was nothing more important to a warrior than his duty—no matter how mind-numbingly staid that duty was.

The countdown showed twenty seconds as his ship came into sight.

“Captain Kader, your approach speed will cause a collision.” The male’s voice held panic.

Coward.

His whole ship was manned by cowards. Not their fault. They weren’t warriors like him. The only ones who came close to his stature, and not that close at all, were the security personnel. Their purpose was to guard, and they only had enough training to do just that. They weren’t like him. No one on his ship was like him, because a science vessel didn’t need more than one warrior.

“Captain Kader, you cannot hope to slow down in time.”

He ignored the panicked male and stayed his course and speed, watching his ship grow bigger every second as the clock continued to count down.

Five seconds.

He had to time it just right.

“Captain!”

Two seconds.

Kader wrenched his controls, flipping the fighter so the boosters now caused a sudden deceleration that threw him against his harness. The fighter came to a complete halt as the countdown hit zero and his power cut off.

He floated beside his ship, within visual distance of the landing bay and the personnel there who stopped running around as though being chased by stinging flyers and stared at him.

He opened his comm—the only thing that still functioned on his fighter—and barked, “Reel me in already!”

“Y-Yes, Captain. Right away.”

He hissed and crossed his arms, annoyed with himself, annoyed with his crew, and most of all, annoyed with that fucking countdown.

The fighter jolted as a tether hit it and then again as the landing bay crew pulled him into the bay. The second he cleared the atmospheric barrier, he shoved open his cockpit and jumped out.

No one said anything as he stalked away. Smart. He wasn't in the mood. Then again, when was he ever?

“Captain.”

And his day got worse. He stopped with a hard sigh and waited for the lead scientist of an experiment he hadn't bothered to familiarize himself with. Once the female reached his side, he continued walking. “State your purpose.”

“That was... scary, Captain. Many thought you wouldn't stop in time.”

“You insult me.”

The female gasped, her fear thick in the air. “F-Forgiveness, Captain. That wasn't my intention.”

He sighed again. “What do you want?”

“Yes. Of course. The readings from the star report optimal output...”

Kader tuned out her words as she rambled on about nonsense that meant nothing to him. Why couldn't she just say what she needed instead of subjecting him to this barrage of useless information?

He didn't care about any of it. Nothing on this ship interested him, save his fighter, which was out of commission for another two weeks, information that made his mood even darker. He wanted to return to his suite and do something a warrior would never do—pout.

Such a childish emotion should have been beaten out of him during training. He'd thought it had, and yet here he was.

Pouting.

Just thinking the word made him want to break something. And if the female beside him didn't get to her point soon, she would become his unlucky victim.

He slammed his tail on the floor with a resounding bang that made the female jump away from him, yelping with fear that perfumed the hall. “I have little patience at this moment, female. What. Do. You. Want?”

The lead scientist—he couldn't even be bothered to remember her name—pulled herself up to her full height with her chin in the air. Brave, but her stance lacked force since the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. If that. "It is time to run the transport experiment."

"Proceed." He continued walking.

"Captain Kader, protocol dictates you be on the bridge when—"

He hissed and slammed his tail again.

"I do not make the rules, Captain."

"And thus you have nothing to fear from my irritation." He reversed his direction to head for the bridge, the lead scientist following several paces behind him. Smart female.

"Captain on the bridge," one of his crew called the moment he entered.

"Get on with it already," he barked as he made his way to his chair, ignoring all those who saluted him and then hissing at them to get them moving.

The lead scientist hurried to the nearest technician. They conferred for a moment in low tones before the lead scientist faced the view screen that showed the star they were using as a power source for whatever the hell they were doing.

The moment the lead scientist opened her mouth Kader tuned her out. He didn't care. So long as her experiment didn't blow up his ship, she could do whatever she wanted. None of it concerned him.

He closed his eyes in meditation, blocking all noise and activity, to rein in his turbulent emotions so the next person who spoke to him didn't get his claws in their throat. His current predicament wasn't their fault. That honor lay with his superior, the male who'd promoted Kader to the *honor* of captaining this ship.

And then the ship bucked to the side and alarms sounded around him, shattering his peace. He opened his eyes while gripping the armrests of his chair to keep from being thrown off it.

Purple static sizzled around the bridge and fear was heavy in the air.

The ship bucked again.

"Report!"

A technician said in a frantic tone, "Energy levels rising dangerously fast."

"Shut it down."

"I can't, Captain. The controls stopped responding. Energy levels entering critical."

Kader slammed his fist down on the emergency switch. "Abandon ship!"

Everyone scrambled from the bridge except the five essential crew members and himself. They had to hold the ship together as long as possible so everyone could evacuate.

He grumbled under his breath, "If I survive this, I will gut that female."

"Captain?"

"Get that machine shut down. Do whatever you have to. I wasn't planning on dying today."

"Controls remain frozen, Captain. Energy spike incoming. Brace."

Kader refused to close his eyes. He wanted to see death coming. He gripped his armrests in anticipation of the pain of his body being ripped to shreds as the ship exploded.

The purple static changed to purple lightning. Thick sizzling bolts of hot energy flashed around the bridge, narrowly missing the crew. And then they converged into one massive bolt that struck the bridge with a deafening boom. The impact threw everyone from their seats to bang against the walls and slam against the floor.

Even Kader couldn't maintain his grip, getting thrown from his chair to fall the three levels to the lowest floor of the bridge and land inches from the outline of the scorch mark where the bolt hit.

And then all was silence. No alarms. No yelling. It took Kader a moment to realize he was deaf from the boom. Hopefully his hearing would return. Until then, the rest of him was whole, the minor pain he felt was ignorable, and he had a job to do.

The lightning and static had stopped. The ship no longer shuddered as though it would shake apart any second. If he could hear the technicians, they would probably report that the worst of it was behind them. He would have to go up to the first level to see for himself, thanks to his hearing loss. Since his ship hadn't exploded, he wouldn't have to gut the lead scientist for putting them all in danger.

He pushed to his feet to assess the damage from the lightning and then froze.

The sight before him made no sense. And staring at it gave no answers, but he couldn't look away.

The transportation experiment had worked. As to what it had transported, he would leave that up to the scientists to ascertain.

CHAPTER 2



The little alien was brown, the color of cliff jewels. A pretty enough shade but a bit strange. Kader wondered if the color covered the alien completely. The clothing it wore made it hard to tell. At least he thought it was clothing. That could be its skin. It was tight enough—the portion on its legs, anyway.

“Our scans detect ovaries, thus we believe it is female, Captain.” Doctor Gyan, a scientist brought on board when their guest had arrived, showed Kader his tablet full of data. Or tried to.

Kader’s hearing had returned with no lingering effects from the drama on the bridge. He hadn’t even needed medical attention, although the head doctor had forced him and the rest of the bridge crew to submit to exams before clearing them to return to duty.

All were healthy with no major injuries. Kader sustained no damage at all, but he was a warrior. He was trained to take punishment far worse than that which the failed experiment had inflicted on him. Actually, not failed, considering what lay in the infirmary of his ship.

He ignored Gyan’s tablet to stare at the female. Not like their females at all. Her body was strangely curvy and lacked scales. Her face was squished and none of her teeth protruded past her lips—which were too plump. Everything about the alien was soft. And small.

She lay on a bed in the infirmary and her feet barely reached the midpoint. When Kader used the infirmary beds, during the physicals he never thought he needed, his feet hung off the edge. He doubted the female would stand taller than his waist.

Had their experiment stolen a child?

As if hearing his question, Gyan said, “As near as we can tell, using only scans and inference, she is a mature adult of her species. Whatever that species may be.

We've searched all our databases and have found no matches. The databases of our nearest allies had nothing as well."

"You didn't let on what you searched for, correct?"

"Give me more credit than that, Captain. I know we've only just met, but I didn't rise to my current rank by being stupid. I merely requested access to their files and copied them all for later research."

Kader leveled a steady gaze on the doctor. "Whether you are stupid or not, I do not care. My duty is the protection of this ship. Anything that could compromise the safety of this ship is something I should be made aware of. That includes requesting information from our supposed allies. The next time you need information this ship does not contain, the request must go through me. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain. Forgiveness."

Kader waved away the male's insincere-sounding apology. "What else do you know about her? Is she a threat?"

"Hardly. Her claws are too thin and would break if she ever tried to use them on our scales. They are also very short. Her blunt teeth suggest she's an herbivore or possibly an omnivore, although I don't see how her species could be anything except a prey animal, suggesting they do not hunt."

"And the ropes attached to her head? What purpose do they serve?"

Gyan shook his head. "They make no sense to us. They are not attached with an adhesive but growing from her head and are not in a strategic enough position to make a viable weapon."

Nodding, Kader said, "Her opponent would use them to incapacitate her and strangle her with them. A punishment, maybe?"

"I could not say. Maybe a status symbol of some kind? They are quite long." Gyan made notes on his tablet. "We hesitated to remove her clothing. Some of it appears bonded to her. With her soft skin, it makes sense her people would use thick cloth to protect themselves. The tightness of the weave and density of the fabric suggest a certain level of intelligence." He shrugged. "Until she wakes, we won't know how much."

"Hm." Kader continued his study of the female, not sure why she held his attention.

And then it hit him. She was cute. No other word fit. Small and soft and *cute*. His fingers flexed at his sides. He wanted to find out how soft. He'd always had a weakness for cute squishy things, and this alien appeared very squishy. Especially

the protrusions on her chest.

He pointed at them. "What is the purpose of those?"

Quagid, Gyan's assistant, said, "They are fat surrounding dormant mammary glands."

A quelling look from Gyan made the other male take several steps back with his head bowed and a mumbled apology. Gyan said, "As Doctor Quagid has already said, they are mammary sacks. Her species must nurse their young, indicating an inability of their young to fend for themselves at birth."

"A very weak species."

"Maybe. Maybe not. A species with so few obvious defenses may well be dangerous in other ways."

Kader narrowed his eyes. "Venom?"

"The scans showed none, although there were high concentrations of chemicals in her system that would be fatal to us. Ingested on purpose, it would seem."

"Poison eaters," he said with a touch of awe in his voice. "That is a formidable defense this soft one has."

"Soft one?" Gyan regarded the female as if seeing her for the first time. As a doctor, he must have been studying the female as a thing and not seen in her what Kader did. Now he looked and then nodded. "An apt description, Captain. I didn't take much notice at the time, but her skin is soft due to her lack of scales."

The urge to feel for himself returned. Kader tamped it down. He was only there for a report and had already lingered far longer than he should. If Gyan had been any other scientist on any other project, such as the female lead scientist of the transport experiment, Kader would have cut the doctor's words short with cool indifference and left as quickly as possible.

But this alien intrigued him, and not simply because of how she'd arrived on his ship. Carried by waves of energy that had nearly torn his ship apart and yet she'd shown absolutely no damage from her arrival. No burns. Not even scrapes on that soft-looking skin of hers. All the damage had been focused on the bridge and was quickly repaired. He had recalled the escape pods. Several hours later, life had returned to normal.

The only thing that had changed was his ship's purpose. The female scientist and her experiment had moved to a ship more capable of handling the energy surges from the attempt to harness and utilize the energy of their planet's star—now that there was documentation of how bad the surges could get—while Gyan and his

team had moved on board to study the alien the experiment had retrieved.

“Are you ready to wake her?”

Gyan gave a quick nod. “Yes, Captain. That was why I requested your presence to approve the removal of the stasis field.”

“Approved.” Kader glanced at the five security guards near the back of the room. They were unnecessary while he was there, but protocol demanded they be present.

With a few strokes on his tablet, Gyan deactivated the stasis field that had held their alien guest in suspended animation until they could determine if she was a threat, directly or indirectly.

The moment the field dropped, the soft one let out a tortured moan and shifted on the bed, only to moan again. She breathed shallow as someone in pain would do. Was she in pain? Or was that how one of her species breathed normally?

Gyan took out his exam rod and approached the bed, but Kader blocked his path with his arm out, noticing the soft one’s sudden stillness, as though preparing for something.

An attack?

A single look silenced whatever Gyan planned to say next.

Behind them, security readied their weapons. Now they would see if this soft alien was as helpless as Gyan described her.



SEMEERA HAD HAD some massive hangovers before, but this one was the Godzilla versus King Kong battle royale for who gets to destroy the world of hangovers. It hurt to breathe. When had she ever gotten so drunk that it hurt to breathe the next day?

Never. And she hadn’t been drinking the night before. What had she been doing? It hurt to think. She would kill for a tall glass of rum to chase down the bottle of aspirin she needed to get rid of this headache.

Did she have aspirin?

For that matter, how had she gotten home?

The last thing she remembered was running from purple lightning and praying not to die. And she could have sworn she’d gotten hit. Maybe it had just grazed her. But that still didn’t explain how she’d gotten home. Or what that sound was—kind of mechanical with soft beeps.

Nothing in her motel room sounded like that. She didn't want to open her eyes to see what it was, knowing the light would make her headache worse. But she got the strange feeling she wasn't in her room. That meant she needed to find out who she was crashing with and whether they had aspirin and rum.

She cracked open her eyes and then yelped, slamming her eyes closed once more and smacking her hands over them.

Mistake!

Huge mistake!

Colossal mistake!

That little bit of light ricocheted through her head and burned everything in its path, ratcheting up her pain beyond levels she didn't even know a human could experience without dying. Breathing through the pain didn't help because breathing fucking hurt. Everything hurt. She wanted to writhe with the pain she was experiencing, but moving hurt. The sobs leaving her lips were involuntary as were the tears seeping past her hands. She wasn't the suicidal type, but if it meant an end to this pain, she would gladly eat a bullet.

For a moment she thought someone had heard her plea when something cool and blunt pressed to her forehead. And then the pain lessened. Not by a lot. She wouldn't call it tolerable, or even acceptable, but at least the desire to rip off her own head had subsided.

And then the blunt object returned and her pain dropped again. She semi-relaxed with a thankful sigh, ready to declare her undying love to whoever had given her relief. Lowering her hands and opening her eyes slowly, she prepared to endure the pain the light would bring just to relay her thanks for whatever the person had done.

She screamed instead and backed up so quickly she hadn't realized she'd moved until the wall pressed against her back. A quick look around revealed she was on a bed in a corner. Trapped.

The cause of her fright was the giant cream-colored lizardman standing over her. She waited for her brain to make sense of what she was looking at or for someone to jump out and laugh at her reaction. Neither happened, and the lizardman inched closer to her while waving behind its back.

She chanced looking away from it to see there were others in the room. Her blurred vision didn't impair her ability to discern there were more lizardmen—gray ones this time—and they were just as tall. She snapped her gaze back to the one closest to her.

He was talking. At least she thought he was talking. His tone was soothing but then he ruined it by reaching for her.

Semeera screamed again and scrambled for the foot of the bed, tumbling over the edge and then darting under it to stuff herself as far into the corner as she could. Knees hugged to her chest, she prayed for the second time in her adult life. Funny how stressful situations beyond comprehension made a person religious.

**** END OF EXCERPT ****

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Zenobia Renquist is the alter ego of D. Reneé Bagby, or simply Reneé to her friends. An Air Force brat turned Air Force wife, she was born in the Netherlands and has traveled all of her life, calling many places home. She's an avid world builder who loves torturing her characters on their paths toward happily ever after. When not concocting new ways to give her characters a hard time, she enjoys crocheting, reading *shoujo* manga, watching anime and Asian dramas, or bingeing a series on Netflix.

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