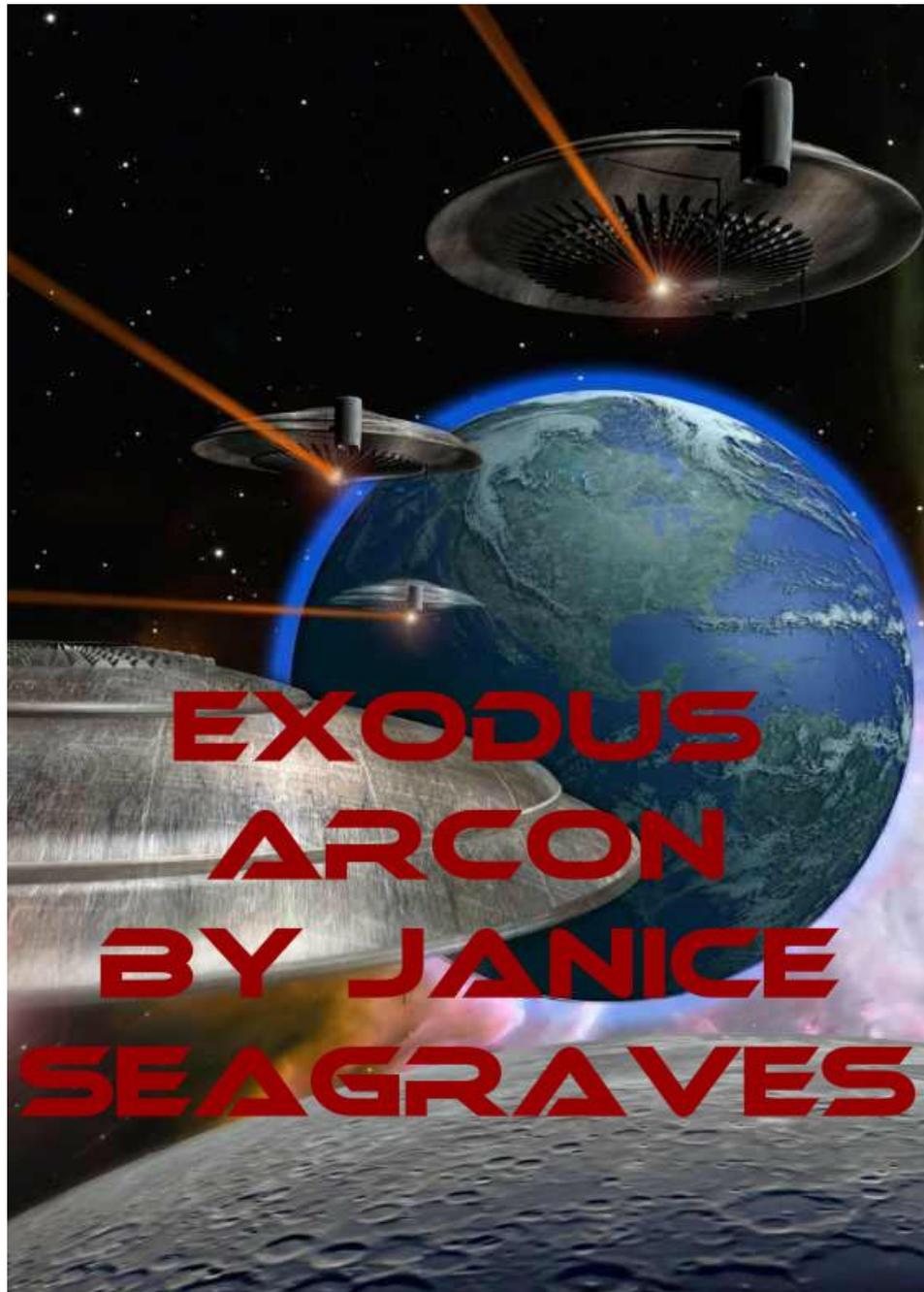


Exodus Arcon

Part 1

By Janice Seagraves



The start of a new SF series

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This story is a free read, and as such has gone straight from my head to the computer. Please be kind and overlook any typos or issues that might otherwise be caught during editing.

Cast of Characters:

Aziza Starstrider: Female from planet Arcon. Mated to Keefe, Prime pro tem and heir of Prime Ynyr.

Blade: A military male from Arcon and twin brother to Keefe. Podling to Keefe and Lug. Brother to Paz, Dar and Dab.

Keefe Starstrider: Male from planet Arcon. Mated to Aziza. Born of the same pod (all males are born in a set of triplets called a pod, but sometimes two will be identical twins). Keefe is an identical twin to Blade and podling or pod-brothers to both Blade and Lug.

Paz: A young Arcon male who will be a scientist someday. Son to Prime Ynyr and youngest brother to Keefe, Lug and Blade. His podlings are Dar and Dab.

Prime Ynyr: The leader of the Arcons and mother to Keefe, Blade, Lug, Paz, Dar and Dab.

The Mother: The living Goddess of the Arcons. She's a cat like being who can change shape at will.

Ynyr's mates: They are also the fathers to Keefe, Blade, Lug, Paz, Dar and Dab.

First mate: Lim, the warrior and body guard.

Second mate: Neron, the scientist.

Third mate: Xin, Ynyr's youngest mate and domestic.

Shadow Warriors:

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Dirk: leader of the shadow warriors

Pierce and Steel: shadow warriors

Rod: the punisher

A brief primer on Arcon slang:

Domestic: A male mated (or just hopefully waiting until the female wants him), who works inside the home.

Mate or mates: domestic partners or poly groups. Arcon females are the leaders of their families. Since it take three males to impregnate one female, the females can have up to three male mates.

Pod: three males born at the same time like triplets'.

Podlings: What Arcon parents call their sons, or an affectionate term the brothers born at the same time or pods call each other.

One

The door slid open. “Welcome, Aziza,” said Xin with a gracious bow of his white head, his green ponytail bobbed behind him. “And welcome my son.”

“Thank you, Xin,” Aziza said, striding into the suite and heading over to Ynyr.

Keefe followed his mate, Aziza, but paused long enough to grab forearms with his second paternal-unit. A warm feeling enveloped him. He’d already spent his first year being mated, so homesickness wasn’t an issue anymore, but it still felt good to return home.

His feet sank into the heavily padded gray carpet. Then he glanced at the familiar walls with the swirls of light green and lavender that flowed over the rounded ceiling. Then his gaze dropped to the large comfortable overstuffed white furniture, that he and his podlings had spent so many days playing on or around instead of in the big playroom like they were supposed to.

Lug, his podling, sat wolfing down something from a bowl in the dining area, his attention all for his food. Xin walked over to pat his shoulder, offering a napkin. Lug was a messy eater.

“Keefe,” shouted Paz. His youngest brother knelt playing with his two stunted podlings, Dar and Dab, just inside the playroom door.

The other two grinned at him with identical round, soft, unfinished faces, as if there wasn’t enough material left after making Paz to finish them, too. They gave him a wave and went back to playing with their plastine blocks.

Paz stood, picking his way through the scattered toys. Like most young unmated males his long green and white hair trailed way down his back. He finally made it over to Keefe and gave him a hug.

Keefe looked down at his brother. “How are you, youngling?”

“Great! After testing, my instructors told me I will be a scientist.” A proud grin lit up his face.

“That’s wonderful, Paz.” Keefe smiled at his brother, but felt troubled. He and his mate had come to find out if Ynyr would be joining them. If she didn’t go, then his little brother wouldn’t, either. Unfortunately, that would mean he’d have no chance at a future at all.

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“I’ve been learning about Earth. Did you know they have five fingers and five toes instead of four like we do?” Paz held up her four fingered hand, then wrinkled up his nose. “Creepy.”

“Keefe, my offspring, you have no greeting for your maternal-unit?”

“My apologies, Ynyr.” He walked over to his mother. Careful of the tubes that kept her alive, he embraced her. Then he gently kissed a withered cheek. “How is the most gorgeous female in the galaxy?”

“Flatterer,” she scolded, and fluffed her almost white ponytail. Her lavender hair color was nearly gone, an indication of illness. But Ynyr was considered a great beauty in her youth. All the males in her life continued to treat her as if she still was. “I have to ask your mate something. Go standby Neron.” She shooed him away.

Keefe obediently went over to the youngest of his three paternal-units, gripping forearms with him. “What’s this about?” he whispered.

“Ynyr, will be asking something very hard of your mate, so please be supportive of your maternal-unit.”

“Why?”

Neron turned serious eyes on him. “It’s important for the survival of our family line, my son.”

Keefe glanced over to where his mate knelt beside his maternal-unit. Her high lavender ponytail bobbed a few times when she nodded, but then it whipped back and forth in agitation.

Abruptly, Aziza let go of Ynyr’s hand and jump to her feet. “No, you are asking too much. I won’t do it!”

Keefe hurried over to gently touch his mate’s back. “What is it, my heart?”

She turned toward him, her crimson eyes wild and angry. “You won’t believe what she wants me to do.”

He faced his mother. “Ynyr?”

“I know you are angry with my request, Aziza, but hear me out.” Tears filled Ynyr’s eyes. “I am dying. Here is where I must stay.”

“What-no?” Keefe gasped. He jerked his gaze to his eldest paternal-unit, Lim, who stood just behind his mother’s chair.

Lim gave him a grave nod.

Keefe’s head swam and it took all his concentration just to stand. *It can’t be true.*

His mate’s voice rose, and he had to concentrate just to hear what she had to say.

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“I know the rules for passage won’t allow the terminally ill to travel to the new world, but you can still come,” Aziza protested. “No one will gainsay you and yours a place on board.”

“Who do you think wrote that ordinance?” Ynyr gave a weary sigh. “Yes, I am still technically Prime. However, being the leader of our people, I can’t be above the law. My mates and I, along with my deficient younglings, will remain behind.”

A tremor shook the home. They all looked up at the high domed ceiling; a few cracks formed, but it held.

Aziza turned her gaze back to Ynyr. “What you’re asking of me is breaking the law.”

“No, it only breaks the spirit of the law, not the law itself.”

“A technicality.” Aziza made a dismissive wave of her hand.

“What does she want?” Keefe asked again.

“I have great news—the Mother came to me.” Ynyr’s rheumy red eyes lit up with a fanatical gleam.

“The Mother?” Lim shouted. “That old feline put you up to this?” He paced the length of the living room, pulling on his high ponytail.

“Lim,” Ynyr snapped, getting his attention. “You are the oldest and most beloved of my mates. I know I sometimes make allowances for you, letting you speak your mind too much. But do not disparage the Mother.”

Lim knelt beside her chair, bowing his head. “Forgive my outburst, Beloved. I just hate when she interferes in our lives.”

“She led me to you, didn’t she?” She ran one arthritic hand over his hair.

“Yes she did, Beloved.” Lim put this head in her lap, as she continued to pet his hair. “I was so surprised to see such a beautiful female entering our small settlement. Later my delight was made whole when we mated.”

Ynyr gazed up at Aziza. “The Mother told me my line will live on. She showed me a vision of my granddaughter. She will be born on the new world.”

“Oh,” Aziza said softly and took a step closer. “What will she look like?”

Ynyr frowned a moment. “She will have pink eyes and pink hair. Odd, but she’ll be very beautiful too. She’ll be born with the Mother’s blessing and be a great leader for our people.”

“That is great news.” Aziza smiled up at Keefe. “Our first child will be a daughter.”

Keefe took his mate’s hand to kiss it. “Any offspring we have, my heart, will be beautiful.”

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“But for this to happen, you must do as I ask,” Ynyr told them. “The Mother told me is of the upmost importance that my lineage remains unbroken. You are my heir, Aziza, and the next Prime.”

“But what you ask of me—”

“Is hard I know.” Ynyr acknowledged with a nod, while her hand continued soothing her mate’s hair.

Lim’s eyes closed and his face went slack.

Ynyr’s fierce gaze took in Keefe’s puzzled expression. “You, my offspring, are safe. Being Aziza’s mate, your place on board is guaranteed. But there are two of my podlings who also need saving as well.”

Keefe’s gaze slid over to his youngest brother, still standing nearby. “Do you want us to adopt Paz?”

“No.” She shook her head with a heavy sigh. “I waited too long for the doctors to give me their final verdict on my health. Then my appeal for Paz to journey on his own as an unattached male was turned down.”

“But you’re Prime!” he said in outrage.

“Even I get turned down, Keefe.” Ynyr gave a heavy sigh. “It’s also too late for adoption. That branch of the government is already in the onboard hibernation tanks.”

Aziza looked up at Keefe. “She means for me to mate with him.”

“What?” Keefe’s eyes got big. “But he is too young for mating?”

Aziza’s hand went out in a calming gesture. “Pretend mating.”

“But,” Ynyr added, “it has to be good enough to pass the council’s inspection, so they’ll allow him board the ship.” She looked over at her brightest child. “Paz will have to give her a love bite.”

“I-I can’t do that.” Paz’s eyes were huge as he shook his head.

Neron patted Paz’s shoulder. “It is a simple thing, youngling. All that is required is that you break her skin. But you . . . mustn’t . . . swallow her blood.”

Paz felt his sharp canines with his thumb, then covered his mouth. “Ugh.”

Aziza looked grim. “I’m not looking forward to this, either, little one.”

“Who else did you want to save?” Keefe’s gaze went to Lug, who still busily ate his meal.

“Not him,” Ynyr replied in a low voice. “Your . . . other . . . podling.”

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Keefe's mind flashed on his identical twin. "You don't mean—?"

"I still will not allow his name to be spoken in my home," Ynyr snapped.

"But you wish to save him?" Keefe frowned.

"I will tell you this one thing, but you are not to tell him, ever." Her gaze held the same unwavering sternness that kept her in good stead on the floor of the senate.

"Yes?"

"I made a mistake." Ynyr shook her head, looking off. In her distraction, she stopped petting her oldest mate's hair.

Lim lifted his head from her lap. "Beloved?"

"I'm not infallible," she told Lim. "You, my mate, were right and I was wrong. I sent the wrong offspring away." A tear ran down her wrinkled cheek.

They both looked over at Lug, who stopped eating long enough to smile at his parents before grabbing a dessert from Xin.

"But the one I kept wouldn't have comprehended what was happening to him, and I couldn't bear to part with him."

"I know, Beloved, but our—"

Ynyr's hand covered Lim's mouth. "No, don't speak his name. And, yes, I know he had been visiting his former home all these years, when I was away at work."

Lim pulled his mate's hand off to kiss her knuckles. "All right, Beloved, I understand. But where will they do the 'deed' then?"

"I've already called the military matron in charge of his squad to request that he visit Keefe before he leaves. It can be done at their suite."

"You don't want to see him again?"

"No." She hit the armrest with a swollen fist. "I can't forgive myself, nor will I ask forgiveness from him, either. What's done is done. He is what he is because of it."

"That will make us run late for boarding," Aziza complained.

"Our people will not leave our planet without their Prime pro tem. Let them wait. It will be better, less time to scrutinize your two new mates." Ynyr leaned back in her chair, wheezing into her oxygen mask.

"All right." Aziza nodded. "That makes sense. I'll do it." Her gaze went to Paz, who looked paler than usual. "Come to me, little one."

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Paz walked over. Females on their planet average a foot or so shorter than the males, but at eleven Paz could already look his brother's mate in the eye.

He fidgeted glancing down. "W-what do you want me to do?"

She cupped his face in her hands, to stare into his crimson eyes. "Look at me."

"Yes?" He blinked uncertainly at her.

"Do you want to go with us to Earth?"

"Y-yes."

"Good, I will not do this without your consent." She then said the ritual words that mating needed, "Do you accept me, all of me?"

"Yes." Paz nodded.

"Good." Aziza glanced over to her mother-in-law and got a nod back. She undid the top of her rob, enough to pull it down, baring the tops of her breasts and one white shoulder. "Bite me so we are joined."

"But don't swallow," Keefe added.

"Where?" Paz blushed violet, looked at her shoulder, then back to his brother.

"Usually, this is done when you're of age and during sex, when instinct will guide you."

Keefe pulled his mate's garment a little farther down. Then he reverently touched her shoulder. "Press your mouth against her skin here." He found himself holding his mate's clothes bunched with one hand, while guiding his brother with the other.

When Paz lowered his head where he indicated, Keefe's gaze met that of his mate. "Thank you, my heart."

Aziza flinched when Paz's teeth broke her skin, but her gaze never left Keefe's when she recited the final mating words, "By blood I bind myself to you, forever."

Paz stepped back, covering his mouth. "Oh, I swallowed some. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Here." Neron thrust a cloth toward him. "Spit out what you can. Quickly, go to the bathroom and rinse out your mouth."

Paz ran into the bathroom with the cloth over his mouth, gagging.

"Well," Aziza said with a hand on a generous hip, "I'm so flattered."

Laughing, Keefe took the offered cloth from Neron, to hold it against the wound on her shoulder. "I didn't do that."

"No, you convulsed." She smiled up at him.

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“So did you, my heart. But it joined us forever.” There was a loud thump from the bathroom. “There goes Paz.”

“I’ll see to him.” Neron hurried to the bathroom. When he opened the door Keefe got a view of his little brother on the floor, shuddering.

“I’m sorry, my heart, but Paz will adore you now.”

Aziza sighed, shaking her head. “I didn’t want that.”

“Without the pheromones from sex, the bond is only temporary,” Ynyr reassured her. “How is the wound?”

Keefe moved the cloth to gaze down at the bite. “Fine. Paz just barely broke the skin. But it’s enough of an impression of his teeth to be credible.”

“Good. When Paz recovers himself, he must leave with you.”

“Yes.” Aziza nodded. “But we’re cutting it close. There isn’t much time until launch.”

“Where is your luggage?”

“Already loaded into the main spaceship, Arcon One.”

The bathroom door opened. Paz staggered out, guided by Neron. “He bumped his head when he fell.”

Keefe moved his hair over to check his scalp. “You’re getting a lump, but your skin’s intact.”

“That s’good,” Paz slurred.

“He’s a little drunk. Did you two have sex before coming over here?” Neron asked, frowning at both him and Aziza.

“Yes, is that bad?” Keefe’s cheeks heated.

Neron patted Paz on the back. “It hits a little harder with some pheromones in the blood.”

“Here’s your things, podling.” Lim held out a suitcase to his offspring.

Paz looked at it blankly, so Keefe took it for him.

The youngling leaned his head against Aziza. “I want my pillow.”

“All right, little one.” She patted him on the head.

“That feels good.” He slumped against her.

Keefe slipped an arm around his brother to pull him off his mate. He looked to his eldest paternal-unit. “Pillow?”

Lim nodded. “I’ll go get it.” He retrieved the cat-shaped pillow from the playroom, but handed it to Ynyr.

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She rubbed it against her cheeks adding her scent. “May the Mother keep you safe through your long journey, my podling.”

Keefe helped Paz over to their maternal-unit.

Paz gave her a hug, sobbing. “Momma, I don’t want to leave you.”

“Paz, my youngling, I’ll miss you, but you must go.” Ynyr bestowed a kiss on his forehead.

Keefe pulled him up.

Paz took his pillow from his mother with a loud snuffle.

Then they gave everyone in the room a hug. Xin even got Lug cleaned up after feeding him, so he could say good-bye, too.

“Lim,” Keefe said. “Lug seems worse. Why isn’t he talking?”

“He’s deteriorating. His condition doesn’t allow for a normal life span. He can’t function as a laborer anymore, so we’re keeping him home.”

“Lug won’t live long?” Keefe felt a sudden loss. Born at the same time, they’d grown up together. He and Lug were two-thirds of their pod.

“Yes, and we don’t know who will go first, Ynyr, Lug or the planet.” Lim patted his son on the shoulder. “But rest assured, my son, we will take excellent care of them in the time we have left.”

“I never doubted that.” He hugged his eldest father, then his podling again but got a sloppy kiss on the cheek in return. “I’ll miss you.”

“Come back soon.” Lug gave him a wide smile.

Keefe was relieved that he finally said something. He cupped the side of his face to look at his podling one last time. “You take good care of yourself.”

“Yeah-yeah.” Lug gave him a big grin, then went to sit at Ynyr’s feet. When he laid his head in her lap, she petted his head, smiling down at him.

Watching them, Keefe finally understood the deep affection his maternal-unit had for all her offspring.

Two

Keefe, Paz and Aziza finally made it out the door, and took the elevator down to the exit. As they walked out of the apartment complex, another quake rumbled. A crack formed in the cavern's high, arched ceiling. Yellow sulfur, just discernible in the dim light, poured out of the crack. Which made the air smell faintly of spoilt eggs. Another crack made from an earlier quake allowed hot water vapor in, which discolored the gray cavern's walls a sickly green.

Aziza stared at the new crack, her back and shoulder stiff. "Do you think the ceiling will cave in any time soon?"

"Don't worry, my heart, we'll be off-world long before that happens." Keefe slipped an arm around her shoulders.

Another rumble shook the road beneath their feet, and then came a sound of a strangled cry that rent the air.

Keefe grabbed both Aziza and Paz then shoved them against the nearest wall, covering them with his body as the first huge flightless bird ran by. Several more rarook, darted past in rapid succession. Then the rest of the flock filled the walkway, brushing Keefe's back with their dark feathery sides as they passed.

"I think that was the last of them." Keefe stepped back, letting go of his mate and podling.

One lone youngling jogged down the road toward them, puffing as he went. He held a long crook in one hand. His hair was cut short and completely green in color. "Sorry. They got away from me."

"You need to keep a more careful watch on your flock." Aziza adjusted her robe, but speared the youngster with a baleful glare.

"I couldn't stop them." He cringed, and then bowed. "When the quake hit the lead female took off, and there was no stopping the rest of the flock."

"Hurry, before they get farther away from you." Keefe waved the youngster away, then picked up Paz's bag. He tried to wipe off the claw marks on the expensive leather, but it was no good some of the marks were deep.

"Yes, sorry. I'm going." He bowed again, then ran down the path between the buildings.

"Feeble brained, moss head," Aziza muttered the derogatory nickname under her breath, as she watched the young male disappear from sight.

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Aziza led the way as they hurried down the path that cut around the buildings, heading for their apartment and their meeting with Keefe's identical twin, who now went by the name, Blade.

The door chimed, and Keefe strolled over to set his hand on the panel to open it.

Blade leaned against the doorjamb with a smirk, his white and green hair up in a warrior's topknot, his well-developed muscles bunched under his green military jumpsuit.

Keefe tensed, seeing him. He always felt a confused concoction of affection, guilt, and fear whenever he saw his podling, the missing third of his pod.

"I got your message, but I can't stay long. I'm patrolling the garment district against looters. So are you finally going to get off this worthless rock?"

"It's not worthless." Keefe stepped back to let him in.

An earth quake shook the building. They both watched the cracks forming along the eggshell white walls up near the domed ceiling.

"It will be soon." Blade glanced around. "Where's your mate?"

"She's in the bathroom."

Blade's restless gaze came to rest on Paz, who sat hunched on the couch, clutching his pillow. "Hi, youngling."

Paz jumped up to throw his arms around him with a sob.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Blade voice softened as he rubbed his back. Even though they weren't raised together, the tough warrior's one soft spot was their little brother.

Paz rubbed his eyes. "I'm mated to Aziza, so I can leave, too."

"Aren't you a little young to be mated?" Blade raised an eyebrow ridge at Keefe.

"We're pretending." Keefe shrugged, one shoulder rolling out.

Blade frowned. "It has to be pretty good playacting to get him on board ship, doesn't it?"

"Aziza let me give her a love bite." Paz sniffed as he sat back down, hugging his pillow.

"And she allowed that?" Blade stared hard at Paz and then wrinkled up his forehead when his gaze shifted back to Keefe.

"Yes, but Paz accidently swallowed some of her blood. The pheromones were a little rough on him." Keefe rubbed his little brother's shoulder. "She's willing to do the same for you."

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Blade shook his head, holding up his hands. “Oh-no, I don’t think so. Trust me. Your mate does not want to be tied to a military male. Even if she’s only pretending to be.”

Aziza checked the vivid reddish-purple love bite, which showed clearly against the whiteness of her skin. *Poor Paz, he is so young for this to happen to him.*

She palmed the bathroom door release and walked out, dressed only in a large towel. She froze when she saw her mate talking to his identical twin. It was confusing to see her mate’s handsome face on such a hard-bitten warrior.

Blade looked her up and down, crossed his arms with a raised eyebrow ridge. “Who were you expecting?”

“I was waiting for you, Blade.” She crossed the room to stop in front of him.

Keefe gaped at the towel. “Why are you undressed, my heart?”

Three

Aziza frowned at Keefe. *He's acting possessive, even though he knows I must do this.* "When Paz bit me, the blood ran down, ruining my clothes. I didn't want to take a chance on my last nice outfit. Everything else is on board the ship."

Blade, breathing hard, turned away from her. "I better go."

"No, don't go." Aziza grabbed his arm. *I must do this.*

"You don't want me." Blade looked everywhere but at her.

"I made a promise," Aziza blurted before she could stop herself.

"To who?" Blade yanked his arm away.

I can't tell him, I promised Ynyr. "To . . . Keefe." She glanced quickly at her mate, he nodded with a frown.

"You must come," Paz told him. "We three are the only ones of our family-unit who are healthy enough to make the journey."

"Why is that, youngling?" Blade glared at the youngest family member.

"Ynyr is dying," Keefe shouted the harsh news at him. "And Lug our podling is fading."

"My two podling aren't allowed to come either," Paz's voice rose to a squeak as tears streaming down his face. "You got to come, Blade, you just got to."

Keefe gave his twin a long look. "We three, and Aziza, need to go on."

Aziza grabbed Blade by his wrist. "Come on, bite me. I know you want to."

All three males sniffed the air, as Aziza's pheromones filled the room, smelling like pod blossoms in the spring time.

"My heart, what are you doing?" Keefe frowned down at her.

"I'm keeping my promise," she snapped at him.

Blade closed his eyes and moaned. "That's a dirty trick." He turned away from her.

Paz jumped up to pull Blade's other arm, turning him toward Aziza. "Do it. I want you to come with us and this is the only way."

"And you, my podling?" Blade looked straight at Keefe. "Do you really want to share your mate with me?"

Keefe's face flushed lavender, but he said through gritted teeth, "Bite her, but don't swallow."

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“With her undressed and smelling of pheromones, all I want to do is bury her underneath my body while I bite that lovely white skin.” He leered at Aziza, showing his sharp canines. “Is that what you want, my lovely?”

Aziza pulled harder on his wrist, staring into his crimson eyes. “You’re not fooling me, Blade. I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be,” he growled. “I’m a bad tempered military male, whom you do not want as a mate.”

“You will bite me, but only that, understand?” She raised her chin. “We are going to pretend to mate. Nothing more.”

“Yes, mistress. You order and I shall obey.” Blade lifted both arms then dropped them so hard, both female and youngling couldn’t hold on. He stepped up to Aziza with such speed, that she was left blinking at his muscular chest a surprised moment.

She smelled Blade’s spicy-sweet pheromones, and then craned her head up at him.

Placing his hard hands on her head, he gently tilted it to the side. He sniffed up her neck and shoulder, making her shiver.

“Do you accept me, all of me,” he breathed against her skin.

“Yes.” She barely said that single word of consent, when his sharp canines pierced her flesh. This wasn’t the little nip she got from Paz. No, this was a deep bite from a male wanting to mark his mate.

Blade stepped back, staring straight at Keefe and swallowed the mouthful of blood. “By blood I bind myself to you forever, Aziza, my sweet.”

All three watched him for a stunned moment, until he hit the ground and convulsed.

Aziza fidgeted in her seat on board the shuttle that was taking them to one of the three big colony ships, Arcon One. She sighed as she gazed back on their planet, seeing the ash covered surface with its angry red blooms from the erupting volcanoes, which would eventually tear up their planet apart. The quakes from the volcanos had produced more problems than she could count. Only last week a lower cavern filled with lava, the monorail derailed, lifts stop working and some time back an entire military patrol disappeared from the surface. However, the single bit of good news was the engineers had managed to repair the main lift to the surface, so the shuttles could ferry their people to the colony ships.

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“What is wrong, my heart?” Keefe asked, taking her hand in his.

She shook her head. “It just feels so wrong to leave.”

He frowned. “We can’t stay.”

“True, but this is our ancestral home. My heart tells me we shouldn’t have given up so soon. There should have been something we could have done to save our planet.”

He petted her hand. “The best minds from around the world have studied the problem, there’s nothing to be done.”

Aziza nodded. “I was there at all the meetings with the scientists and engineers. They all agreed it was a lost cause.” She leaned back in her seat and tried to relax. “Just first launch jitters, my mate.”

“If you are nervous, my sweet,” Blade said from the seat behind them. “I will tell you a little secret. My squad and I were called up to help test the engines and even toured our solar system.” He pointed out a mother and babe that sat across from them. “You’ll be safe as an infant in her maternal-unit’s arms.”

The baby started to fuss, and the mother handed her infant to the male sitting next to her. He got out a bottle to feed the baby. The female’s two other mates sitting behind her, strained to see over the tops of the seats at the nursing babe and smiled.

Aziza glared back at Blade. “Who authorized that?”

He rolled one shoulder out in a half shrug. “Military males are never told, only ordered. Apparently there weren’t enough trained males to run these big ships.”

“Did they choose any from your squad as crew?”

“Yes.”

“But not you?”

“No. I’m better at firing the big particle gun, but I’m too large for anything else.”

Aziza peered between the seats at the size of Blade’s arms, legs and the width of his chest. She knew the military males worked out and trained hard to control their aggressive urges, but what are they feeding them?

“Like what you see?” Blade smirked as he leaned back.

Aziza jerked around, heat flooding her face. After using her pheromones and being bitten twice, she was in some sexual need. *I wish we had the time. I would have dragged Keefe into the bedroom and had intercourse until we both were too weak to move.*

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She imagined mounting Keefe, but her daydream put Blade's body under her. *By the Mother*, she swore silently to herself. *I shouldn't desire a military male. They're too aggressive.* But part of her wondered how aggressive would he be in the bedroom?

Four

When the shuttle docked, the passengers stood to make their way off, with the exception of Aziza, Keefe and the two brothers.

Aziza watched everyone leave, then stood and straightened out her ceremonial robes, which chaffed the new love bites. She turned back to the two males seated behind them. “Blade, Paz, listen closely. There will be a welcoming committee for me. I will go out first, but only Keefe can walk beside me. He’s first mate. You two will follow behind us.”

Blade grinned. “Which one of us is second mate?”

“You,” Keefe said without hesitation.

“Why him?” Paz pouted. “I bit her first.”

“Do you really want to challenge me, youngling?” Blade asked with a sarcastic lift to his eyebrow ridge.

Paz ducked his head. “No.”

“Little one, it isn’t about who’s first,” Aziza told him. “It is about who is favored and who is more dominant. Keefe is my favorite so he is my first mate.” She patted Keefe’s arm, and he beamed down at her. She turned back to Paz. “Blade is more dominant than you, so he is second.”

“So that makes me last?” Paz sulked with big, round eyes.

Aziza reached over to touch his shoulder. “You are third, little one, that doesn’t make you last. All mates are special in their own way.”

“Very diplomatic,” Blade told her with a bow of his head.

“It’s my job.” She shrugged one shoulder rolling out. In truth she wanted to spare Paz’s feelings. He was young yet and infatuated. It wouldn’t do to hurt him. *Besides I may keep him as mate. He will be a scientist one day. The daughter, whom the Mother predicted, will be smarter for having him as one of the paternal-units.*

The female shuttle pilot walked into the main cabin, looking at Aziza. “Prime pro tem, they are ready for you.” Just behind the pilot, through the open cabin door, the female’s two mates were going through the check-list and shutting everything down.

Some females chose mates to complete their professions and they worked together. Aziza regretted that she was unable to do the same with her government job. *Working with Keefe would*

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have been a pleasure. My mate has a wonderful mind that is wasted being just a domestic. Maybe that's something I can change when I've been sworn in as Prime?

"Thank you." Aziza turned back to her two pretend mates. "Stay close to me, don't bring any attention to yourselves and be quiet."

Blade smirked. "Are you trying to hide us with your and Keefe's bodies?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't work long." She strode out, and the three males hurried to keep up with her.

"Prime pro tem. So good of you to finally join us," called out a female from a group near the ramp.

"My apologies for the lateness of my arrival." Aziza walked unhurried down the gangplank. "But I paid a visit to Prime Ynyr, and stopped by my own suite one more time to make sure I didn't leave anything important behind."

"How is the Prime?" asked Vega, a young councilmember.

"Not good," Aziza answered drawing near. "She won't be joining us."

"What?"

Aziza stopped in front of the group, and watched expressions of sorrow spread across most of the members of the council. She knew they had waited to greet their aging Prime. "She regrets that it is necessary to stay. The doctors gave her bad news on her condition just this morning. She's terminal. The disease is taking her away from us."

Sobs broke out in the gathering. Prime Ynyr was well loved and had ruled a long time. Her illness was known, but many had held out hope for a full recovery.

"But she is Prime, she could have come," argued Vega with tears on her eyes.

Council member Laysa turned toward the young council woman. "Yes, but would she have survived the long journey in hibernation?"

"I doubt she would have," answered Aziza with a dejected sigh.

"She also had three defective offspring," Laysa added, pulling a nasty expression. "We wouldn't have allowed her, Prime or no, to bring them. We had already agreed that we won't be polluting the gene pool on the new planet."

"Councilmember Laysa," snapped Aziza. "Prime Ynyr knows the rules better than any female alive. She did write many of them, after all."

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“Of course.” Laysa bowed her head. “I meant no disrespect to our former Prime. Madam Prime pro tem, when did you want to have the swearing in ceremony?”

“When we reach our destination,” Aziza answered promptly.

“Make way for the Mother,” called out someone.

The welcoming committee moved to either side of the loading bay, while several females in flowing ceremonial gowns hurried by, pushing a small hibernation tank. As the group passed, they all stretched to get a quick glimpse of their living Goddess.

“Aw, she was already asleep. I would have liked to have spoken to her,” Paz said.

“Who are these two with you, Aziza?” asked Laysa, looking over Keefe’s brothers.

With her heart beating a painful rhythm against her chest, Aziza turned toward the troublesome councilmember and lifted her chin. *Here it comes.* “They are my two new mates.”

Laysa jerked her head down to Paz. “So you’re picking out mates from the playroom?”

“He will be mature by the time we make our destination.”

“Pedophile,” someone coughed into her hand.

Aziza glowered into the crowd but couldn’t see who it was that spoke.

“And the other one is a military male?” Laysa looked surprised at Aziza. “Are you out of your mind, taking one of . . . those to your bed?”

“He’s . . . my bodyguard.” Aziza raised her chin a fraction higher. “As Prime pro tem, I am allowed a military mate.”

“Humph. Show us your love bites then.” Laysa frowned.

“Laysa,” snapped Vega. “We can’t demand,” she glanced at Aziza and back to Laysa, “that she show us something, so . . . private.” She nearly whispered the last word.

“We have to show our love bites, when we register our matings don’t we?” Laysa gestured with one hand.

Vega frowned. “That’s different.”

“How so?” Laysa stepped closer to her.

“Well, for one thing it’s not out in front of a bunch of cynical council members.” Vega flung her arms wide, indicating the gray passageway around them. “Or out in a hanger bay where everyone who chances by can see.”

“Whatever you people are doing, you’d better wrap it up quick,” said Captain Unna, marching toward them. “My mates are finishing up with the check-list and the countdown must proceed on

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schedule. The other colony ships' captains have already called wanting to know 'what's the holdup.'" Her voice rose on the last thing she said.

"My apologies, Captain, but we have two last minute passengers and we need to check their right to be here." Laysa smirked.

"Greetings, Prime pro tem," the Captain said to Aziza, breathing hard from her fast walk.

Aziza nodded back. "Captain."

"Prime couldn't make it?"

"Unfortunately no, she couldn't. Her disease is incurable. So she decided to stay behind."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Ynyr is renowned for her decades of service and in uniting the caverns. She is the best of us and she will be missed." The Captain looked around the small group, and then back to Aziza. "Is there a problem here?"

Laysa gestured with a wave toward the two males behind her. "Aziza just told us she took these two to be her new mates."

"And?"

"Well, look at them." Laysa pointed. "This one is clearly underage. He's still wearing his play pajamas, for Goddess sake." Then she motioned toward Blade. "And this one, by his outfit and hair is a military male."

"So?"

"So, this shouldn't be allowed, and certainly not by our future Prime. Who among all of us should obey the law and not be above it."

"Aziza," snapped the captain.

"Yes?"

"Are they your mates?"

"Yes."

"May I see your love bites, and thereby proving that they are who you claim they are?"

"Yes." Aziza undid several fasteners on her ceremonial robe. Keefe helped her by pulling the cloth down both shoulders, while she held the garment up over her breasts.

Captain Unna stepped closer to examine the bites, several members of the council also moved up. "This one looks like the little one did it," Unna said, lightly touching the fresh wound, then examined the other shoulder. "And this one looks like the big male did it." Unna stepped back.

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“I’m satisfied. Congratulations on the new matings, Prime pro tem. I’ll register your new mates into the ship’s computer once we are under way.”

“I’m not satisfied,” snapped Laysa. “I say let’s strip the males and look for corresponding bites, or if they’re still sealed virgins.”

Paz gulped loud enough it must have hurt and moved closer to Blade, who slipped an arm around his little brother’s shoulders. But neither male said a word in protest.

They didn’t dare.

“Oh, Laysa, give it a rest,” said Council member Nix. “You’re not captain or Prime here, they are.”

“Yes,” snapped Unna. “And as captain I have the final authority on *my* ship. And I say they are mated. Now, go and get into your hibernation capsules.” She placed her hands on her hips and glared at Laysa. “Or do you still want to be having this conversation when our world explodes underneath our feet?”

Nearly all of the group turned and headed up the ramp onto the ship. All except Laysa. “This isn’t over,” she warned Aziza.

“Uh, yes it is,” Captain Unna told her. “Go away, bye-bye, that’s a good little council member.”

Laysa muttered something insulting under her breath, and left.

Unna turned back to Aziza. “She is right, it isn’t over. I just stopped this silliness for now.”

“I know, but I’ll worry about that once we’re out of hibernation and at our new world.” Aziza bowed from the head to Unna. “Thank you, Captain, for all your help.”

“My pleasure.”

Aziza stepped closer. “Captain, it recently came to my attention that some of the members of your crew are military males?”

“Yes, some are.” She hesitated a moment before continuing. “It was Ynyr’s idea, but she seemed . . . disappointed when I gave her the new crew list.”

“Disappointed how?”

“As if she expected someone to be on it that wasn’t.” The Captain’s gaze slid over to Blade and her eyes widened a moment in recognition, before returning to Aziza. But she tactfully kept her mouth shut. “I do have some disappointing news. The battleship Talon won’t be escorting us.”

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“Oh, why is that?” Pressure built in her chest. Without the more maneuverable battleship, how could they safely get across the vastness of space to reach their objective, the planet called Earth?

“Unfortunately, their captain radioed me that they had engine trouble and are stuck in another galaxy, so we are on our own. Now, scoot. I really do need to get us underway.” The Captain hurried up the ramp.

“Yes, Captain.” Aziza and the three males strode into the big ship, right behind the captain.

Blade touched Aziza on the back. “You were very brave back there.”

“Thank you.” She glanced back at him. *A warrior giving me a compliment on my bravery. How interesting.*

The door behind them closed with a resounding clang.

Continued in Exodus Arcon II, coming soon.