



REBEL MATE

INTERSTELLAR BRIDES® PROGRAM:
BOOK 20

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GRACE GOODWIN

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Published by KSA Publishers
Goodwin, Grace

Cover design copyright 2020 by Grace Goodwin
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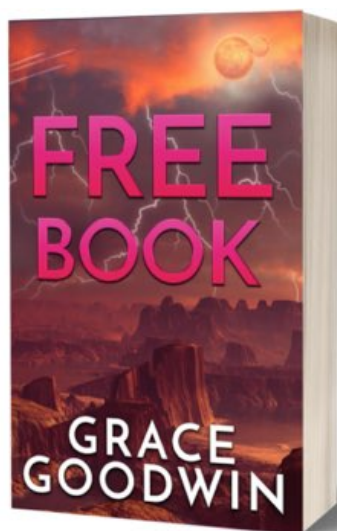
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*Z*ara Novak, Transport Room, Planet Trion

I BLINKED. Then again. My eyes couldn't be working correctly because I had nipple rings. Just a few seconds ago, or a few light years away, I'd been in a drab hospital-style gown. The last thing I remembered was the warden counting down... three... two... one, and I definitely hadn't had nipple rings then. Sure, I'd had a needle jammed into the side of my head for a voice translator, but I'd have remembered having my nips poked.

When the warden had said I was to arrive on Trion prepared for the planet's customs, this wasn't what I'd expected. I knew it to be an arid place. Hot. Desert-like. Maybe I'd be in a ridiculous outfit from *I Dream of Jeannie* with billowy pants and bare midriff. Me, in harem pants. As if.

Instead, I was just... bare.

Naked.

I was lying on a small platform, the surface hard and unforgiving. Curled on my side, I looked down at myself. At the little gold hoops that went through my nipples.

I was transfixed. While it wasn't something I'd ever imagined doing, I had to admit, they looked pretty good. They went pretty well with my navel piercing.

"Thank the gods, you're awake."

The male voice had me startling and looking up. A guy came up the few steps to reach me with a garment that looked much like a robe in his hands. I pushed up to sitting, and he wrapped it around my shoulders, covering me. I couldn't miss the way his gaze raked over my bare flesh before it was hidden.

Again, I blinked.

"I am Naron, your mate. You have transported far and just for me. I have been given the ultimate reward."

When he squatted beside me, our eyes were at the same level. His were a piercing green. I couldn't miss the pleased look on his face. Bright eyes, a broad smile. Curious. Eager. Like a well-muscled, broad shouldered puppy.

"Hey," I said, then cleared my throat. The air was warm, the robe a cool silk. I glanced about. We were in some kind of primitive building with cloth walls. A large tent, like one used as a rental for parties. The material was a sturdy canvas, but a rustic brown, as if it were woven from natural materials. Unbleached.

"You are well, *gara*?" he asked, his gaze raking over me. "Do you need me to send for a doctor or are you recovered enough from transport to await the examination?"

Examination? I didn't know what that involved, so I just said, "I'm well."

I was. I still felt the tingly pleasure from the orgasm I'd gotten during the testing. God, it had been intense. Powerful. I'd even screamed as I'd awoken. But it hadn't been real, yet I felt it still. But the guy in front of me? He was *very* real.

He exhaled and gave me a relieved smile. "That is excellent news. When word was given that I was matched, I was on duty. I am relieved I was able to meet you upon your arrival. I didn't desire for you to be frightened or alone. Due to our remote location, this station is unmanned unless transport out is required." His eyes continued to shift, taking in my hair, my features. Every inch of me he could see. "I have heard that Earth females are unusual in appearance, but I find you... lovely."

I didn't know what that meant or if Trion females looked much different from me, but he didn't seem to be insulting. The opposite. I seemed to surprise him.

His eyes widened. "I do not even know your name, mate."

Mate. He was matched to me. This guy. This Trion alien.
"Zara."

He repeated it, then again as he held out his hand. I took it, and he helped me to my feet as I held the robe closed. He eyed me, perhaps ensuring I wouldn't pass out. I was tired, and I had a head rush standing up, but otherwise, I felt fine. Even my nipples which should have hurt after being pierced didn't ache.

"I am a sentinel guard to Councilor Bertok. A true honor and position. Now I have you. I am a lucky male." He wore brown pants with a long-sleeved shirt that did look quite like a uniform. Black striped epaulets were on his shoulders, and he had a—was that a sword?—at his hip. "Ah, here is the region's leader now." He leaned close to whisper in my ear. "Females remain silent in his presence."

An older man entered the tent. I took in his long robes and regal bearing. Naron bowed, and I only stared, stuck on what my mate just said. *Females remain silent...* What the hell?

What kind of planet had I landed on? Naked? Nipple rings? Silent females?

I was thankful for Naron's thoughtfulness regarding the robe because the old guy stared. And stared some more. Not in a friendly or warm way. Nope. I felt a little creeped out. While Naron was a stranger to me, he was my mate. He would see me naked...while awake and probably soon. I didn't have any illusions that he would court or woo me prior to getting me beneath him. Yet I didn't wish to reveal myself to the entire planet, especially if this guy was his boss. Especially if this guy gave me the willies.

The man... guy, alien, was old. I couldn't guess his age but definitely older than Naron. He could be his father. Even grandfather. His hair was gray, and his face was heavily lined, but his spine was ramrod straight. I couldn't guess to his physique beneath the long robe he wore. He had an assessing gaze. It wasn't sexual as much as... predatory. As if he saw something he wanted.

That wasn't happening. I recognized that look from men before. It never meant anything good.

"Naron, word has quickly spread that you were matched and to an Earth bride." His voice was deep and imposing, laced with coldness.

"Yes, Councilor," Naron replied, setting a hand upon my shoulder. His touch was warm and reassuring.

The ice blue gaze of the older man settled on the action. "I had to see for myself your prize... a proud fighter such as yourself has earned."

I wasn't sure how I felt being a prize. I was just a woman from Boston who'd seen and done enough shit on Earth to try a hand at space. The testing said I'd been matched to Trion. How living in bitter cold for half the year made me a good match for a desert planet, I had no idea. And Naron, well, he seemed... sweet. I wasn't sweet. Far from it. Like the song, I was bad to the bone.

He appeared kind though, and that was a good start. He wasn't hard on the eyes either. At the words of praise, I saw Naron's chest puff up.

Bertok looked me over as if I were a blue-ribbon heifer at the county fair. "It's obvious you are human. Your diminutive size is that of High Councilor Tark's mate."

I had no idea who that was or his mate. I was just over five-feet tall, so I had to assume the guy's Earth bride was petite, too. Opening my mouth to respond, I remembered Naron's whispered words and closed my mouth. I had no clue what the deal was here, and I didn't want to blow it this early in the game.

Bertok stepped closer, his long robes swirling about his ankles

He stood before us, his gaze on me. I didn't know what to do other than to keep my trap shut. I knew nothing about Trion. Nothing about their ways. Nothing about—

Bertok lifted his hand, a dagger within his grip catching my eye. I barely had time to gasp before he struck. If I thought him weak and frail, his ability to slash through Naron's throat with one well-aimed slice proved I was wrong. So very wrong.

Naron's hands went to his neck, and his eyes widened in stunned agony.

"Holy fuck," I said, taking an instinctive step back.

Blood spurted onto me, hot and thick as my mate collapsed to his knees. Bertok retreated as Naron fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Dead. Very, very dead.

Blood continued to seep from his neck and into the packed dirt.

I'd seen bad shit in my time. Bad things done by bad people. Hell, I'd *done* a bunch of that bad shit myself. I was hardened from it. Jaded. Definitely untrusting. But this? What Bertok just did with ruthless precision? He wasn't even breathing hard. Hell, other than the blood on the knife, he didn't have a drop on him.

I took a step back. Then another. I did *not* want to be next. I had to get away. How, I had no idea. All I'd seen of Trion was inside this tent. Hell, I'd only been on the planet less than five minutes. I tried to hop back on the transport pad, hoping it would *Star Trek* me back to Earth. I'd tell the

warden I wanted my fucking money back. Not that I paid any.

"Oh no, female," Bertok said, his voice low and menacing as he grabbed hold of my arm. "You're mine now."

His? Yeah, no. I slipped on one of the steps and stumbled to stand beside him.

Bile rose in my throat at the thought. Um... what the hell was happening?

"I... I—"

I didn't know what to say. I was numb. Afraid. So very lost and completely out of my element. It was one thing to be in a back alley in Southie dealing with shit. I'd have on shitkicker boots with jeans that had pockets for a switchblade. A cell phone. Here? Now? I was barefoot. Naked except for a thin robe and weaponless. The guy might have been old, but I was no match for that blade or his skill in using it.

"You saw what I did to your mate," he said. "I can do that to you before you utter a scream."

I took a breath, smelled the metallic tang of blood. My mate's. Wait. *Wait*.

Why had he killed Naron? He wasn't just some crazed lunatic on a killing spree. We weren't standing in the middle of a gang fight. At least I didn't think we were. This guy was sane. Focused. He had a reason for wanting Naron dead.

Me. He wanted *me*.

"You won't kill me," I replied, licking my suddenly dry lips. "You want me for yourself."

He didn't smile, but he laughed. "I do not want you for myself. I have a worthless mate already. You are too valuable to keep."

Oh shit. This was not good. Were assholes the same everywhere in the universe? This guy was going to... sell me?

"What... what are you saying?" I asked then swallowed hard. I wanted to hear it from him. To know exactly what the fuck he was doing.

"Enough. Females do not speak." He reached out and grabbed my arm, his fingers like talons in my skin, and pulled me out of the tent into the bright sunshine. I squinted as I held my robe closed, trying not to trip on the long hem. We were in some kind of encampment, perhaps fifteen or twenty similar tents spread out over the desert. I saw no one nearby, only in the distance. I didn't dare scream, for they were too far to save me if this guy... Bertok, decided to use his knife on me. I tripped over the root of a scrubby bush. There were also wind-bent trees and rugged mountains in the distance, completely different from inner city Boston. Not a speck of concrete anywhere. Beyond this small clump of civilization, I saw nothing as far as I could see.

The test was supposed to offer me an almost perfect match, and it said Trion? The machine had definitely been broken because I didn't even like the beach. What the fuck had I gotten myself into? I'd gotten in and out of shit in my time. This, though, was out of my league. Or universe.

He tugged me to another tent. This one obviously belonged to him, for the floors were covered in thick

carpets. Pillows and low tables with gilded bowls of fruit and other strange foods upon them. It was exotic... rich. As if this guy would skimp or live without luxuries.

Yanking my arm, he pushed me forward, grabbing the robe as he did so. It slipped from my shoulders, and he let it fall to the floor at his feet. I was naked while he was clothed.

I was fine with my body. I had no real issues with modesty. Sure, I'd been told my boobs were small, but whatever. At least I didn't give myself two black eyes if I ran. This felt different though. Subjugation. We weren't equals, and he was making that very obvious.

"If you're selling me, rape won't make me more valuable." I began to shiver, even though it was quite warm. I tipped my chin up. I'd never let anyone see me afraid, and I wasn't going to start now. I'd never let him see how I really felt. No fucking way.

His white brow rose. "A mouthy female. I'm sure your buyer will enjoy taming you."

He turned from me and went to a table, picked up a gold chain and what looked like a thick, golden collar. He still held the dagger in his other hand, reminding me as he approached that I was definitely at his mercy. I'd learned long ago fighting back was important but to do it at the right time to stay alive. Now wasn't the time.

"Kneel."

I looked up at him, said nothing.

He lifted the knife to my neck, pressed the tip into the skin until the blade bit into my flesh.

Holding my breath, I reached out and grabbed hold of the tent pole beside me, carefully dropped to my knees, careful lest I slash my own throat. Once on my knees, the idea of giving him a BJ made bile rise into my throat. I would definitely throw up if forced.

Reaching out, he set the knife down on a table without taking his eyes from me, telling me without words it was close enough for him to grab. To kill.

With his hands free, he brought the collar forward and locked it around my neck as if I were a dog. I even had a tag, a heavy medallion hung cold and heavy on my chest. He then affixed the chain he carried to one of my nipple rings. I flinched, but he seemed to have no sexual interest in me. His hand moved to the other, affixing the chain to both, however he did so with the tent pole in between. My breaths quivered with my breasts, the chain swinging once he let it go. It was light and dangled only a few inches but... I. Was. Trapped. By. My. Own. Nipples.

What the fuck?

If I tugged, the rings would rip right out. That wasn't going to happen. The thought alone made my nipples harden. God.

I looked up at Bertok who loomed. "Just as a female should be. Naked. On her knees. Restrained."

I wasn't liking Trion all that much. How could I have been in Florida at the Brides Testing Center only a short time ago, and now, I had a dead mate and was a prisoner of a creepy old murderer who planned to sell me?

Had I been sent to Hell instead?

"You're an asshole," I muttered.

If he'd wanted me dead, my blood would be spilled beside Naron's. He needed me alive and obviously unharmed. He didn't want to rape me. He didn't even seem overly interested in my body. Based on his words, Trion females were naked, and this kind of weird chaining thing was... normal. Kinky in some situations, but this wasn't one of them.

Yeah, the testing was so fucking wrong. I had perpetual shitty luck, and it had continued into space. Wait. The match may have been just fine. Naron had been my match not this guy. Bertok was just an evil dick. But sand? Desert? Sooo not me.

"Rest." He walked toward the tent's entrance. "We travel to Sector Zero as soon as you are strong enough to transport again. You have a delivery to make, and you won't do me any good if you're dead."

I remembered something the warden had said after my test, that once a bride accepted the match, she is no longer a resident of Earth but of the matched planet. I could never return to Earth. I just had to wonder if this was what she had in mind.



*J*saak, Sector Zero, Planet Occeron, Abandoned
Prillon Outpost known as Omega Dome

"THERE'S A HUMAN FEMALE, JUST ARRIVED."

"An Earthling."

"Too weak for me, one fuck would kill her..."

"...she's not for sale, fool."

"Everything is for sale, for the right price."

A very large male, possibly a Prillon and Atlan hybrid with a dark-red arm band pushed his way between the chatting outlaws. "She belongs to Cerberus."

The voices carried from the back of the small, filthy room where I sat with my tech buyer. My ears had picked up on the words, the important ones. A human female was here?

I'd never known that to occur in all the time I'd been doing business here. I flicked a gaze to Ulza, for she wore

the armband of Cerberus. She would know the truth of the gossip.

"It is true." She sat across from me, smirked because she knew exactly what I was thinking. "A human female in Sector Zero. But they are wrong on one thing. She is not for sale at any price. She now belongs to Cerberus."

I gave a grunt of reply, showing her complete indifference. Hopefully.

I looked down at the tech unit in my hand, confirming that she had kept her word, and the credit transfer for the latest batch of Hive implants was complete.

"You will keep your nose out of Cerberus business, won't you Isaak?"

"Not interested." Not only did I not want to become tangled up in Cerberus business, but anything involving Ulza from Cerberus? She was more dangerous than anyone else I knew. Killing Hive and selling them for parts? No problem. But even I had some honor left. And if Ulza's words were true and the female in question was here in the outer reaches of Coalition-controlled space because of Cerberus?

She'd gotten mixed up in serious stuff. The question was how?

No. I had to stay focused on why I was here. Sticking one's nose in other people's business was a good way to die.

"Are you sure, Isaak? I wouldn't want to have to kill you."

"I'm sure."

"I paid you as agreed. Now, I have business with Jirghogis."

I looked up then, the deadly blue Cerberus female watching me over the top of her drink. I knew I should keep my *farking* mouth shut, but I wasn't an outcast because I always did the smart thing. The right thing? Usually. But the smartest? No. Seems I hadn't learned a damn thing.

"Exactly what kind of business?"

She tapped her armband. I was shocked to receive an answer. "I am to deliver the human to Cerberus myself."

Her cackle made me sick. For the past five years, ever since I'd begun trading in stolen Hive tech, Ulza and I stayed out of each other's way... outside of our tech dealings. I had no desire for that situation to change. She was a cousin to Cerberus himself, was a member of Cerberus legion and a known associate of the Silver Scions, a tightly knit syndicate of doctors, engineers, scientists and killers from every sector of the galaxy. They bought Hive integration technology and sold what they could on the black market as surgical enhancements to anyone with the credits to pay for it.

Ulza bought every piece of Hive tech I brought to her without complaint. I didn't like her, but I liked her business model. She always paid, up front and on time, and never asked where I procured my goods.

"And Jirghogis procured her from...?" I asked although I knew she wouldn't answer this one. I pushed my beverage container across the scarred tabletop. The thought of any human—*fark* that, anyone at all—dealing with Jirghogis, the creature whose shipment warehouse was used for illegal

trade and auctions, made me choke down bile. He was far from humanoid, a hideous creature with huge eyes and a tail thicker than my torso. His exoskeleton was covered in scales, and those scales? Coated in poisonous slime that emitted an odor designed to sear the lungs of anyone who got too close.

"So you are interested in the female." She tipped her head to the others at tables nearby. "Like everyone else under this dome."

"Simply curious. We don't get many humans out here," I replied, glancing toward the nearest exit. It was time to leave. I had no desire to investigate the appearance of an unknown human nor in why Cerberus wanted her. The last time I'd tried to save someone, my brother, Malik, had paid the ultimate price for my failure. The accident was five years past. The memory of him dying in my arms so vivid, it could have been five hours ago.

The wrong Councilor's son had died that day. Malik had bled out in my arms in the middle of the desert, and there hadn't been one *farking* thing I could do to save him. My father lost his heir, the responsible son, the one groomed from birth to take his place, and had been left with me.

Rebellious. Impulsive. Bored with politics. Lacking in both patience and diplomacy. My brother had been mere minutes older than me, but his spirit had been wise. Measured. Compassionate.

Everything I was not.

Memories of my brother's face pushed into my mind, and I forced them away. No. I wasn't interested in saving anyone. Not anymore.