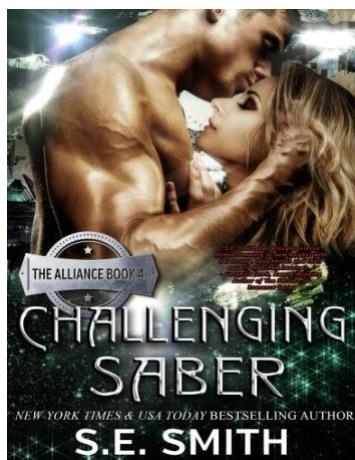


## **Challenging Saber: The Alliance Book 4**



**By S.E. Smith**

## **Acknowledgments**

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—S.E. Smith

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Summary: A damaged alien warrior fights to save the human woman he loves when she is caught behind enemy lines during a civil war.

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## Synopsis

*Sometimes it takes losing the one thing closest to a warrior's heart to wake the beast that lives inside him...*

Saber, a wounded Trivator, believes he is no longer a fit warrior, much less strong enough to claim a mate. Scarred, he does everything in his power to push away the delicate human female he has fallen in love with. He knows that she deserves a warrior who can protect her, not one that will need her constant help.

Taylor Sampson may be human, but that doesn't make her weak. She and her two older sisters survived four years on their own after the Alliance made first contact with Earth. She is all grown up now and has her eye on the one stubborn Trivator that captured her heart seven years before.

Taylor has one last assignment on another planet in order to complete her schooling. Once she finishes, she plans to show Saber that he is the man she wants, but when civil war erupts she is trapped behind enemy lines. When Saber discovers that Taylor has been left behind, the warrior inside him refuses to think of her as collateral damage in a savage battle for power.

Journey to a lawless, alien world and discover what happens when the beast awakens inside a damaged Trivator warrior when the woman he loves is threatened.

# **Chapter 1**

**Seven Years Before – Earth:**

**The Collapsed Parking Garage:**

“This way,” Hunter said in a quiet voice.

Saber nodded, staring at the dark crevice between the huge slabs of concrete. A curse echoed through his mind when he saw Hunter disappear into the opening. Sometimes he wondered about his friend’s sanity. If it had been him, he’d have left the human woman to her fate.

A grimace crossed his face as he slipped through the hole and slid down the incline created by the collapse of the building. With a shake of his head, he knew deep down he would have done the same thing as Hunter did if a human female had risked her life to save him. It was bred into their species to protect those that were weaker, that included all females.

Over the last four years of his mission, he had met a few human women. Most of them had been pleasant, but overall, he found them to be either too demanding or too delicate for his tastes. That had led to many frustrated nights since his arrival on the planet.

He paused when Hunter glanced at him and held up two fingers, then a third. Stepping to the side, he and Dagger spread out while Hunter took the center. This was Hunter’s mission; they were the support. His vision quickly adjusted to the darkness. His gaze

narrowed on the dim light and the soft voices in the far corner. Hunter slowly moved off to search for the female that had helped him, leaving him and Dagger to deal with the other two. He watched as Hunter disappeared into the darkness before returning his attention to the two figures by the fire.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the figure of the youngest human. She wasn't quite a woman, but she wasn't a child either. What he did know was that she was in a very dangerous situation, and that ignited a flame of anger inside him that he had never felt before.

His eyes scanned the shadows of the parking garage for signs of any males. It was hard to tell from the scents in the air. He could smell fresh blood and the acidic smoke from the fire. The blood was the same as from the warehouse where they had tracked the female earlier. He knew that the female Hunter was seeking had to be here, it was just a matter of where.

He turned his gaze to search for Hunter. He caught a glimpse of his friend's shadow and knew that Hunter was in the mode that made his name famous. It wouldn't take long for Hunter to find his prey.

He glanced at Dagger. Surprise and amusement swept through him when he saw Dagger's intense gaze on the two females. Dagger had always been the most forceful and deadly out of the three of them. It wasn't like he or Hunter couldn't be put in that same category, it was just they didn't play with those that

pissed them off before killing them. Dagger was known to draw out the deaths of those stupid enough to get under his skin.

Turning his gaze back to the two females, Saber felt a strange twist in his chest as he listened to them quietly talk. The little one was trying to take care of the other. His eyes swept over her tousled blonde hair and slender, almost fragile form.

Anger burned in him as he wondered why the females did not have a male or males to protect them. As a Trivator warrior, protection of a female within a family unit was top priority. If a warrior proved himself worthy, he would be gifted with a family of his own. All warriors hoped to one day prove they were strong enough to have an *Amate*, a mate, to carry on their bloodline and fill the empty space inside them.

Saber looked critically at the young girl's face. There was something about her in particular that pulled at those protective instincts, that made him want to shield her from the horrors outside. She was too young and delicate to be living this way.

He wasn't sure what Hunter's plans were for the other female, but he had a feeling that it would involve offering his protection. If Hunter did, then these two would also receive the same shelter and care. That meant that he and Dagger would protect them as well, since they considered Hunter more of a brother than a friend.

Satisfied with his reasoning, he decided that Hunter could protect the one he was seeking, Dagger

obviously was focused on the welfare of the injured female, and that left him to care for the little one. A grin curved his lips. Since she was obviously the youngest and smallest, that meant his job would be the easiest. He could handle that.

He snapped back to the present when he saw Dagger motion for him to move forward. He nodded and stepped out of the shadows into the dim light of the fire.

A moment later, he realized that he might just have made the biggest error of judgment in his life. His mistake was thinking the littlest one would be the easiest to control.

He drew in a hissing gulp of frigid air as he bent forward. He was trying to keep his footing after the little hellcat with blonde hair nailed him in the stomach with an anything-but-fragile piece of broken concrete that lined the fire pit. She had thrown it underhand with enough force to leave him gasping for air.

He rocked for a moment, trying to push away the pain. He thanked the Goddess that she hadn't hit him a few inches lower. If she had, any hope of ever having a family would have been over. Straightening, he glared back at her defiant eyes.

*Something tells me this isn't going to be as easy as I thought,* he reflected, warily watching as she bent and picked up another fragment of concrete.

## Chapter 2

"I swear, Hunter, if that she-creature bites, hits, or tries to escape one more time, I'm going to put her in a cage!" Saber growled, staring at the petite female standing behind his friend several hours later. "Why you little...!"

"Saber," Hunter grimaced, looking at his friend's murderous face. "She is a defenseless female."

Saber could see what Hunter couldn't. His hands curled into tight fists when she stuck her tongue out at him before giving him a self-satisfied smirk. He didn't care that she was under Hunter's protection. Saber was about to throw her over his shoulder and scare a little respect into her.

He rubbed his wrist. He was sure she had drawn blood this time. He wondered if he should have insisted that the healer examine her for any diseases instead of believing the medic on board the transport when he said that, except for being malnourished, the youngest one appeared to be healthy.

"I swear, Hunter," Saber started to say again before clamping his lips shut. "Go, check on the other females, I will watch over her," he finally said with a weary sigh.

"Are you sure? I could see if another warrior...," Hunter offered before giving Saber a strange look when a growl escaped his friend.

"Did he just growl?" The young female asked in awe. "What are you guys? That sounded just like a tiger. I heard one do something similar at the zoo. Does he need to be caged or something? He isn't going feral, is he? Ugh! I bit him. You don't think he has rabies, do you? Maybe he should be quarantined. My neighbor did that to a feral cat that she found in the woods near our house. Do you guys have those big pet containers?"

"Taylor," Hunter warned, glancing at Saber's red face. "Saber is fine. He is under control. Isn't that right, Saber?"

"Oh, I am under complete control," Saber said with a tight, sharp-tooth smile. "Just leave the little human to me."

"Thank you," Hunter said with a relieved smile. "I won't be long. I hope that the healer will allow me to bring both of her siblings back to my rooms."

"Take your time, we will be fine, won't we, Taylor?" Saber promised.

He stared over Hunter's shoulder. His intense eyes locked with Taylor's wary ones that gazed back at him with growing alarm. He rolled his shoulders and bent his neck from side to side, enjoying the feel of the crack that released the tension building inside him.

"Keep her safe, Saber," Hunter finally said, breaking the growing silence. "Her sister is my *Amate*. That means that Taylor and Jordan are now under my protection."

"I know what it means, Hunter," Saber growled, not taking his eyes off of Taylor. "I promise there won't be a single bruise on her."

Hunter nodded, glancing once more at Taylor before reluctantly stepping around the table in the nearly deserted cafeteria. Saber had to give Taylor credit, she didn't scream until Hunter walked out of the room. Still, he should have known it wouldn't be easy to catch her.

\*.\*.\*

*Shewta, she's fast, and slippery, and...,* he thought as he wiped the white gooey food matter from his face, *creative when it comes to escaping.*

"I am so looking forward to wrapping my hands around her little neck," he muttered under his breath as several warriors chuckled from where they were sitting and watching from the safety of a corner table. "Taylor, get down from there right now!" he ordered, looking at the top of the cabinets attached to the far wall.

"Why don't you try to make me, you... you moron!" she snapped. "I've got a bowl of..." she glanced at the orange mixture with a frown. "Orange goop and I'm not afraid to use it."

Saber flicked a piece of green food particle off his left shoulder as he stomped toward the metal cabinets. Right now, he was wearing just about every other color of food matter the cafeteria served. Why

not add the last? He was going to need to visit a cleaning unit as it was.

"I won't hurt you," Saber promised, watching warily as the cabinet under her shook. "Taylor, that cabinet is not secured to the wall properly. Be careful."

"You're just..." Taylor started to say when the cabinet shifted under her. Her eyes widened in alarm when it began to tilt. "Catch me!" she cried out before slinging the bowl in her hand to the side and jumping.

The sound of the warriors shouting a warning was drowned by the loud crash of the cabinet as it fell. Saber ignored everything but the small figure flying through the air. His arms opened and he caught Taylor.

The force of the impact sent him backwards. On the second step, his left foot hit one of the items that Taylor had thrown at him. The combination caused him to lose his balance and he fell.

His arms instinctively wrapped around Taylor to protect her as his back hit the hard, tiled surface. He was surprised when he felt her hands wrap protectively around his head to cushion the back of it. It took a moment for him to draw in a deep enough breath to speak. He opened his mouth to give Taylor a piece of his mind, but he snapped it shut when he locked gazes with the bright eyes staring down at him in worry.

"Are you okay? I didn't mean for that to happen," she said in a breathless voice. "I... Thank you for catching me."

Saber's expression softened. The feel of her in his arms reminded him of just how small and fragile she was. He glanced over her shoulder and scowled at the grinning faces of the other warriors who had come to make sure that Taylor was unharmed.

"Is she alright, Saber?" Arrow asked with a grin.

"Yes," Saber grunted with a wince when Taylor pushed up on his chest and accidentally kneed him in the groin. "Careful, little one. I'd like to keep those intact."

"Oh, sorry," Taylor muttered, turning a little red as she climbed to her feet and stared down at him with a wiggle of her nose. "Boy, I didn't miss you much, did I?"

Saber grimaced when the other warriors chuckled. "No, you didn't."

"I was a kick-ass softball player before...." Her voice died and she looked around at the group of warriors towering over her before she turned her head to look back down at Saber. "I want to see my sisters," she said, wrapping her arms protectively around her waist.

The other warriors registered the change in Taylor from bubbly pain-in-the-ass to a somber young girl at the same time as he did. Saber rose to his feet, wiping a hand down over his side before he tentatively reached out and drew her into his arms. With a fierce

glance at the other warriors, he jerked his head for them to leave them alone.

"It will be alright, Taylor," Saber murmured, holding her stiff body against his. "We will not harm you or your sisters."

Her arms slowly unfolded and she slid them around his waist, resting her cheek against his chest. That protective possessive feeling he felt the first time he saw Taylor swept through him.

"How can we be sure?" Her muffled voice asked. "Everyone else... I wish my dad were here."

Saber frowned at her fractured words. He wondered where the male was. Taylor and her two older sisters appeared to be alone, but what if they had protectors? He didn't know if Hunter or Dagger knew the answer to that question.

"Where is he? If you tell me, I will do everything I can to reunite you with your protector," he promised in a husky voice.

"You can't," she replied with a sniff. "He's... he's... dead. It's just Jesse, Jordan, and me now."

A shudder ran through Taylor, and Saber frowned when he felt her ribs through her threadbare shirt. She was too thin. The knowledge that his people and the Alliance were partially to blame for that fact did not sit well with him.

His species, the Trivators, had come to Earth four years ago. Their mission was to initiate first contact and prepare the Earth for inclusion into the Alliance, a vast coalition of planets that encompassed a large number of star systems.

They had encountered resistance before, but never like this. Mass chaos had reigned around the planet. While the humans were all the same species, their beliefs and lifestyles went from one extreme to the other. Tribal groups, fanatics, those greedy for power and wealth, and those that refused to accept they were not the only ones in the universe fought against not only the Trivator forces, they fought each other too, until their civilizations crumbled.

Bending, he scooped her up in his arms. He glanced at where Sword, Edge, and Thunder were watching in silence. All three men had a tense look of regret on their faces. He bowed his head in acknowledgement. They couldn't change what had been done, but he could change what happened to Taylor. She would not only have Hunter to protect her, but Saber and Dagger, as well.

"You are not alone any longer, little one," Saber whispered as he carried her out of the cafeteria. "I will watch over you."

Neither one of them spoke as Saber turned left at the end of the hallway. They had been negligent about Taylor's welfare. He felt another shaft of guilt pierce him. Taylor's two sisters, Jesse and Jordan, had been critically ill while Taylor had been a fireball of rebellion. She had fought like a warrior trying to protect her sisters. Because of her resistance, it never dawned on Saber that Taylor might need medical attention as well. The medic had checked her over and said she needed food, but otherwise appeared healthy.

"Where are you taking me?" Taylor asked, not moving her head which was nestled just under his chin.

"To the medical unit," he replied in a gruff voice. "I should have insisted that the healer check you over."

"Is that where Jesse and Jordan are?" she asked, tilting her head back to look at him. "You have dried mashed potatoes in your hair."

A startled chuckle escaped Saber. "I think I have more than that. You hit me more than you missed. You have a very good aim for a female. You are also very...." He stopped as he tried to think of the right word to describe her quickness.

"I'm very what?" Taylor asked with a puzzled frown.

Saber glanced down at her as he paused outside of a dark green door. "Fast. You are very fast, but the way you could jump and flip... I'm not sure the correct human word to use," he said in frustration.

"I'm very limber," she replied with a small smile. "I was in gymnastics. I was really, really good at it. Dad..." her voice choked for a moment and her eyes glittered with tears. "Dad said I needed it because I was born with too much energy for anyone to keep up with."

"I'm sorry about your father, Taylor," Saber murmured, reaching down to open the door.

Taylor shook her head and snuggled up against him again. "It wasn't your fault," she whispered. "He was killed the first day by a human. We've been

running ever since. I'm tired of running. So are Jesse and Jordan."

"You'll never have to run again if I have anything to do with it," Saber said grimly, glancing as one of the medics came forward. "I want a healer to check her."

The medic looked at the grim expression on Saber's face and gave him a sharp nod. "Follow me," he said.

\*.\*.\*

Taylor sat on the exam table and looked around the room. The medic had ushered Saber out of the room, telling him that he would have to wait outside in the front office. She glanced at the door, listening carefully. She could hear the quiet murmurs of the medic and another man.

She bit her lip in uncertainty. Jesse and Jordan had taught her the first year they were on the run to look for anything that they could use. Her eyes flickered to the medicine cabinet attached to the wall. They could always use the medicine once they escaped from here. Drugs were the second hardest thing to find out on the streets; the first was food.

She wiped her sweaty palms down her faded jeans. She would wait until after the doctor saw her, then find a way to hide a few things away. Her eyes jerked back to the door when it opened and a huge man walked into the room.

"Hello, human. My name is Carp. You were with the other two females that are resting?" he asked.

"Are they..." Taylor said, nodding her head at his question. "Are Jesse and Jordan going to be okay?"

Carp studied the tablet in his hand for a moment with a frown before he glanced up at her and nodded. "Yes, but it was a good thing the three of you were found when you were. Your sisters were very ill and one of them had several broken ribs," he said with a grim look. "How long have you been without protection?"

Taylor pursed her lips. "Jesse, Jordan, and I have been protecting each other. If you mean how long have we been on the run? It's been four years," she replied with a shrug, looking on curiously when he held up a small device. "What's that?"

"It allows me to scan your vitals," Carp replied with a slight smile.

"How does it work?" Taylor asked, glancing at it with a frown.

"It picks up your temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure," he explained, pocketing the device in his jacket before reaching for another strange piece of equipment. "Please place your hands on the surface."

Taylor cautiously lifted her hands and laid them on the dark glass. "What does this do?" she asked as a red light ran back and forth several times, causing her hands to tingle.

"It is taking blood samples and running tests on them. The results will tell me if you have the same virus that your sisters are suffering from, if you are anemic, as well as other tests," he said, pulling the flat

glass toward him and studying it. "When is the last time you ate?"

"About half an hour or so ago," Taylor admitted. "It was the first time I've had that much in years."

Shaking his head, Carp set the scanner down and walked over to the medicine cabinet. Pulling out a key, he unlocked it before dropping the key back into the pocket of his jacket. He scanned the contents. He started when he realized that Taylor had quietly stepped up behind him.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to a purple bottle.

"A vitamin supplement," Carp replied with a raised eyebrow. "Are you going to ask me what each vial contains now?"

Taylor glanced up at him with a mischievous grin. "Yep," she said. "I've always been fascinated with stuff."

"A few drops in water will give you strength as it replenishes the nutrients and vitamins you are missing. This one will kill any infections you might have. This one will seal a wound and enhance healing," Carp explained as he touched each vial.

"How do you guys know how to do all of this stuff?" Taylor asked in curiosity.

Carp picked up several vials and turned, motioning for Taylor to return to the examination table. He placed several drops from the purple vial into a glass of water before handing it to her. Taylor studied it suspiciously before sipping it. She was surprised when she felt a charge of energy sweep

through her. Quickly drinking the rest of the water down, she handed the glass back to him.

"Can you tell me if you are feeling pain anywhere?" Carp asked, motioning for her to lie back.

"Not really," Taylor said with a shrug as she scooted back and lay down. "I've got some bruises from Saber, but that's all."

"Saber?" Carp said with a dark scowl. "He hurt you?"

Taylor snorted. "Only when I hit his hard hide," she growled. "The guy is built like a brick wall. You try hitting him and see if you don't end up with a bruise or two."

Carp's scowl dissolved and he chuckled as he shook his head. "No, thank you," he replied dryly. "I've participated in enough training sessions to know what Saber, Hunter, and Dagger are like. This will take care of your bruising. I suggest that you refrain from striking any more Trivator warriors in the future."

"Of course you'd say that, you're one of them!" Taylor retorted.

"I've requested clean clothing to replace your torn garments," Carp said, running the last of his scans and motioning for Taylor to sit up. "I'll inform Hunter that you and your sisters may return to his quarters with instructions to return in a few days for a check up to make sure all of you are well."

"Thanks," Taylor said, smiling as she sat up.

She watched as the healer walked to the door and opened it after a soft knock sounded. He turned with

a stack of clothing in his hands. She slid off the exam table again and reached for them when he held them out.

"I'll inform Hunter you are here. Just come back out to the front room when you are ready," Carp instructed.

"I will. Thanks, doc," Taylor grinned brightly.

Carp gave her an uncertain look before he nodded and stepped out of the room. Taylor breathed a sigh of relief and quickly changed. She glanced at the door before walking back over to the bed where she pulled out the key and scanner she had slipped from his pocket and hidden under the pillow.

It didn't take her long to place all the vials into her old shirt that she had tied up to make a bag. Her fingers hovered over a gun-shaped item. It was the same thing the medic had used on Jordan and Jesse in the transport that had brought them here.

"It might come in handy," Taylor whispered under her breath as her fingers wrapped around it. "Always think ahead, like Jesse says."

Wrapping the items in her jeans, she straightened. Once she, Jesse, and Jordan were together, they could plan on how to escape. She paused by the door and pulled down the paper taped to the wall. It was a map of the compound. It would definitely come in handy.

Drawing in a deep breath, Taylor grinned. This was actually fun. They were healthy, had clean clothes, food, and medicine. Now, all they needed to do was escape. Taylor thought of everything she had

seen as they were walking to the building. There had been a line of garbage trucks leaving. They were checked coming in, but not going out. It wasn't an ideal escape plan, but knowing how well these aliens could smell, it just might work.

Doing a little jig, Taylor opened the door and stepped out. She smiled at Carp when he walked by her. She took the opportunity to drop the key back into his pocket. He was just going to have to get a new scanner.

"Thanks again for everything, doc," she said.

Carp bowed his head in acknowledgement. "I have instructed Hunter to take better care of you and your sisters. Now that he has claimed one of them for his *Amate*, you are under his protection."

"Sure thing," Taylor agreed, not understanding what an *Amate* was and deciding it didn't matter, as they wouldn't be here long enough to find out. "Bye!"

She bit her lip when she heard Carp's muttered words as he turned. If he thought they were strange, he needed to spend a few weeks in the outside world. With a sigh, Taylor saw Saber rise as she entered the room. The adorable alien moron still had dried food in his hair.

## Chapter 3

"Hunter, wake up," Saber growled, bending down over Hunter's inert body and shaking him early the next morning. He patted Hunter's face before glancing over his shoulder at Dagger. "Anything?" he asked.

"They went out the back window," Dagger replied, nodding to where Hunter was covered by a thin blanket. "How is he?"

"Out cold," Saber muttered, glancing at the discarded injector. "You'd better get Carp. Hunter is going to be furious enough as it is. I don't think waiting for him to wake up would be a good idea. It will just give those females more time to run."

Twenty minutes later, a very pissed off Hunter sat at the same table where he had been hours ago. Saber couldn't help the grin that curved his lips. It would appear his little human had struck once again. The smile quickly turned to a scowl when he realized where his thoughts had taken him.

*She's not mine, he thought in aggravation. Well, she is not mine yet, but she will be.*

"Saber!" Hunter growled again, pulling him back to the present.

"What?" Saber frowned as he glared across the table at Hunter.

"I asked how Taylor was able to get her hands on a sedative injector." Hunter asked with an accusing tone, glaring at him.

Saber shrugged and waved his hand at Carp. "How should I know? The medic and Carp would not allow me back into the examination room. Ask Carp, he is the healer, not me," he snapped defensively. "I told you she was a little hellion. I was covered in food by the time I left her with you."

Carp raised his hands in the air and shook his head. "I just checked her over like I was asked to do," he retorted when Hunter turned his irritated gaze on him. "Saber insisted that the young human be examined. It was just as well that he did. Her body was showing an increase in white blood cells, indicating that she was fighting an infection. I suspect she would have been as sick as her siblings within a matter of days. Her body was also depleted of essential nutrients due to her extended period of malnourishment."

Saber rose out of his chair and glared at Carp. "You didn't tell me any of that! You said she was fine," he growled.

"I said she would be fine," Carp corrected. "After you notified me of what had happened to Hunter, I checked the medicine cabinet in the room where I examined Taylor. She cleaned it out. I need to return to the medical unit. All I can say is good luck. I have a feeling all three of you are going to need it!" Carp bowed his head in farewell before he walked out of the door.

Saber winced when Hunter ignored Carp's departure and turned back to stare at him. He knew what Hunter was going to say. The problem was Saber didn't have an answer.

"Which leads me back to how the *shewta* did she get all of that past you?" Hunter asked bluntly.

Saber raised an eyebrow. "How did she knock you out?" he retorted, deciding being on the offensive was the better of the two options since he couldn't very well say he had been too busy trying not to make a bigger fool of himself in front of Taylor than he already had in the cafeteria.

"I don't think the how or why matters now," Dagger finally said, turning from where he was standing by the window looking out at the compound. "What matters is that we find them."

Saber watched as Hunter bowed his head and drew in a deep breath before he rose out of the chair. He returned Hunter's stare when he glanced back and forth between him and Dagger with a slightly confused expression on his face. Saber knew Hunter could hear the slightly possessive sound in his and Dagger's voices when they talked about the other females.

Saber was reminded of when they were boys. They often knew what the other was thinking or feeling without having to be told. When they were boys, they had taken a blood oath that they would always be there for each other. Finding the women wasn't just for Hunter, who had to find Jesse now that

he had claimed her, it was for Dagger and Saber as well.

"Dagger's right," Saber agreed. "We need to find them. Hunter," he paused, glancing at Dagger before drawing in a deep breath and returning his steady gaze to Hunter. "I believe these females are different. I... As of today, I pledge my honor as a warrior to protect them as if they were my own. The little one, Taylor, she is far too spirited for her own good. I believe you will need all the help you can get in keeping her safe."

Dagger nodded his head. "I agree, though for a different reason," he admitted, looking at Hunter. "I stake my claim here and now, my friend. The one called Jordan will one day be my *Amate*. I swear on my life that I will protect her... as soon as I find her again," he added grimly.

"*Shewta!*" Hunter said, staring in shock at Dagger. "You are sure?"

Dagger flushed, but didn't look away. "Yes," he replied in a quiet voice.

Saber couldn't quite meet Hunter's gaze when Hunter turned back to stare at him. His eyes focused on the window where the girls had escaped. He moved from one foot to the other as the silence grew. Finally, in exasperation, he looked back at Hunter with a slightly tormented expression.

"She is young," Hunter replied in a soft voice.

Saber could feel his own face heat. "I know," he replied.

"It won't be easy. Something tells me that she will push you to your limits," Hunter continued.

"I said I know," Saber growled before turning his gaze to Dagger's amused face. "Her sister is young, too. You will have to wait as well," he pointed out.

"Yes, but not quite as young as the other, and she doesn't bite," Dagger chuckled before he sobered and a frown creased his brow. "At least, I don't think she does."

"I think it will take all three of us to keep them safe," Hunter replied with a grimace as he ran his hand over his neck, touching the spot where Taylor had injected him with the sedative.

"Then, I suggest we go find them," Saber said, rubbing his hands together. "I have a little demon to strangle."

\*.\*.\*

Two weeks later, Saber stood outside the transport Hunter had obtained for them to search for the females. They were near the former downtown area of Seattle. Abandoned buildings in various levels of destruction stood as a testament to the ravages done to the city since the Trivators' arrival four years before.

The destruction was not what Saber was currently thinking about though. No, at the moment he was thinking of all the ways he could throttle the three females. He released a tired sigh and stared down at the scanner in his hand.

Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Taylor's body lying somewhere out in the crumbled ruins. His eyes lit up with hope, then fear, before a dark, primitive rage swept through him when a new reading showed up on the scanner. Fifteen dots surrounded three.

"Hunter," Saber growled in fury. "Over here!"

Saber held the scanner out to Hunter before turning it to Dagger. Without another word, he attached it back to his belt and turned toward the alley leading in the direction where the figures were located. He broke into a run when he heard the sound of a scream. It was Taylor.

Saber, Hunter, and Dagger immediately assessed the situation when they reached the target area. Fifteen men circled the women. Rage unlike anything he had ever felt surged through him when he saw one of the human males strike Taylor across the face. As if in slow motion, he saw her collapse in the rubble-strewn street. The man bent over her and began ripping at her clothing.

"Kill them," he roared as he barreled through the men standing between him and Taylor.

Saber pulled his laser sword. He cut a path through three men before they were even aware that they weren't alone any longer. He sliced through a fourth man as he tried to scramble away, severing the main artery in the man's throat with a clean stroke.

The man kneeling over Taylor would not die so quickly. He sheathed his laser sword at his waist. Reaching out, he grabbed the man by the back of his

shirt and lifted him away from Taylor's unconscious body.

"Hey, this one is mine..." the human started to protest before he saw who had grabbed him. "Oh, shit!" The male whispered, paling.

"Yes," Saber agreed, flashing his sharp teeth at the male. "*Soco ballast, human!* Now, you die... slowly."

Saber caught the man's hand in his when the human tried to strike him. He closed his fingers around the man's hand and squeezed. He could feel the bones breaking under his grip.

"No!" The man screamed, fighting to break free. "Help me, damn it!"

Saber shook his head. "There is no one left alive to help you this time, human," Saber snarled as he twisted the man's arm, breaking it with a sickening snap.

"Why?" The male blubbered. "Why? They're just a couple of bitches. Why do you care what we do with them?"

Saber grabbed the male's other arm when he tried to push him away. His fingers wrapped around the human's wrist and he quickly twisted it, breaking the human's other arm. Leaning in, he made sure the human could hear him before he died.

"A true warrior protects those weaker than he," Saber hissed out. "This female belongs to me, human. She is not a bitch. She is a fierce warrior who will one day be my *Amate*."

"I didn't know," the man cried. "Please, I didn't know."

Saber stared into the man's eyes. "What did you do when she asked for mercy?" Saber whispered as the sound of fighting faded behind him.

He watched dispassionately as the man's eyes widened when he realized there would be no reprieve. He released the human's broken arm and wrapped his hand around the man's neck. With a quick twist, he snapped the bastard's neck before tossing the male's body to the side.

Stepping closer to Taylor, he knelt down beside her and carefully drew her torn shirt closed. He could see the steady rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. His fingers trembled as he ran them over her temple and cheek where a fine line of blood stained her skin.

He tenderly ran his hands down over her body, checking to make sure that she didn't have any injuries that would prevent him from picking her up and carrying her back to the transport. Confident that it was safe to move her, he slid his arms under her and rose back to his feet.

He was shocked by how little she weighed. Turning, he glanced over towards Dagger who was holding Jordan. He watched in concern as Jesse turned on her heel and started to walk away. Gazing down at Taylor's pale face, he couldn't help but think she looked incredibly young and fragile. She also needed immediate medical attention. He strode over to Hunter and Dagger.

"Get them to the transport," Hunter ordered, glancing at Taylor's bloody and bruised face with regret. "I will meet you there."

Saber glanced at Jesse's stiff back as she walked toward an alley opposite to their entrance onto the scene. "She won't come willingly," he warned.

Hunter glanced at him before he turned away. "I would expect nothing less from her," he muttered as he walked away.

Saber glanced one last time at Jesse before he turned and strode back toward the transport. He would let Hunter and Dagger worry about the other two sisters. His main concern was for the one in his arms. She was his world, whether she realized it or not.

"Goddess, help me," Saber muttered as he carefully palmed the transport platform open. "Something tells me I am going to need it before she is old enough to claim."

\*.\*.\*

Saber stood inside the medical unit once again, only this time it was on the warship heading toward Rathon. He refused to stay outside when Carp had asked him. Instead, he paced back and forth waiting for Carp to finish his examination of Taylor.

He stopped when Carp stepped back from Taylor's side. His gaze flashed to the tablet Carp was frowning at before returning to the healer's face. He scowled when Carp didn't immediately look up.

"Well?" Saber demanded, clenching his fists in an effort to not reach out and snatch the tablet out of Carp's hands. "Is she going to be alright?"

Carp looked up and nodded. "Yes," he replied with a deep sigh. "I don't think I will ever understand why the human males treat their females like this. I must admit, I am glad we have left their world."

"So am I," Saber admitted. "When will she wake up?"

"I'm awake," Taylor grumbled. "It's kind of hard to sleep with you pacing back and forth."

Saber immediately stepped around Carp and walked over to the bed. He stared down at Taylor. Carp had healed most of the bruising, but there was still a small discoloring. He started to open his mouth, to ask her what she and her sisters had been thinking, before snapping it shut when her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't cry," he grunted out as a feeling of panic began to rise inside him. "Don't...." His voice died when the first tear escaped to course down her cheek. "*Shewta!* You are trying to rip my heart out, aren't you?"

He sat down on the side of the bed. In the background, he could hear Carp quietly leaving them alone. He opened his arms when Taylor sat up. A deep sigh escaped him when her shoulders began to shake with her silent sobs. He awkwardly patted her back before he lowered his head and tightened his arms around her and rubbed his chin against her hair.

"Jesse... Jordan," Taylor sobbed.

"They are safe," Saber murmured. "Why did you leave? You were safe at the compound."

Taylor pulled back to gaze up at him with watery eyes. He reached for a tissue on the tray next to the bed and held it out to her when she sniffed. He waited as she blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

"How were we supposed to know that?" Taylor asked stubbornly. "I heard Hunter say that Jesse was his *Amate*. I don't know what that is, but it doesn't sound good. We were going to try to head up to the cabin."

Saber gently raised Taylor's chin so she was forced to look at him. An amused smile curved the corner of his lips when she wiggled her nose at him and gave him a slightly suspicious glare. His thumb ran tenderly along her lower lip. He raised an eyebrow at her when she tried to bite it.

"Still trying to bite me, little one?" he asked with a soft chuckle.

Taylor's lips twitched. "You bet, old man," she retorted before falling back against the pillow. "I'm tired," she admitted with a huge yawn. "So, Jordan and Jesse are okay?"

Saber nodded, seeing the pleading look in Taylor's gaze. "I swear on my honor as a warrior," he promised. "Sleep, my little warrior. I will look after you and keep you safe."

Taylor rolled onto her side and gazed around the room with a frown. She rolled back over onto her back and gazed up at him. He could see the confusion in her eyes.

"Where are we?" she asked in a hesitant voice.

Saber reached over and tenderly brushed her hair back from her face. She relaxed back onto the pillow at his touch. Something told him that watching over her was going to be a challenge to not only his patience, but to his control as well.

"We are on the *Star Raider*," he murmured. "We are returning to Rathon, where my home is."

"Oh," Taylor whispered before her eyes began to droop. "That's kind-of cool."

Saber watched as her eyelids slowly lowered until they created two crescent moons against her pale cheeks. Within minutes, her breathing had deepened and he knew she had slipped into a deeper sleep. He glanced toward the door when he heard Carp pause outside of it.

"Good luck, Saber," Carp replied with a slight grin. "I have a feeling you, Dagger, and Hunter are about to discover a battle that will take all your skills to win."

Saber glanced back at Taylor's relaxed face. Carp was probably right. One thing Saber knew, it was a battle he planned to win.

## **Additional Books and Information**

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## About the Author

S.E. Smith is a *New York Times, USA TODAY, International, and Award-Winning* Bestselling author of science fiction, romance, fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary works for adults, young adults, and children. She enjoys writing a wide variety of genres that pull her readers into worlds that take them away.