

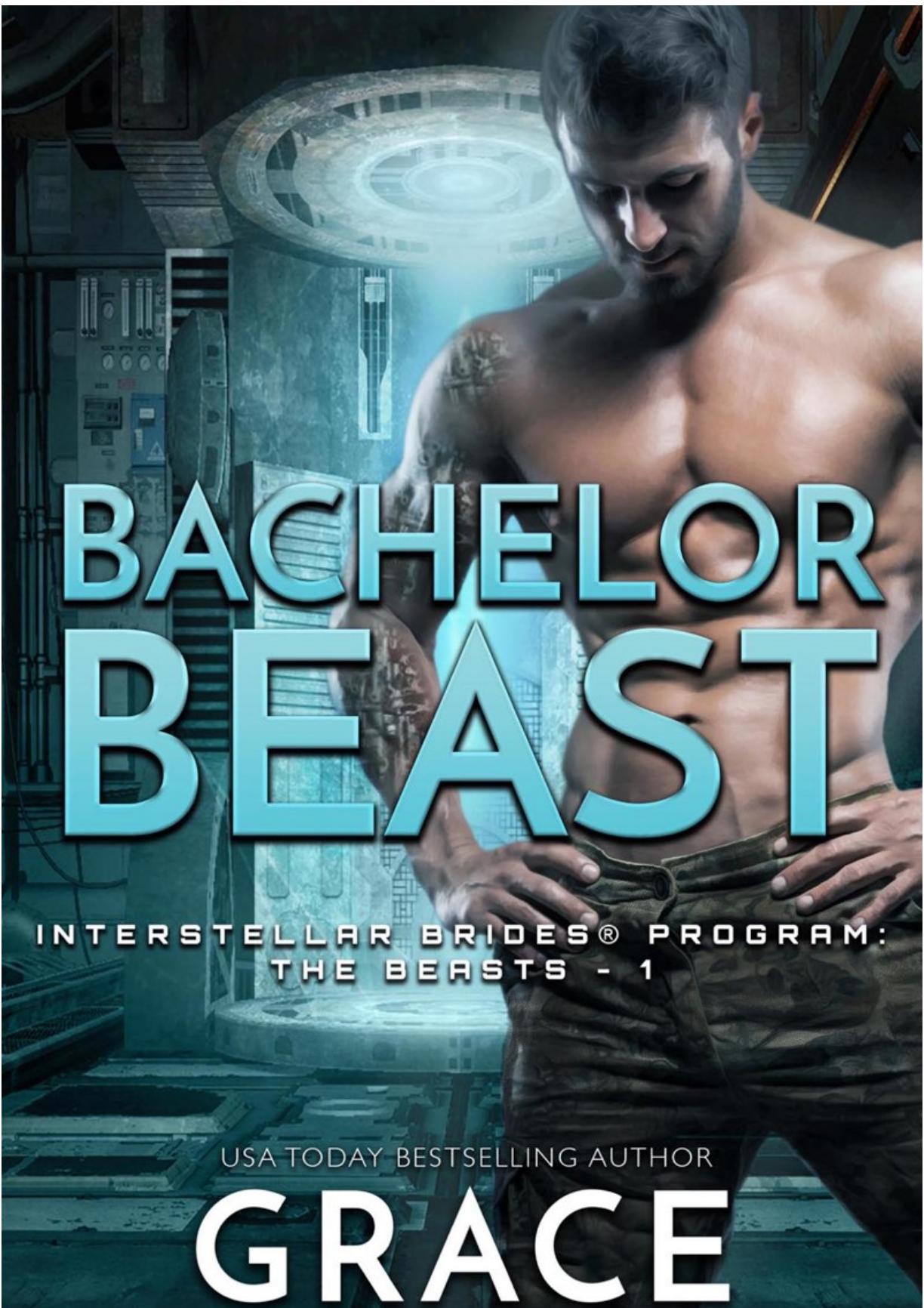


BACHELOR BEAST

INTERSTELLAR BRIDES® PROGRAM:
THE BEASTS - 1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GRACE
GOODWIN





GOODWIN

BACHELOR BEAST

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Bachelor Beast
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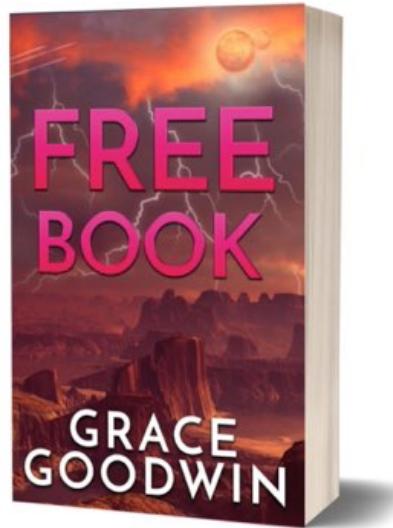
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1



Marlord Wulf, Interstellar Brides Program Processing Center, Miami, Florida, Earth

“THIS IDEA WAS stupid from the start, and now it’s ridiculous,” I snarled.

A woman fluttered behind me with a small brush in her hand and brought it up to my neck. It not only tickled, but it was covered in a pale powder she was applying to my skin.

I swatted her away... carefully—she was small and female, and I didn’t want to hurt her—then looked back at the comms.

“What is the human doing to your neck?” Maxim asked, cocking his head to the side as if that could help him see better. “Why are your cheeks that color? Are you ill?”

My beast practically snarled, ready to rip the comm screen off the wall. The frustration had been building ever since I’d arrived on this far-off, backward planet.

“It’s what they call makeup,” I said through gritted teeth. “The small female assures me that if I do not have this red powder on my cheeks, that I will appear to be unwell and weak on the display screens all over this planet.”

Rachel, who stood behind Maxim, nodded her head. “That’s true. Humans call it stage makeup.”

I huffed in disgust and waved the female forward. In moments she was back at it with her little brushes. I looked down at her, tried to calm myself enough not to scare the shit out of her. The look in my eye must have indicated imminent death if she didn’t leave me alone. She swallowed hard, then climbed down from the stepladder she had to use to reach my face. I was so much taller than anyone on Earth, and she was a small version of a human. She cleared her throat. “I think that’s good enough. Good luck tonight.”

“Thank you,” I replied, trying to practically whisper so she didn’t burst into tears.

She and her ladder scurried away as if she’d used the reserves of her courage to speak to me.

“You look odd,” Maxim said. I was glad he refrained from using a more insulting word.

“While makeup is usually a thing Earth women put on their faces, for television, people of both genders need it or they’re washed out by the set lights.” Rachel explained to Maxim the same thing I’d been told the first day on set.

“I have no idea what any of that means,” Maxim said, turning to look up at his mate. He sat in his familiar chair—even though it was light-years away from where I was—and Rachel stood at his side, her arm around his shoulder. It

was a very casual pose for an official comms call between planets.

But nothing about why I was on Earth was official or formal. It was a hot mess, as I'd heard someone here say. It was a disaster. The worst solar plasma storm on record had nothing on my life. I was the unlucky fucker chosen for this ridiculous mission because I'd learned the human language of English several years ago. I'd learned it to try to please my Interstellar Bride. My *perfect* matched mate.

Look how that had turned out. Back then I'd been a fierce warlord. Whole. Battle tested. In my fucking prime. Still, she'd taken her thirty days and chosen to return to Earth. She'd chosen another. Not an Atlan, but a human male. A man she'd loved more than she could learn to love me. I'd felt nothing but pain every time I'd been forced to recall this primitive language to speak to the females the Earth program paraded before me like gifts. To speak to the annoying man with large white teeth and stiff hair who took every opportunity to shove a voice amplifier in my face.

I held no hope this mission would save my life. If a perfect matched mate had not ended my mating fever, I had little hope that a stranger would now, even if she were willing. I'd rather return to Atlan and be processed for execution than condemn a female to life with me but without the devotion of my beast.

So far, that dark, primitive side of me, my beast, was simply *not interested*.

"This isn't going to work, Maxim," I repeated. I'd been saying the same thing since the first day I'd arrived. *Three*

weeks I'd been on Earth. Three interminable weeks. No wonder females volunteered for the Brides Program to get the hell off this crazy planet.

Their vehicles were primitive and smelled of burned fuel, as did the black tar they spread on their roads. The air was brown with pollution and smelled of chemicals. The people were cruel and unkind to one another, with filthy, unwashed humans left to sicken and die on the sides of streets, sleeping in paper boxes while others lived in palaces of stone and crystal. Earth humans were, as the Coalition had been prior to Prime Nial's decree, unkind to their soldiers who returned from battle damaged. They were ignored or forgotten, denied the honor due them for their service. They were not adored; they were feared. Different.

Like me and every other male and female banished to The Colony. We were damaged goods. Contaminated and shunned out of fear.

Which was one of the reasons I'd agreed to this debacle. Not for me. For them. The others. We needed more brides. Earth females had, for whatever reason, adapted to life on The Colony and accepted our fallen warriors as their own. Claimed them. Loved them. Mated and had children with them. Earth had given us hope, and two of the human mates on The Colony, Lindsey and Rachel, had come up with this insane idea.

Why they believed I would entice human females to apply to be matched specifically to The Colony, I had no idea. I was not the best of us. There were many, many honorable males who would have been happy to be chosen.

But I spoke English, if not very well. I could communicate. Rachel knew I would deny her nothing. She was one of our chosen females, matched to our elected governor, Maxim of Prillon Prime. She was to be honored and protected, in mind and body. When she'd pleaded with me, I could not refuse.

"Can't you try? I know it doesn't work that way, but still. Maybe kiss one of them or something? Maybe that would light the spark."

My beast recoiled at the idea of touching either woman, of kissing them. But Rachel, with her curly brown hair and perky attitude, looked like the hopeful, optimistic Earth female she was. Now, being here and surrounded by females, I understood why she was so small. They were all small. Despite everything I could see wrong with this planet, the humans persisted in their hope. Their optimism. They refused to yield or admit defeat.

"No." One word was all I could give her as I fought back the rage of my beast. He wasn't just uninterested; he was furious at the idea that I might try to force him to kiss a female he did not want for his own. Not now. Not when the fever was riding us like fire in our blood and unrelenting rage was flowing in every fiber of our being every moment of every day. As the humans would say, I was holding on by my fingernails.

"Why not? What do you have to lose? You might be surprised, you know?" Rachel tried to encourage me, and I admired her independent spirit. That spirit was tempered by her two Prillon mates, as theirs were by her. She arched a brow at my statement. "I've heard the ratings are

through the roof and everyone's dying to find out what's going to happen next. This is going to be great for recruiting brides."

I set my hands on my hips and took a deep breath, trying not to burst into beast mode. It wasn't because the fever raged within me, but because I was so frustrated and out of control. Here, on Earth, *I had no control*. I ate when they told me to eat. I slept when they told me to sleep. I wore what they told me to wear. I spent time with females they insisted I attempt to woo. I answered to a small, gray-haired human male with a clipboard and dark-rimmed glasses. He was not my commander, not an Atlan. Not a soldier.

He was an executive assistant, whatever the fuck that was supposed to be. As I was not one of these executives, I was uncertain why he insisted on following me from place to place and ordering me around like a small child. Sometimes he even spoke loudly, slowly, as if I were not only contaminated with Hive technology, but deaf and dumb as well.

"I don't care about human ratings," I grumbled.

"But you do care about helping us get more brides to The Colony," Maxim insisted, and he was not wrong so I did not argue. Many worthy males waited for a mate. Too many.

Sadly I knew what the term "ratings" meant and all the other terminology associated with an Earth television program. "Lindsey wanted me to come to Earth to promote alien mates with the hopes of gaining new volunteers to the Brides Program. Fine. That is what I agreed to. They were supposed to interview me. Get some pictures. Send me to

the different bride centers around the planet. What you didn't tell me was that I was to be on some kind of... entertainment program experiment."

"Reality TV," Rachel clarified. I could tell by the way she was biting her lip that she was holding in a laugh. She was not my mate, but I wanted to paddle her ass for finding amusement in my discomfort.

I'd learned all about the concept of reality television the moment I stepped off the transport platform when the producer, the director and two staff underlings met me with ridiculous enthusiasm and wide-eyed stares. Turned out, I wasn't a representative from The Colony answering questions about life on the planet and the various fighters who were possible matches. I was a tiny, fat Earth animal with a lot of fur. Once Rachel used the term, I had searched Earth's primitive computer to look up the animal in question. I was, apparently, a rodent kept as a pet by small children. A... guinea pig.

"This is not reality. Why didn't you tell me I was to be the subject of an entertainment program where a gaggle of females were preselected to spend time with me in organized activities? Females I am not interested in. Why did you not tell me that I would be forced to spend time with them until I narrowed down the females to one to be my mate and receive my mating cuffs?" I asked that last, long question in one huge breath.

"Because you wouldn't have gone," Maxim said.

"Would you?" I countered, eyeing the Prillon governor. His brown hair was as dark as his mood. As leader of The

Colony, he had a lot of responsibility and only seemed to smile when Rachel was about. He wasn't smiling now.

Good. He'd given permission for this mess.

"It was necessary, Wulf. The warriors here watch the broadcast as well. They are smiling. Laughing. They are excited on your behalf. There is hope."

Low blow. I could not let them down, and he knew it. Still I felt the need to warn him. "With all due respect, what if I fail? Would you want to be in my place?"

He shifted in his chair, his cheeks turning as bright a pink as mine probably were from the ridiculous amount of colored powder the frightened female had brushed onto my face. "No. Thankfully I already have a mate."

"I'm sure volunteers at the brides center must have increased. Let me end this. Get me the hell out of here. All I have to do is walk down to the transport room and I'll be gone."

"You can't!" Rachel practically shouted. "It has to go well, because what about the others? I mean, you're not the only one who's yet to be matched. And no, there has been no increase in brides, not yet. I think they are all watching, waiting to see how the show ends."

"Fuck."

She tried to smile, but I wasn't buying it. "Think of the females on Earth who will volunteer because they see you claiming a mate on their TVs. You are handsome and honorable. A human woman's dream. They're going to want a Wulf of their own."

I rolled my eyes. Gods be damned, I actually rolled my fucking eyes like a human.

"Then there's your fever," Maxim cautioned me.

As if I needed the reminder. My beast was always right below the surface, ready to break free, ready to stretch my skin, my bones, my size and take over.

I thought of all the fighters on The Colony who were waiting for a mate. Most had been tested by now, but the odds of being matched were slim. Only a small number had found mates, and all the females they'd been matched to were from Earth. Maxim was one of the lucky ones. Rachel, the mate he shared with Ryston, had volunteered to be tested and mated instead of facing a long prison sentence on her home planet. She was too fucking sweet and kind to have wallowed in a cell. She'd worked with Hunter Kiel's mate, a human woman named Lindsey, to devise this... scheme with some people within the Earth side of the Brides Program. It was the hope that this trip to Earth, that my public courting of these females, would grow the volunteer bride pool, which might mean matches for my friends. Rachel and Lindsey had good intentions, but I was the one paying the price.

Still, I couldn't let them down. Not the unmated warriors on The Colony, not Rachel nor Lindsey and not Governor Maxim, who had fought for every one of us at one time or another.

"I survived the Hive. I can finish this." I would control my beast with my last breath. I had no choice.

"That's the spirit!" Rachel pumped her fist in the air and clapped Maxim on the shoulder. But his gaze did not lighten, and I knew he expected my next words.

"I have remained here and participated in this for the others. But Rachel, this episode is the last." I would see it through to the end, when I would kindly thank both females and take my leave like a male of honor, while I still could. Before I lost control. Because *my fever raged*.

"The grand finale!" She smiled and clapped her hands together. "I know. It's so exciting. I've been glued to the screen."

I frowned, having no idea what that meant.

"Seeing you in a tuxedo... wow, Wulf. You're hot."

I looked down at myself in this strange Earth outfit. With the shirt, something called a vest and a jacket, I *was* hot.

"Are you going to pick Genevieve or Willow?" she whispered as if I might share a secret.

I growled thinking of the two females my beast had disliked the least out of the twenty-four. I was not interested in mating either female. My beast had no desire to claim—or fuck—either of them. Admittedly they were beautiful women. Kind. Thoughtful. Eager to be matched. Eager to leave Earth. The mating fever was pushing me hard to find my mate, but neither of the finalists tempted my beast. Neither would be able to soothe him, let alone control him. A beast answered only to his mate. Without that feminine touch, we were lost.

It would be simple to choose one female on that stage. But my beast would not accept her as a mate, my fever would not be soothed and I would be forced to leave this planet before I hurt anyone when my beast raged and lost control. A false mate wasn't what my beast wanted, and admittedly neither did I. I wanted *her*. Whoever the fuck

she was. The one to set my heart ablaze. My body, my cock would be perpetually hard for her. To be in her. To make her scream.

Genevieve and Willow didn't do any of that for me.

"I'm not going to pick either of them."

Her mouth fell open. "What?"

The lady with the brush had wrapped a small towel around my neck earlier, and the small paper cloth felt like it was choking me. Being here, my choices—or lack of them—was practically strangling me. Tugging the paper off, I threw it on a nearby desk. Fortunately the taping was being done at the testing center, since I wasn't officially allowed to wander around on the planet. They'd made a few exceptions... for dates. These... organized activities I had to do with the females, which were supposed to be fun. Romantic. I growled at the screen, hoping Maxim would take last-minute pity on me.

Yes, pity, and that proved how deep I'd sunk.

At least I was fortunate to be in a place with a comms station, offering me a direct connection to The Colony, to *home*. I'd been trying to talk Maxim, my governor, into intervening before the final episode, which was happening in just a few minutes.

"What?" Rachel said, her voice full of panic. "You have to pick one of them."

"Do you prefer either female to live on The Colony? I know you Earth ladies up there are close, but you'll have to include whoever I pick into your little group. Willow and Genevieve are fine females, but they won't be happy. Not with me. Especially since I'll have to fuck her for the rest of

my life and my beast is livid at the possibility. He might refuse to touch her, to claim her. Females are meant to be treasured. Adored. I cannot do that. My beast refuses."

"It can't be that bad," Maxim said.

I eyed him for a moment. "My cock isn't rising for either of them. My beast would rather transport to Atlan and be executed. He would rather die. It is our way. The Atlan way."

Maxim cleared his throat at what was becoming a likelihood. My beast had been raging for a long time, the fever pushing me to find my mate. I knew it was part of the reason I'd been selected, hoping I'd find a female here in this... reality show... who was my mate. The alternative was death. That was looking more and more likely.

"Two minutes!" A perky female the size of an Atlan child stuck her head into the room, interrupting us, then disappeared.

Fuck.

"I've been on these things called dates with the females. I've gone on something called a fan boat in a water swamp to see prehistoric creatures with sharp teeth. I've walked along a beach barefoot. I've had something called a picnic. I've even gone swimming."

"At least you learned how from Mikki."

I growled and Rachel pinned her lips closed.

"I've done everything expected of me, including making twenty-two women cry at being rejected. I don't need to see an Earth sunset while holding hands with a female to know she, or any of them, are not my mate. I'm surprised females here don't demand to be tested to avoid such

activities when they have no idea if the male they're spending time with is worthy."

"Preaching to the choir on that one," Rachel interjected. As I had no idea what she was talking about, I continued.

"A bride test is simple and quick and ensures they find the perfect mate." I sighed, knowing it wasn't the same on the males' side. I'd been tested years ago and even been matched. That had turned out to be a complete disaster. I'd been fighting the fever ever since, returned to space, to battle as an outlet for my rage. I had given the vast wealth and lands granted to me on Atlan to my family when I left for the second time. I had planned to go back, to try to find an Atlan female who would soothe me, but the Hive had killed that dream as well. Captured me. Tortured me. Turned me into... this.

I was out of time and out of options. My family on Atlan would be well taken care of. If I could convince even a handful of human females to be matched to others on The Colony, I could go to Atlan with a clear conscience. I would hold the beast back for one more day. One more night.

But I was glad I had an inner beast to let me know who my mate was—or *wasn't*. I could not hate him, nor regret that he was part of me. He had saved me in battle, killed countless enemies. He didn't deserve falsehood. He deserved respect. I would not force him to accept a female neither of us desired. If he preferred death, I would accept his choice.

"I must go."

"No, Wulf, listen! Just pick one. You can tell them the truth after the show," Rachel countered.

“My cuffs are in a glass case on the stage,” I reminded her, pointing at the closed door and the stage that lay beyond. “They expect me to get down on a knee and offer the cuffs to one of them while the entire world watches.” I took a step toward the screen and narrowed my eyes. “I’m Atlan. To make such an offer with no intent to claim the female would be dishonorable. My beast will not kneel for anyone but my true mate, Maxim.”

The producer came through the door. He was a small human. Well, they were all small. His hair was gray, and he never seemed to stop talking. Or moving. I wanted to lift him up by the neck and tell him to fuck off. “Say goodbye to your space friends. This is a live show. We’re live in thirty seconds. Now move!”

Yeah, I really wanted to finish him.

“Good luck. We’ll be watching,” Rachel said before the screen went dark.