



# Forced to Mate By the Mad Scientist

**Author:** *Evangeline Anderson*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** He was meant to protect her...now he might destroy her...

Dr. Sylvia Cooper can't stand her Kindred bodyguard. Sure, Kross is seven feet of ripped, smoldering alien hotness—but he's also a sarcastic pain in the ass who keeps meddling in her missions. When he tries to block her latest expedition—tracking down a miracle plant that could heal spinal injuries—she ignores his warnings about the dangerous planet... and the rumors of the infamous Dr. Barbarous. Kross has known Sylvia is his Fated Mate from the moment they met. But as a Hybrid, he can't Bond—so he pushes her away with sarcasm, hiding how badly he wants her. Until their mission goes sideways and they're captured by the twisted Dr. Barbarous. Now they're part of his latest experiment... and escaping might mean giving in to the one thing they've both been fighting: their feelings for each other.

Can they break free before they're Forced to Mate by the Mad Scientist?

\*Author's Note—there is a scene in this Enemies to Lovers, Bodyguard Romance book that might be disturbing to anyone who has experienced SA in the past but it has to do with a robot, not the hero of the book. Please read responsibly.

**Total Pages (Source):** 46

# Page 1

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1

SYLVIE

“I hate him! I mean it—I can’t stand that big asshole!” Doctor Sylvia Cooper snarled, throwing her hairbrush across the room.

“Take it easy there, doll,” Kat said dryly as the hairbrush landed against the metal wall of Sylvia’s suite hard enough to make a dullclangsound. “If you throw that any harder we’re going to have a hull breach on our hands.”

Of course, it would take more than a hairbrush to breach the hull of the Kindred Mother Ship but Sylvie took her friend’s point. Taking a deep breath, she went to pick up the brush and continued brushing her long, wavy hair. It was what you might call strawberry blonde or rose-gold and she had both the freckles and the temper to match her coloring.

“I know I shouldn’t let him get to me,” she said to Kat, who was watching with her arms crossed and one eyebrow raised. “It’s just that I have to spend so much time with him! Why couldn’t Commander Sylvan have assigned me to some other Protector?”

Kat shrugged.

“Dunno. I’m sure he didn’t have any idea that you and Kross would clash like this.”

Kross was Sylvie’s Protector—a seven-foot-tall Hybrid Kindred warrior who was

half Beast Kindred and half Blood Kindred. He also had some Skellax blood in him—a very rare alien race that had very few people.

Being part Skellax meant that Kross had dark gray skin, silver hair, and eyes that changed colors depending on his mood. Whenever he was around Sylvia they were almost always red, which she was fairly certain meant he was angry or irritated with her.

If so, the feeling was mutual. Kross was constantly complaining that she wanted to go to unsafe planets for her research and bitching about the fact that she was “reckless” and “putting herself in danger.”

Which was ridiculous, of course, Sylvie thought, as she pulled the brush through her hair in short, irritated jerks. She had a double PhD in Xeno-Botany and Xeno-Zoology with a minor in pharmacology, which meant she went to different alien worlds to find plants and animals that might have medicinal benefits. Sure, sometimes the plants grew in dangerous areas and the animals were difficult to handle, but that was just part of her job. And it was Kross’s job to protect her—without complaining.

It might have been different if he’d been the silent, growly type but it was worse—he was sarcastic and his remarks always bit her to the bone. He got under her skin like no other man ever had. They’d only been working together for a few months and already Sylvie was ready to ditch him for some other Kindred—any other Kindred. And their last mission together had only cemented that sentiment in her mind.

Closing her eyes as she brushed her hair, Sylvie remembered the humiliating episode...

It had been on Minerva Twelve—a swampy planet that was barely habitable in the C'rex'or System. Sylvie had heard tales of a certain leech native to the bogs and swamps of the planet that secreted a numbing solution that rivaled any other topical painkiller. She had been determined to collect some for her research, even though Kross pointed out that the swamps of Minerva Twelve were home to dangerous Xaimons—or “water dragons” as the natives called them.

“They get up to ten meters long!” he’d growled, when he was trying to talk her out of the mission. “They have teeth as long as my fucking forearm. Any one of them could eat your curvy little body in a single bite, Princess!”

That was another thing Sylvie hated—his sarcastic nicknames for her. He was always calling her “Princess” or “Your Majesty” and being elaborately and sarcastically deferential when she insisted on doing her job correctly. And yes, that might mean going to some places that weren’t strictly safe, but Sylvie refused to let herself be intimidated. She followed the science and collected her specimens wherever they were, and so far she’d always been fine. Well, except for a few minor mishaps, she admitted to herself.

“Don’t call me Princess,” she’d snapped at Kross. “And the fact that the Xaimons are so big, means they won’t be able to go in shallow water. As long as I stay in the shallows, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry—you won’t have to get your precious boots dirty—you can just stand on the bank and watch.”

That was another thing about Kross—he was very particular about his appearance. His clothes were always the latest fashion. Even his Kindred uniform which consisted of a long-sleeved maroon shirt with gold buttons and tight-fitting black trousers tucked into high black boots, always seemed to be perfectly tailored to his tall, muscular frame.

Kross had scowled at her, allowing his irritation to break through the cool, sarcastic

demeanor for once.

“If you go in the water, I go in the water—that’s the way it is, Princess. You know that.” His eyes flashed red with irritation as he spoke.

“Fine—then I guess you’ll just have to get wet because I’m going to get those leeches,” Sylvie told him. “Even Commander Sylvan admits they might have some real medical benefits he could use in the Med Center.”

Kross’s eyes were still red as he performed an elaborate bow and murmured,

“Yes, Your Majesty—your wish is my command. I live only to fulfill your every desire.”

Despite herself, Sylvie had felt her cheeks getting hot. She hated it when he acted like that! She’d seen him bow before when greeting others—apparently, it was a Skellax thing—a mannerism he’d been raised with. But when he bowed to her there was always a sardonic gleam in his changeable eyes that made her feel foolish—as though she was a headstrong child demanding her own way instead of a highly respected scientist trying to do her job!

Despite Kross’s objections, Commander Sylvan had given his approval and they had gone to Minerva Twelve. Sylvie had been wearing a protective cover-all, of course, but the day was so hot and muggy that by mid-afternoon she’d been forced to strip the top part of it down and tie it around her waist. Under it, she had on a thin white T-shirt and under that she wasn’t wearing any bra. Because, like most of the women aboard the Mother Ship, she had adopted the use of float dots instead.

Float dots were tiny, tear-drop-shaped devices that adhered to the bottom of each breast and acted like tiny anti-gravity engines. They caused even the largest and heaviest breasts to “float” and look perky. Which was a good thing for Sylvie, since

she'd always had extra-large breasts to go with her extra-large curves—no one was ever going to accuse her of being skinny.

She hadn't thought much about her outfit at the time—she was hot and sweaty and standing thigh-deep in the swirling, murky blue-green waters of the swamp. So what if she had mostly sweated through her t-shirt? She was too busy to notice and she still hadn't found any of the elusive leeches!

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They must be further out...She waded a little deeper so that the swirling waters came up just past her hips. She hoped the bottom half of her cover-all would keep the moisture out. So far it seemed to be holding and now she thought she saw some of the leeches. They were nearly invisible because their bodies were transparent but when you looked just right you could see the little ripple they made when they moved...

“Hey, Princess—you’re getting out too far!” Kross’s deep voice interrupted her concentration and she jerked her head around to glare at him.

“I’m fine! Just leave me alone—I’ve almost got them!”

She turned back to look down into the water and took one more step forward...only to find herself suddenly slipping under the murky surface.

“Shit!” she heard Kross growl just as the water closed over her head. Then there was a muffled splash and long arms were dragging her up and out of the swamp.

“Told you not to get out too far,” Kross said as he pulled her back to the shallows where the swamp only came up to their thighs—well Sylvie’s thighs and his knees, since he was so much taller than her.

“I was fine—I just slipped! You didn’t have to rescue me—I can swim,” she sputtered defensively, pushing her wet hair out of her face.

“Is that right, Princess?” Kross was smiling but it was an angry smile and his eyes were a burning reddish-orange. “Well what if it wasn’t just a slip? What if one of those fucking water-dragons had grabbed you? Because that’s what it looked like from

where I was standing—you went down like something had dragged you under!”

“Well, it didn’t,” Sylvie snapped. “I must have stepped in a hole—that’s all. I’m sorry you had to mess up your perfect hair and clothes,” she added, since he was every bit as wet as she was and he hadn’t even been wearing a protective coverall. His maroon uniform shirt was clinging to his muscular chest in a way that was somehow both mouthwatering and irritating at the same time.

Kross’s angry grin grew even wider.

“Well, at least I know it was for a good cause. You finally found your leeches. And tell me, how do your nipples feel now that you have?”

“What? My nipples?”

Sylvia glanced down at her shirt and saw that the white fabric was now basically see-through and clinging to her tight points. Also, her Kindred protector was staring at them freely, as though he had every right to peruse her nearly-naked chest.

“You perverted pig!” she snapped and slapped his face. Of course, she had to reach up to do it, but she made a pretty good job of it—her palm connected with his cheek hard enough to make her hand sting.

The smile fell off Kross’s face and his eyes went full red for a moment. A muscle in his jaw clenched and his big hands balled into fists. For a moment Sylvie was sure he was going to hit her back, even though the Kindred never hit or abused women.

She braced herself for the blow...but it never came. Instead, Kross leaned down and swung her up over one of his broad shoulders. Carrying her like a sack of grain, he splashed out of the swamp while Sylvie beat on his muscular back with her fists and shouted for him to let her down.

“Hey, stop it! Where are you taking me? Let me go!” she was still shouting when he abruptly set her on her feet. They were right in front of their long-range shuttle, she saw—but why had he taken her back to the ship?

Kross opened the main hatch.

“Come on,” he growled, taking her by the arm and steering her into the interior of the shuttle.

“Hey, what are you doing? Stop it—I don’t care how mad you are, this mission isn’t over yet!” Sylvie exclaimed, though she was helpless not to follow him into the ship—he was dragging her along and he was much too strong to resist. “It’s not over until I find my slugs!”

“You found them, Princess,” Kross said shortly. He marched her to the tiny first-aid area in the back of the living quarters. It was no more than a bench to sit on and a cabinet full of medical supplies but it also had a brilliant overhead light—the better to see wounds or injuries. Kross flipped it on now, making Sylvie blink.

“Hey, why did you do that?” she muttered, shading her eyes with her hands. Outside in the swamp it had been a foggy, overcast day so the bright luminescence really hurt her eyes!

“Look down at yourself,” Kross demanded, looming over her. “At your nipples—really look at them this time. Don’t just fucking assume I’m a ‘pervert,’ as you humans say.”

Warily, Sylvie looked down. At first, she didn’t see anything except that her shirt now seemed to be practically see-through right over her nipples. Her pink points were standing out like two exclamation marks—probably because she was cold from being dunked in the water. It almost looked like she had cut two holes in her t-shirt to show

them off—how embarrassing! She just...

The thought died as a new realization hit her. Her shirt looked like there were two holes in it because there were two holes—they had been made by the see-through, nearly invisible leeches that were attached to her—one to each of her nipples! They must have been drawn to her sensitive points because they were prominent and had good blood flow.

Sylvie normally didn't get upset during her scientific missions—she prided herself on being nearly unflappable. But seeing two slippery, pulsating, alien leeches attached to such a sensitive part of her anatomy brought a shriek to her lips.

“Ah! Oh my God—get them off me! Get them off!” she cried, brushing frantically at the front of her t-shirt. But her brushing was in vain—the leeches wouldn't be moved and now she could see faint reddish trails appearing in their nearly see-through bodies, like long red ribbons.

That's my blood, she realized, staring at them in horror. They're drinking my blood! Oh my God, I'm going to be sick!

“Don't get sick!” Kross commanded, almost as though he could read her mind. “If you throw up all over yourself, it's just going to make getting them off even harder.”

Sylvie swallowed hard and took a deep breath. Somehow she managed to hang on to the contents of her stomach—which luckily, wasn't much. She'd had a very light breakfast and they hadn't had lunch yet, for which she was profoundly grateful.

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“They...they’re drinking my blood,” she said faintly.

“I know, Princess. Don’t look,” Kross ordered firmly.

He collected a few things from the cabinet filled with medical supplies and crouched down in front of her.

“What...what are you going to do?” Sylvie asked, doing her best not to look down at her chest.

“Going to get these little fuckers off you,” he growled. He was holding a small collecting basin in one hand and a long pair of silver tweezers in the other, she saw.

“Wait!” she begged, as he started to reach for the leech attached to her right nipple. “What if they...what if they bite when you pull on them? What they bite...bite my nipples off?”

“Do they feel like they’re biting hard enough to do that?” Kross asked, arching one silvery eyebrow.

“I don’t know—I just feel numb,” Sylvie admitted. “I guess that numbing agent they generate when they, uh, feed really is effective,” she added faintly and her eyes started to close as a feeling of lightheadedness swept over her.

“Hey—wake up! Come on, Sylvia.” Kross’s voice was worried but she could have told he was anxious about her even if it wasn’t—he never called her by her first name unless things went seriously sideways.

He patted her cheeks until Sylvie opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Listen—you’re the Scientist,” he told her. “I’m just the grunt who protects you. You’ve been studying these little bastards—what can we do to make them drop off on their own?”

“Probably they won’t fall off until they...they drink their fill.” Sylvie started to look down again, but Kross caught her chin in one hand and kept her face level with his own.

“Don’t look,” he said, frowning. “The way those things are growing, I’m afraid they might drain you dry before they let go on their own. What else can we do?”

“Maybe...cold water?” Sylvie suggested faintly. “The water of the swamp is warm—the cold might be a deterrent.”

“Okay, one cold shower coming up, Princess. Come on.”

Kross lifted her by the arm and then crouched low to slip his own long arm around her waist. He practically carried her into the bathroom—or “fresher” as the Kindred called it. Then he sat her firmly on the closed toilet and turned on the shower.

“You ready?” he asked, turning to her.

“I...I think so.” Sylvie nodded, trying to be brave and sound like an experienced scientist instead of a scared little girl.

“Good—let’s get you in here. But first...”

Kross knelt at her feet and began tugging at the bottom of the coverall which was still tied by the arms around her waist. Sylvie started to watch him...then stopped herself.

She didn't want to see how big the leeches were now. Though her nipples were numb, she felt as though two heavy weights were hanging off her breasts which she was sure couldn't be a good sign.

Her Kindred Protector got the coverall untied and tugged it down. He took off her protective boots as well until she was wearing nothing but the thin t-shirt and a pair of white lace panties.

It was embarrassing to be so bare in front of him—Sylvie was usually self-conscious about her curves and she made sure to hide them from her sarcastic Protector, fearing what he might say about her. But Kross didn't say a word—he only helped her strip.

Then, to her surprise, he started undressing as well.

“Hey—what are you doing?” she asked faintly, as he stripped out of his long-sleeved maroon shirt, showing a bare chest that would have made an Instagram model weep.

“I'm getting in with you,” he said grimly, reaching down to take off his boots.

“But, you don't have to do that,” Sylvie protested.

“Yes I do.” He stripped down his black flight leathers—the tight leather trousers he always wore when they were on a mission together—revealing a skin-tight pair of black boxer briefs that clung to his muscular buttocks like a lover. “You're too unsteady—I can't risk you falling and hitting your head, Princess.”

By the time they were both ready to get into the shower, Sylvie was feeling extremely faint. How much blood had she lost? By the way the “weights” on her nipples were dragging at her breasts, it must be a considerable amount. Even the float dots were having a hard time keeping her boobs perky.

The ice-cold water in the shower brought her back to full alertness when Kross helped her into it. True to his word, he came in with her, though she saw his jaw clench when the freezing needles of water hit his bare skin.

“All right,” he rumbled and knelt in front of her again. “Let’s see what we can do with these bastards.”

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“L-let the wuh-water f-fall on them f-f-first,” Sylvie advised, her teeth chattering and her skin pebbled into gooseflesh from the cold.

“Fine.” Kross positioned her so that the spray was hitting directly on her chest.

Sylvie shivered helplessly. For a moment she felt as though someone was tugging—hard—on her breasts. Then, abruptly, the weight on the left breast was gone and she heard a splashing sound on the shower floor by her feet. Then the weight on the right breast dropped off as well.

“There they go, the little fuckers!” Kross sounded relieved as he reached behind him to turn off the freezing water.

“Am I...are m-my nuh-nipples okay? Are they...st-still th-there?” Sylvie asked, her teeth still chattering.

Without waiting for his answer, she looked down anxiously, wanting to be sure the alien leeches hadn’t bitten off those extremely sensitive parts of her anatomy.

To her overwhelming relief, both her nipples seemed intact—though each one had a ring of tiny tooth marks all around it which was oozing blood. But then she made the mistake of looking lower—down at her feet.

“Don’t look!” Kross said again quickly but it was too late—Sylvie had already seen the leeches.

Both of them had grown horribly. When she’d first noticed them, they were no bigger

than her pinky finger. Now they writhed on the floor like two fat sausages, each almost a foot long and monstrously thick.

“Blood sausages,” she whispered. It was too much—too awful.

Her vision grayed out and the world began to spin around her as she started to fall...

3

SYLVIE

Kross must have caught her, but Sylvie didn't remember it. When she woke up, she was lying on the bed in the shuttle's single bedroom. Her bottom half was wrapped in towels but she was topless from the waist up.

Looking down at herself, she saw that her breasts were as perky as ever, the nipples pointing at the ship's rounded ceiling above her, thanks no doubt, to the float dots.

Her Kindred Protector was sitting beside her and as Sylvie watched, he did something strange. He put his first two fingers in his mouth, sucked them for a moment, and then pulled them out and began rubbing one of her stiff, pink peaks.

“Hey!” she protested, still feeling slow and stupid from fainting. “Wha...whadaya think you're doin'?”

“I was wondering when you'd wake up, Princess. I'm healing you,” he said matter-of-factly as he circled her tight peak with his long fingers.

It occurred to Sylvie that she was no longer numb—she could feel everything he was doing and her nipple was as sensitive as it had ever been. In fact, the gentle caress of his fingers was sending sparks of pleasure straight from her tight peak to the sensitive

place between her thighs.

“Healing me?” she repeated stupidly as she watched him.

“Yes—I’m half Blood Kindred. See?” he bared his teeth briefly, showing a double set of sharp, pointed fangs on either side of his upper jaw, where a human’s canine teeth would be.

“So?” Sylvie was a little more awake now. “What...what does that mean?”

“It means that my fangs make ‘essence’ that can heal,” he told her. “So I’m ‘milking them’ to get some for your nipples.”

He was apparently finished with the left nipple because he stuck his fingers in his mouth again and sucked them before beginning to circle her right peak.

“But...but I thought a Blood Kindred could...could only heal his...his mate.” Sylvie wished her voice wouldn’t come out so breathless. She also wished she could turn off the feeling of pleasure that was running in a direct pipeline from the nipple he was caressing and healing straight down to her pussy, which was feeling swollen and hot by now.

“I’m not a full Blood Kindred—I’m a Hybrid,” Kross reminded her, which didn’t really answer the question, Sylvie thought.

“Why not just...put some, uh, salve on them instead, though?” she asked. “Don’t we have some...um, some healing ointment or something in the...in the uh, cabinet?”

She hated the way she was stumbling over her words. It was hard to get her thoughts together when his touch was affecting her so much, damn it!

Kross shook his head.

“I looked but none of the medicines we have stop bleeding. The fucking leeches must have injected you with some kind of blood thinner—you were leaking all over the place, Princess. I knew my essence would close the wounds, so...”

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He broke off talking to suck his fingers some more and then went back to circling her aching nipple.

“I mean, I guess I could have let you keep bleeding, but I didn’t think you’d want that,” he murmured as he worked on her. “And you’ve already lost too much blood.”

Sylvie bit her lip, trying her best not to moan and arch her back as the tingling pleasure rushed through her. God, she couldn’t stand Kross—he was always so sarcastic and rude! But she couldn’t seem to help the way her body was reacting to his gentle touch.

Maybe she had him all wrong, she thought as she watched his face. There was an intent look in his eyes as he healed her—an expression that said he took his job as her Protector seriously and would do anything to keep her safe. Maybe they had gotten off on the wrong foot and he was an okay guy after all. Though he was touching her nipples, it clearly wasn’t because he wanted to grope her—his essence really was healing the tiny wounds the leeches had left.

He was sitting on the side of the bed, wearing a fresh pair of flight leathers and nothing else, which meant his muscular chest was still on display. But it was his face Sylvie looked at—there was still a very faint imprint of her hand on his cheek. She must have really slapped him hard! Or else his pearly gray skin just kept a mark for a long time.

“I...I’m sorry I slapped you,” she whispered, reaching up to graze his hurt cheek lightly with her fingertips. “I shouldn’t have assumed you were just, uh...”

“Perving on you?” He looked up from his task and grinned briefly. “Yeah, I don’t blame you though, Princess. If I’m being completely honest, it’s hard not to notice you when you have all your gorgeous curves on display.”

Sylvie bit her lip, uncertain how to respond. Was he saying he liked full-figured women? She’d heard something about Kindred liking curvy girls from friends aboard the Mother Ship—especially from Kat, who was curvy and mated to Twin Kindred—but she hadn’t had any idea that Kross felt that way. He was so big and tall and muscular—with his strong jaw and changeable, jewel-toned eyes, he looked like a male model. Could someone like him really find someone like her attractive?

“Um...really?” she asked at last. “You like, uh, women with curves?”

“Like them?” He looked up again for a moment, his eyes flashing reddish purple. “Princess, I fucking love curvy women—we call them ‘Elites’—didn’t you know that?”

“Elites?” Sylvie frowned.

“Women the Goddess has blessed with extra curvy figures.” He sucked his fingers again and went back to the other nipple, even though Sylvie was almost sure it was healed. But maybe he was just trying to be thorough...

She shifted on the bed, pressing her thighs together tightly.

“So...I’m an Elite?” she asked, breathlessly.

“Yes, you fucking are, Princess,” he growled softly and his eyes were suddenly half-lidded and more purple than red. “You’re Goddess-damned gorgeous and you fucking know it.”

Sylvie didn't know any such thing. She knew she had pretty hair—it was her best feature, honestly. But she had too many freckles and more than one man had let her know that her weight made her 'undateable.'" It was one reason she'd given up on the dating scene completely and decided to focus wholly on her work. Now, however, Kross was looking at her like she was incredibly desirable and hot.

It made her wonder what was going on in his head as he stared at her with that lazy look of lust and continued to tease her tight nipples.

"I...um..." She couldn't think of what to say. Kross was leaning over her...so close now. Almost close enough to kiss... "Am I healed yet?" she asked, not sure what else to say.

"Ithinkso." Kross pinched her nipple and tugged on it gently. "How does that feel?"

This time Sylvie couldn't bite back a moan.

"It...it feels good," she admitted breathlessly.

He gave her a lazy smile.

"Good. I wanted to be sure your sensitivity wasn't compromised by those little fuckers. Maybe I should test the other one too."

And he reached across and tugged her other nipple, making her moan again as sparks of pleasure shot through her, straight down to her pussy.

"Ohh!" Sylvie gasped, arching her back again.

His eyes went lazy with lust.

“Gods...so responsive. Yes, I think you’re all right now, Princess.”

“Don’t...don’t call me Princess,” Sylvie panted, not knowing what else to say.

Kross leaned forward, looking right into her eyes, his lips almost brushing hers as he spoke.

“I’ll call you anything I want,” he growled softly. “Princess.”

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Sylvie had no idea what to say. He really was close enough to kiss. She could feel his warm breath on her face and for a moment, she was sure he actually was going to kiss her. And the worst thing was—she actually wanted him to!

“Kross...” she whispered breathlessly. “I don’t know?—”

Abruptly, he pulled away from her.

“Well—I think you’re all healed now, Princess.”

His sudden shift in mood left her feeling almost dizzy. What had just almost happened between them? Or had she imagined it?

“Um... thank you, I guess,” she said, at a loss for anything else to say.

“Welcome, Princess. Here—wear this.”

He got up and found a spare shirt for her—one of his uniform shirts, Sylvie saw. It was from the extra uniform he always carried with him when they went on missions, she realized.

“But what about you? What will you wear?” she asked uncertainly as she sat up and slipped the huge shirt on. It was made of a thick, satiny material that felt cool and silky against her now extremely sensitive tips.

He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling with the motion.

“My flight leathers are fine until we get back to the Mother Ship.” He raised one silvery eyebrow at her. “Unless you’re thinking you want to go back outside and look for some more leeches or some other creepy-crawlies?”

“Ugh—no! Not right now.” Sylvie shivered. “Um, do we still have the slugs that, uh, bit me?”

He nodded.

“Still on the shower floor but I can put them in a specimen box for you.”

“Would you?” Sylvie asked. “Thank you—I’d rather not handle them again so soon after...”

“After they almost drained you dry? Yeah, I don’t blame you, Princess.”

He barked a laugh and nodded.

“Okay, I’ll go take care of that and then we can go home. If you’re sure you’re feeling okay, that is?”

Leaning over, he cupped her cheek briefly in one big, warm hand as he looked anxiously into her eyes.

For some reason, Sylvie found it hard to hold his gaze. Which for once, was a pure, deep, dark blue without even a hint of angry red.

“I think so...I mean I’m pretty sure I’m okay,” she said. She could feel her cheeks getting hot with a blush—damn it, what was happening? Was she having some kind of moment with her sarcastic Kindred Protector?

“Well...if you’re sure. Because we can stay here for a little while if you need to recuperate,” he offered. “I could make you something to eat—we have plenty of meal cubes.”

Sylvie bit her lip. What should she say? For the first time her Protector was being nice instead of rude and cutting. Also, the moment that had passed between them had been strangely compelling. Could it be she’d misjudged him all this time?

“Well...I guess we could—“ she began. But just then the com-link at the front of the shuttle buzzed, which usually meant they had an incoming message from the Mother Ship.

“Hold that thought,” Kross rumbled, stroking her cheek. Then he got up and went to the front to answer the message.

Sylvie sat there on the bed, fumbling with the rest of the gold buttons on his shirt, her heart pounding, wondering if she’d been wrong about the big Kindred all along. Could it be that he actually liked her? Liked her so much that something might even grow between them?

It was a strange thought and one she tried to push away at once. But she couldn’t forget the way he’d looked at her...and cupped her cheek. Couldn’t forget the way he’d healed her so gently...

But then, when he came back from the front of the ship, everything changed.

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“So why do you hate Kross so much? Just because he’s a sarcastic jerk?” Kat asked, dragging Sylvie back to the present.

“Something like that.”

Sylvie continued to brush her hair with short, sharp strokes of the brush. She didn’t want to admit what had happened after the “moment” she and Kross had shared—a moment she now doubted was anything but wishful thinking on her part.

After coming back from taking the call at the front of the ship, Kross had treated her completely differently.

“Who was it?” she asked when he came back into the bedroom.

“Just the Mother Ship—checking that we were okay.” He wouldn’t look at her and his voice was short and clipped.

“Um, so are we going back now or...” She let the question hang in the air, wondering what was bothering him.

“Cover up, will you, Princess?” His eyes flared orange-red with apparent irritation. “Pull the blanket around you or something—you’re too fucking exposed.”

“What?” Sylvie looked up at him uncertainly. “You’re the one that told me to wear this,” she said, plucking at this maroon uniform shirt, which fit her almost like a dress. Only her bare legs were sticking out—was that bothering him for some reason?

“Well now I’m telling you to fucking cover up,” he growled, glaring at her. “And settle in—I’m about to lift off so we can get the fuck back to the Mother Ship.”

“Why are you acting like this?” Sylvie demanded. She felt betrayed—he’d been so kind and nice and so, well...hot just a few minutes ago. Now he was looking at her like she was a piece of dog shit he’d scraped off the bottom of his boot.

Kross had been headed out the door but now he turned on her, a mean glint in his red eyes.

“Like what, Princess? How am I acting? Am I not being sweet enough to please you, Your Majesty?”

“Don’t call me that!” Sylvie exclaimed. “You know I hate it when you call me that!”

“What else should I call you?” he demanded, his eyes blazing. “What do you want from me, Sylvia? All I do is follow you around the fucking galaxy to different fucking dangerous planets trying to keep you from getting your fucking self killed!”

Sylvie was taken aback by his outburst. He was usually just sardonic—he had never blown up at her like this before.

“I’m just doing my job,” she said stiffly.

“Right—and I’m doing mine. Because that’s all you can ever be to me—just a job,” he shot back. “I’ll never be able to?—”

“Able to what?” Sylvie demanded, because he cut himself off abruptly.

“Never mind, Princess. Just be sure you’re secure. I’m getting us off this Goddess-forsaken planet,” he growled.

Then he turned and left, leaving her feeling like crap and with no idea of why he'd done such a complete 180 and turned back into a jerk.

"He's just an asshole," she said to Kat now, pulling herself out of the bad memory. "He never wants to go on any of my missions. He tried to get Commander Sylvan to refuse my latest request to go to Gim'bab Orious to gather some of the tangeline vines to study."

"Why? Is the tangeline vine dangerous?" Kat raised her eyebrows. "Poisonous?"

Sylvie shook her head.

"No, nothing like that. It's actually completely benign—the flowers it grows are supposed to help in the healing of damaged nervous tissue. Do you know there have been reports of the natives of Gim'bab Orious getting paralyzed and then being cured when they drank a tea made of the flowers of the tangeline vine? If those reports are true, we could have something really major on our hands. A substance that actually heals the spinal cord! That would be amazing!"

"That would be amazing," Kat agreed, frowning. "But that still doesn't tell me why Kross doesn't want you to go there."

Sylvie made a shooing gesture.

"Oh, some stupid rumor he heard about Dr. Barbarous setting up shop on the Southern continent there."

"Dr. Barbarous? Isn't he the scientist who's wanted on three planets for his bizarre genetic breeding program?" Kat asked, sounding worried. "I heard that his home planet expelled him for 'crimes against Nature.'"

“Yes, yes—but it’s just a rumor,” Sylvie said. “And besides, the tangeline vine grows in the Northern continent, which is thousands of miles from the Southern continent. We’ll be fine.”

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“Maybe Kross is just worried for your safety,” Kat suggested.

“No, he’s worried about getting his shirt wrinkled or his hair messed up when he has to come to a field assignment with me,” Sylvie snapped. “I don’t know why he took the job as my Protector in the first place if he’s so afraid to get his hands dirty!”

“Hey, sorry, doll.” Kat held up both hands in a “don’t shoot” gesture. “I didn’t mean to make you angry.”

“You didn’t! Oh, Kat—I’m sorry.” Sylvie put down her brush and gave her friend a hug.

Kat had been one of the first people to welcome her aboard the Kindred Mother ship and she was also the one who always helped Sylvie get ready for her field assignments—especially if she had to deal with an alien culture. Kat was the one who researched the natives of any given planet and made sure that Sylvie was prepared for anything.

“I’m so sorry I snapped at you,” she said to Kat, giving her a remorseful look. “It’s just that Kross makes me crazy. I just wish Commander Sylvan would assign me someone else as my Protector, since he clearly doesn’t really want the job.”

“You might be surprised about what Kross really wants.” Kat sounded thoughtful.

“I doubt it,” Sylvie said dryly. She sighed. “Anyway, I should get ready. We’re meeting in the Docking Bay for the mission to Gim’bab Orious in a few hours and I want to be sure I have all my protective gear packed.”

“Good luck, doll.” Kat gave her a kiss on the cheek and smiled. “Just be safe out there. Remember, Kross might not like being your Protector for some reason, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want you to be safe. Listen to him if he tells you to be careful—the Kindred have excellent survival instincts. Way better than what we humans have.”

“Hmmpf, I’ll believe it when I see it,” Sylvie said, frowning. But she kissed Kat’s cheek and smiled. “Just wait until I bring back that tangeline vine! I can’t wait to study its medicinal properties. Think of all the lives we can save and patients we can heal if even half of what I’ve heard about it is true!”

Kat grinned at her.

“You love your work—I’ll give you that. Good luck and be safe.”

“I’ll be fine,” Sylvie said airily. “It’s going to be a piece of cake.”

She had no idea how horribly wrong she was or how badly her next mission was going to go. And by the time she found out, it was too late...

5

## KROSS

Kross watched from the corner of his eye as his charge fastened her five-point harness in the seat beside his. His hands clenched on the steering yoke of the long-range shuttle as he considered where they were about to go and how potentially dangerous it was going to be.

Not for him—he was a Kindred warrior, he could handle himself in almost any situation. But Sylvia was a curvy little human—soft and defenseless and oh-so-

vulnerable. It drove him fuckingcrazyto see her put herself in danger all the time and yet there was nothing he could do but follow along and pray to the Goddess that he could keep her safe.

Goddess damn her!

His hands tightened even more on the yoke. She didn't know it but she was his Fated Mate—Kross knew it as surely as he knew his own name and blood type. He'd known it from the moment he'd first met her...and yet he also knew he could never Claim her properly as a Kindred warrior should.

The problem was, he was a Hybrid—his mother had been a Blood Kindred and his Father had been a Beast Kindred with just a little Skellax mixed in. This particular genetic combinationmeant it would be impossible for him to Bond with a woman, even if he found the right one for him.

Kross knew this from painful personal experience. When he'd been younger, he had formed an attachment to a girl he'd grown up with. His parents had tried to warn him to leave her alone, but the two of them had run off together and attempted to Bond.

The pain of a Failed Bonding is something you don't ever forget. It's a soul-deep ache—an agony that never truly fades. The girl Kross had tried to Bond to him had been driven nearly mad by the pain. And even after it had lessened, she'd wanted nothing more to do with him—not that he fucking blamed her. He should have listened to his parents and never tried to Bond her in the first place.

Well, lesson learned. He was determined never to try and Bond a woman to him again. And for years—decades actually—he'd kept that promise to himself with no problem. Other than a few flings—mostly with sex bots to avoid any kind of commitment issues—he'd had no interest in females at all. He'd moved to the Mother Ship and made a place for himself, working in the Kindred's Elite Espionage Corps.

And then Sylvia had walked into his life.

It started innocently enough with Commander Sylvan asking if he would leave the Corps for a while to become a Protector. The specially trained bodyguards were each assigned a single female scientist or diplomat to ward and protect with their life. Thinking nothing of it, Kross had accepted.

Which was when he had been introduced to Sylvia.

From the very moment he'd taken her hand when they were introduced, he knew—knew she was meant to be his. And yet, the cruel fate of his own genetics would forever keep them apart.

At first, Kross tried to tell himself he didn't care. He told himself it was better to be close to her and keep her safe than to live without her in his life.

But he hadn't counted on Sylvia being so fucking reckless! Why couldn't she be a diplomat or a Good Will Ambassador, he often wondered. Why did she have to be a scientist whose research seemingly took her to only the most dangerous planets in the known galaxy?

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He had trailed her from the lava fields of Vulrick Six to the dangerous jungles of Pera'tor Beta to the frozen wastes of Harkinor Prime where the deadly sub-zero temperatures could kill in a heartbeat. It seemed that everywhere she wanted to go could kill her...and that in turn, was killing Kross!

How he longed to gather her into his arms and just keep her safe! He wished she would agree to stay aboard the Mother Ship and do experiments in a lab instead of insisting on going on missions that could get her killed all the time!

Kross knew if anything happened to her, he would want to die too. But it wasn't just the fact that he was constantly worried for her life that kept him up at night and made his job so difficult. It was the fact that he was relentlessly drawn to her—it felt at times like she had tied a golden cord around his heart and she was tugging on it anytime she was near him.

Every time they were in the shuttle together, her sweet scent invaded his senses. And every move she made—every swish of her long, reddish-gold hair, every movement of her soft, curvy body—called to him like a siren song. It was torture being around her—so close to her—and not being able to touch her. To not hold her and kiss her and Claim her the way every fiber of his being was begging him to do.

To combat his feelings and keep Sylvia from having any idea of his daily struggle, Kross had been forced to become an asshole. He was short and sarcastic with her—he pushed her away in every way he could think because he couldn't risk letting her get too close. He knew if he did, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from Claiming her—from admitting how he felt and how badly he wanted her.

And then, on their last mission, he had nearly ruined everything.

It was the damn leeches that did it, he thought, as he input their flight sequence into the shuttle's control bank and requested that the Mother Ship fold space for them to Gim'bab Orious. Seeing her in pain—in danger—had nearly done him in. All he'd wanted to do was heal her—to comfort her and hold her close.

For a little while, he had allowed himself to do those things and Sylvia had responded to him. More than responded. He could still smell the scent of her desire as he had healed and teased her tender nipples. And the way she had looked at him...as though she was melting from the inside out just because they were close...it was Goddess-damned intoxicating.

Kross had certainly felt himself melting. He'd been a heartbeat from kissing her...from confessing how he felt.

And then sanity had reasserted itself, thank the Goddess. He'd been able to pull back from the brink...barely. Ever since he'd had to act like even more of an asshole to keep her off track.

He knew his behavior was hurting the woman he loved and he hated himself for it. But it was better to hurt her feelings than to scar her soul. Or so he told himself.

And in the meantime, they had yet another dangerous mission to get through. He just hoped that he could keep his Fated Mate safe without revealing his feelings.

He had no idea how impossible that was about to be.

Kross was obstinately mute as they took off from the Docking Bay and the long-range shuttle lifted through the invisible atmosphere shield. Sylvie usually tried to make small talk but this time she decided if he wanted to give her the silent treatment that was fine—two could play that game. So they rode in silence through the red, horizontal gash in space that would lead from the Mother Ship directly to the space just outside of Gim’bab Orious.

As always when she folded space, Sylvie felt a stretching sensation—almost as though she was being pulled in every direction at once. It didn’t hurt—it just felt strange. She knew from talking to other people that folding space felt different for everyone. And of course, the only people who couldn’t fold space were pregnant women—it was apparently bad for the baby.

Don’t have to worry about that, Sylvie thought dryly. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been with a man. After suffering through the disastrous dating scene back on Earth, she’d decided to make do with a vibrator and concentrate on her work when she moved up to the Mother Ship. So there was no way she was pregnant.

“Well—there it is.” Kross broke the long silence between them and she turned to see that he was staring at the viewscreen. It showed a smallish purple-green planet spinning like a jewel in the darkness of space.

For a moment, the sight took her breath away.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Beautiful and fucking deadly, Princess—if Dr. Barbarous is in residence.”

“He’s not!” Sylvie snapped. “Stop making excuses—the sooner we get to the Northern continent, the sooner I can get a specimen of the tangeline vine and we can get back to the Mother Ship before you mess up your hair.”

Kross glared at her.

“Yes, Your Majesty—your every wish is my command.”

Sylvie bit back the sharp reply that rose to her lips.

I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me upset, she told herself. I won't let him make me angry, no matter what he says!

About an hour later her resolve was truly tested when Kross was hovering over her shoulder in the dense purple-green forest as she tried to find a specimen of the tangeline vine.

“Kross, will you give me some space!” she asked at last, turning to face him. He was so close to her that his broad chest was right in her face—he was irritatingly tall, damn him! Also, why did he have to smell so good? It was distracting when she was trying to work.

“Just trying to be sure you don't fall into the jungle and get eaten alive by whatever creepy-crawlies they have on this fucking planet,” he growled. “As I recall, you didn't need much space on Minerva Twelve to get yourself in trouble.”

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Sylvie felt her cheeks get hot with a blush—how dare he mention their last mission when he'd acted like such a jerk to her there, after acting like he cared for a moment?

"I'm fine! I don't need you breathing down the back of my neck," she snapped and turned away from him.

There was a small hole in the dense undergrowth in front of her—a low archway that she was sure she could fit through but she knew Kross couldn't. On impulse, she ducked her head and slipped through it.

"Hey! What the fuck, Princess?" she heard her Protector snarl. But it was too late, she thought triumphantly. He couldn't get to her here—not without a struggle anyway—he was just too tall.

"Just wait for me," she called back. "I'll come back as soon as I find a good tangeline specimen."

"Goddess-damn it! You know you're not supposed to go off without me! You could get hurt!"

The genuine fear in his deep voice almost made her turn back...but then she looked around her and the view drove all the guilt she felt out of her mind.

She had found her way into a lovely, natural clearing in the forest. It was a vast space of short purple and gold vegetation surrounded by a thick ring of enormously tall trees with thick, mossy green trunks—each one wide enough around to form a small cottage. Sunlight slanted through their royal purple leaves, casting magical shadows

on the ground.

Sylvie took a deep breath, inhaling a sweet, floral scent that seemed to be coming from the vines that were wrapped around one of the enormous tree trunks on the far side of the clearing. The trees reminded her of the giant redwood trees of California which she had visited once when she still lived on Earth. She inhaled deeply as she walked towards the vines with the bright golden flowers.

“That’s the tangeline vine—I know it is,” she murmured to herself as she reached the huge tree. The vine looked just like the reports had described it. It was dark blue and as thick as her wrist and the flowers growing from it were bright gold and shaped like the bell of a trumpet.

Behind her, she could vaguely hear some crashing in the undergrowth—no doubt Kross was trying to follow her. He would probably be angry that she’d left him behind, but then, he was already angry with her, Sylvie reasoned. So what did it really matter?

Carefully, she reached into her collection kit and got out a specimen bag and some scissors. She snipped off one of the golden flowers—which was about as big as her hand—and slipped it into the bag. She was just about to snip off another when there was a creaking sound and—to her shock—a door seemed to open in the side of the massive tree.

The creature that came out of it was monstrous—though also vaguely humanoid. At least, it had a head, two arms, and two legs and it walked upright, albeit with a shambling limp. Its body was covered in a soft, blue-green moss-like substance that might have been hair or might have been fungus—it was hard to tell. Its face was craggy—as though it had been carved from living rock. Tiny black eyes, two nostril slits where a nose should be, and a thin, lipless mouth made up the face, which Sylvie stared at uncertainly.

The creature—which happened to be huge, almost as big as Kross in fact—stared back at her blankly. Then it seemed to see the golden blossom she was holding in her hand.

It threw out an arm, one thin, stick-like finger pointing directly at her and its lipless mouth began to work.

“Thief!” it cried hoarsely in a voice that carried all the way across the clearing. “She steals the sacred blossoms—thief!”

Of course, Sylvie couldn’t have understood it without the shot of Translation Bacteria she’d gotten from the Kindred, but at the moment the wonder of comprehending an alien language was lost on her.

“Wait, no please—wait!” she begged, making shushing motions with both hands. “I didn’t mean to steal anything. I didn’t know you lived here!”

“Thief!” the creature exclaimed again, taking a step towards her.

It became clear to Sylvie that he wasn’t wearing any clothing under the blue-green moss-like hair that covered him. The point was driven home when she saw a perfectly enormous phallus swinging between his thick thighs. Good God—that thing was huge! And he was getting close enough that she could smell him—a rank odor that was also somehow floral. It reminded her of the smell of flower stems when they’re left in a vase full of water too long and rot.

“Stay back!” she exclaimed, beginning to back away from him. She didn’t want to be anywhere near this weird creature! She fumbled in her pack for the blaster that Kross had insisted she learn how to use, but it was down at the bottom under all her supplies and her seeking fingers couldn’t find it.

Speaking of Kross, wherewas her Kindred Protector? She would have expected him to be able to get through the undergrowth to reach her by now! Sylvie desperately wished she hadn't left him behind, but now it was too late to regret her foolish impulse.

The mossy alien was still coming and Sophie decided to give up on trying to reason with him. Shoving the collecting bag with the stolen blossom back in her pack, she turned and ran for the other side of the clearing, where she'd come in. She was sure if she could just make it to the small opening in the underbrush she could lose the creature behind her. It was almost as big as Kross—there was no way it was getting through the low opening.

Every minute she expected to feel a heavy hand fall on her shoulder and stop her, but the creature behind her seemed to be slow and clumsy. It was coming after her at a shambling run she was easily able to outpace.

Sylvie was becoming certain that she was going to get away. She whipped her head around to look over her shoulder and saw that the moss-man—if that was what he was—had fallen far behind. Also, she could see the opening in the underbrush up ahead. She was almost there...

And then her foot snagged on something—maybe a root or a creeper—and she went down hard.

She let out a strangled shriek and put out her hands to catch herself as she went face-first into the purple-gold vegetation covering the clearing. There was a stinging pain in her palms and the wind was knocked out of her, but at least she kept from banging her head.

The fall had knocked the wind out of her and for a moment she lay there gasping. But she couldn't stay for long. Turning her head, she saw that the moss-man had almost

caught up with her.

She was in the act of scrambling to her feet when a hand suddenly came into her line of vision. A long, white, elegant hand but clearly a male hand, she thought distractedly. The nails were neatly clipped and the fingers were square at the ends.

“My dear, how very good of you to come and visit us,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Do let me help you up.”

### SYLVIE

Sylvie looked up at the face that went with the hand...and felt all the blood drain from her cheeks. She knew this man—she'd seen him before. In fact, Commander Sylvan had given her and several other scientists a briefing specifically to warn against him.

He was tall and gaunt—"as thin as a scarecrow," her grandmother would have said. The thin, sandy-blond hair on his head and the long white lab coat which fit badly on his scrawny frame added to the strange illusion. As for his eyes...well, Sylvie couldn't see them. He was wearing a pair of thick black goggles that hid them from view.

It was Dr. Remold Barbarous, "The Mad Geneticist" as they called him—the most wanted man on three planetary systems, notorious for his "crimes against Nature."

"Come, come my dear—don't tell me you're shy," Barbarous said, giving her a cold, thin-lipped smile. "Not after you snuck into my little compound in order to steal my genetically modified blossoms."

"Thief! Doc-tor...she is...a thief!"

The moss-man had finally caught up with her. He stood over Sylvie, pointing at her with one long, stick-like finger accusingly.

“Yes, yes, Mandrow, I know it,” Dr. Barbarous said mildly. “Don’t point like that—it’s abominably rude.” He smiled at Sylvie again. “You can take the man out of the forest, but you can’t take the forest out of the man, I’m afraid. You’ll have to excuse Mandrow—he’s only two generations removed from a Geglintree and it’s quite difficult to teach manners to those with foliage for brains.”

“You...you’re Dr. Barbarous!” Sylvie said stupidly, still staring up at him. “You’re supposed to be on the other continent!”

“Indeed, that was the story I spread before moving here to start my little colony,” he agreed, nodding. “I’m happy to hear that it’s working. Now, do allow me to help you up, my dear. I hate to leave a guest groveling on the ground.”

Reaching down, he grabbed Sylvie by the arm and hauled her to her feet. Despite his gangling appearance, his grip was unnervingly strong and once she was standing he didn’t let go.

“And who might you be? I think introductions are in order—you already know my name. I should very much like to know yours,” Dr. Barbarous said.

Sylvie took a deep breath and raised her chin.

“I’m Dr. Sylvia Cooper,” she said coolly. “I’m here to gather some specimens of the tangeline vines and their flowers. I’ve heard they can play a part in nerve regeneration and even reverse spinal damage.”

If she was hoping that the mention of her academic credentials and her research might level the playing field, she was disappointed.

“Ah, a fellow scientist—and such a pretty one too,” Dr. Barbarous remarked, looking down at her with his, cold smile. “Well, aren’t I lucky that you decided to drop in on

me today?”

“I didn’t mean to,” Sylvie said quickly. “Didn’t mean to, uh, disturb your compound,” she added, nodding at the clearing.

“Oh please, you’re not disturbing me in the least!” he protested politely. “Quite the opposite, in fact. I was just thinking that I would have to leave Gim’bab Orious and make an arduous quest to find a specimen for the next part of my experiment. And then you deliver yourself right to my door—you’ve saved me a trip!”

“What? What experiment?” Sylvie pulled against his grip on her arm uneasily. “Let me go! I have no interest in being part of any of your sick research!”

Dr. Barbarous shook his head and made atskingsound.

“Ah, I see my reputation precedes me. A great shame that you’ve already been prejudiced against my work, for it is, indeed, nothing less than groundbreaking.”

“It’s illegal!” Sylvie exclaimed. “I’ve heard that you tampered with humanoid DNA and added animal and even plant genes!”

“Indeed I have! So you can see with my treetures like Mandow. That’s what I call them—it’s a portmanteau of ‘tree’ and ‘creature’ don’t you know,” he said, gesturing to the moss-man, who was now just standing there, staring at Sylvie stupidly. “They’re admittedly not very smart, but they’re excellent guardians of the compound. In fact, I do believe they’ve found another intruder. Pushplant, Chopclip, do come forward,” he called.

Two more moss-men shambled forward and to Sylvie’s horror, she saw that they were dragging Kross between them. Each had long, branch-like fingers wrapped around his muscular arms and one of them also had a thick brown vine wrapped

around his throat, half strangling him.

Kross was fighting every step of the way but it was clear he was well and truly caught. As she watched the brown vine around his throat tightened, cutting off his air.

“Let me...go!” he choked in a hoarse voice. “Fucking...trees!”

“Yes, they are part tree, as I was telling this lovely young lady before you came. May I assume the two of you are together?” Dr. Barbarous spoke with elaborate civility at odds with the brutal actions of his tree-men.

“Not...telling you...anything...fucker!” Kross rasped.

“I see. Well, maybe my man Chopclip can change your mind.” Dr. Barbarous nodded at one of the tree-men holding Kross and suddenly the thick brown vine around the big Kindred’s neck began to tighten.

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Sylvie's heart leaped into her throat as her Protector's eyes fluttered and he sank to his knees. If they didn't stop they would kill him! Kross might be a jerk, but he didn't deserve to die!

"Don't hurt him—please!" she begged Dr. Barbarous. "He's my Protector—he's only here because of me!"

"Well, well...all right. Chopclip, ease up a bit, won't you?" The tall scientist smiled at her. "Maybe you would care to tell me why the two of you are here?"

"I told you already—to gather blossoms from the tangeline vine," Sylvie said quickly. "They're for my research in spinal regeneration. Please—we didn't mean any harm! If you'll just let us go, we'll be on our way and never tell anyone you're here."

Dr. Barbarous shook his head regretfully.

"Oh, I think not, my dear. I believe several planets have placed quite substantial rewards on my head—I can't imagine you passing them up. Also, I need both of you for my breeding program. I've been running low on pure humanoid DNA so it's actually quite fortuitous that you came here."

"Breeding program?" Sylvie felt cold all over. "You're not serious—you can't be!"

"Oh, but I am." He clapped his hands. "Mandrow, take her to the woman's cabin," he instructed the moss-man who had seen her and sounded the alarm in the first place. "And Chopclip, Pushplant—I expect the two of you to lock him in the newspecimen room. I'll begin my work on him immediately," he added, nodding at Kross.

“What? No!No!”Sylvie cried. But it was too late. The moss-man had already wound his long fingers around her arm and was dragging her

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## SYLVIE

The moss-man named Manlow dragged Sylvie across the compound to one of the huge trees surrounding the glade. He touched the bark and a hidden door opened.

“In!” he commanded, and shoved her inside before slamming the door shut, leaving her in a dim room.

Sylvie stumbled...and ran right into someone.

“Hey—watch it!” a sharp female voice snapped.

“I...I’m so sorry!” Somehow she regained her balance and looked to see who she was talking to. It was a woman about her own age—at least, Sylviethoughtshe was. It was a little hard to tell since she was extremely strange-looking.

She had purple skin, thick curly white hair almost like wool, and slotted golden eyes with horizontal pupils. They put Sylvie in mind of a goat’s eyes. The woman also had two curving horns growing from the sides of her forehead. She was wearing a ragged tan gown that looked like it was made of some kind of untreated plant fiber.

“So, he caught another one.” It was a new voice.

Looking around, Sylvie saw it was coming from a different woman—presumably also a captive. In fact, there were three other women in the small room carved out of the tree trunk.Counting Sylvie herself and the woman she’d run into, that made five

female captives altogether that Barbarous was keeping, she thought numbly.

Two of the women looked like the first woman, with purple skin, curly white hair, and curving horns. They were sitting together on one of the narrow cots that were pushed up against the far wall. Another woman was busy washing something in the small sink—she had pink skin that had strange growths coming out of it at the joints. It looked like she was growing clusters of tiny green and blue flowers from her elbows and knees, Sylvie thought. But that couldn't be right, could it?

The last woman was sitting on the far bunk and Sylvie couldn't tell what she looked like except that she had long, straight hair that was a mixture of green and gold strands. She had her back to the rest of the women in the room and was rocking back and forth, making a soft, keening sound.

"So what's your name, newbie?" The woman Sylvie had run into was studying her with her slotted golden eyes.

"I...I'm Sylvie," Sylvie said, not bothering to add her credentials. She didn't think anyone in this room would care that she was a double PhD.

"Uh-huh. And how did old Barbie catch you?" the woman demanded. "Did he snare your ship in his space-net? That's how he got Shredda and Lorna and me," she added, nodding at herself and the other two women who looked like her.

"What? No. I came here to collect blossoms from the tangeline vine," she said. "And do you really call Dr. Barbarous Barbie?"

The girl shrugged.

"Not to his face, of course. But that bastard has held us in this miserable tree trunk prison for the past three years—he doesn't deserve any fucking respect if you ask

me!”

“Threeyears?”Sylvie asked faintly. “But...didn’t anyone come after you? I mean, doesn’t anyone know you’re here?”

The girl whose name she still didn’t know shook her head.

“No—we were fleeing from the Flay’gobah system. Our planet was mired in civil war and we were trying to get out.” She sighed. “I wish now we’d stayed and taken our chances with the war!”

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“It’s not your fault he captured us, Hersha,” the woman named Lorna said softly. “It’s nobody’s fault but his.”

“I still feel responsible. I was the one piloting the ship.” Hersha ran a hand through her thick, curly white hair. “If I had taken another route?—”

“There’s no point in trying to rewrite the past—it’s over and done with.”

These words were spoken by the woman with the pink skin and flowers growing from her knees and elbows. She had deep hazel eyes and a serene look on her face. She came right up to Sylvie and smiled at her.

“Welcome, child. We will do our best to make your captivity bearable. We all support each other here.”

“Speak for yourself, Clemina,” Hersha said dryly. “Nobody’s captivity is bearable. It suckscorshudicks no matter how many ‘nature rituals’ and ‘healing chants’ you do.”

“I understand that our circumstances have made you bitter, Hersha,” the woman with pink skin and flowers said. “But?—”

Just then a section of the wall opened and a humming sound could be heard.

“Shit!” Hersha exclaimed and backed away from the circular opening. “Again?”

“Again, what?” Sylvie asked nervously but no one answered. The other women just huddled nervously together by the row of cots on the far wall of the room.

Through the round opening in the wall came a floating droid. At least, Sylvie assumed it was some kind of droid. It was a silver sphere about the size of a basketball with a smaller silver sphere on top. There were unblinking red lights that looked like eyes in the top sphere. It must have some kind of antigravity device in it because it zoomed effortlessly through the round hole in the tree trunk wall.

“What...what is that thing?” she asked, wishing her voice wouldn’t shake so much. A simple silver ball shouldn’t exude such an air of menace yet somehow this thing did.

“It’s Barbarous’s collector,” one of the goat-women whispered. She spoke in a low voice, as though she hoped that the silver sphere droid wouldn’t notice her as long as she didn’t draw too much attention to herself.

Immediately reacting to her words, the silver droid turned towards her, humming and hovering in mid-air.

“Silence!” the voice that came from the top sphere was tinny and artificial. “You have not been authorized to speak.”

“Fuck off, you silver fucker!” Hersha snapped. But when the droid flew in her direction, she shrank back from it, a look of fear in her slotted golden eyes.

Sylvie wasn’t sure what was going to happen but she found out soon because the silver droid pivoted and flew over to her instead.

“Hold out your arm,” it said in its tinny, mechanical voice. “I must collect specimens from you.”

“What? What kind of specimens?” Sylvie drew away from it nervously.

“All kinds,” the top sphere informed her. And then the bottom sphere opened and a

silver mechanical arm extended towards her. It was tipped with a long, sharp needle.

Sylvie's heart started pounding. As a scientist, she had collected biological specimens of all kinds—including blood attimes. But she didn't like the idea of the floating silver droid stabbing her with a needle—not one bit!

“You'd do best to hold still and let the collector take what it wants,” Clemina advised her in a low voice. “The punishment if you don't can be...extremely unpleasant.”

“More unpleasant than a needle in my arm?” Sylvie demanded.

“Muchmore,” Hersha said. “Take it from me, newbie—don't try to resist.”

Feeling sick with apprehension, Sylvie at last extended her arm.

“What are you going to d—?” she began, speaking to the droid.

But before she could finish her question, the collector zoomed forward and stabbed the vein at the crook of her elbow with the needle.

“Ouch!” Sylvie jerked involuntarily, dislodging the needle.

“You must hold still. You must not resist. Punishment will occur if you move again!” the droid warned her in its tinny voice.

“Sorry!” Sylvie held out her now-bleeding arm again reluctantly. “I just...wasn't expecting you to?”

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But again, the droid didn't let her finish. It darted forward and stuck her in the vein again.

There was another sharp pain but this time, she managed to hold still as the blood was sucked out of her arm. It seemed to take forever and she wondered how much it was taking. At least as much as the leaches had drained on her last mission to Minerva Twelve, she thought.

Thinking of that made her wonder about Kross. Was he also enduring the same thing? If so, she wondered how much he hated her for it. After all, this was all her fault. If she hadn't insisted on going to Gim'bab Orious in the first place and if she hadn't run away from him they wouldn't be in this situation!

My fault,she thought as the collector droid sucked what felt like a gallon of blood out of her arm.All my fault. Kross must hate me and I don't blame him!

Finally the needle was withdrawn but not before the droid squirted something sticky on her arm, presumably to seal the wound it had made.

Sylvie thought the ordeal was over but then the tinny voice commanded,

“Open your mouth and push out your tongue.”

“What? Why?” she asked, feeling more anxious than ever.

“For epithelial cell collection. Open!” the droid demanded.

Feeling horribly vulnerable, Sylvie did as it said, parting her lips and sticking out her tongue.

The droid hovered closer to her head and a new arm protruded from its silver belly. This one seemed to have something like a spoon at its end. Before she could see it very well, the droid jammed it between her lips and into her mouth.

The spoon-like instrument scraped painfully against the inside of Sylvie's cheek. Then it withdrew and disappeared back into the droid.

This time she was sure it was over...but the worst was yet to come.

"On your back," the droid demanded. "Spread your legs."

"What?" Sylvie backed away from it. "I don't think so!"

"You'd better do it," Hersha warned. "It's no fun but it doesn't take long."

"What...what is it going to do to me, though?" Sylvie demanded.

"Take samples from between your legs, of course. What else?" the other woman said dryly. "Come lie on one of the cots—it's easier that way," she added.

Feeling sick and horrified, Sylvie shook her head.

"No! I won't do it!"

"You'll be sorry if you don't," Hersha warned and the other women murmured ascent.

But Sylvie simply couldn't make herself do what the droid was demanding. It would

be like being complicit in her own rape, she thought. She wasn't going to make it easier for that bastard Dr. Barbarous!

“You refuse to comply?” the droid asked in its mechanical voice.

“That's right—you can fuck off!” Sylvie told it in a shaking voice.

She was afraid the silver droid would shock her or poke her with needles again to make her obey but instead it simply hovered in front of her for a long moment.

“You will regret this disobedience,” it said at last.

Then it turned and hovered back into the hole it had come from, which irised shut behind it, leaving what looked like a smooth, wooden wall.

“Oh, you're going to be sorry for that,” Hersha remarked. “I'm surprised it didn't shock you.” But she and everyone else in the room seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Sylvie could almost read their minds.

‘At least it wasn't me’—that's what they're all thinking.

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But what would happen to her now that she'd refused to let the droid collect all of the "samples" it wanted?

She didn't know and she was afraid to find out.

9

SYLVIE

About an hour after the collection droid had made its appearance, another of Dr. Barbarous's "treetures" came into the small, dim room. He was pushing a cart with five metal bowls and he also had an armful of clothing. He shoved the clothes at Sylvie.

"Change now. Dr. Barbarous says."

Sylvie thought about telling him to fuck off, like she'd told the droid. But she was probably already in trouble for that little piece of noncompliance.

Unhappily, she slipped out of her protective white coverall. She was wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and panties under it. But when she tried to leave them on, the treeture shook a long, branch-like finger at her and growled,

"All off! All off!"

Very unwillingly, Sylvie took off the rest of her clothes and quickly slipped into the garment he had brought her. It turned out to be the same kind of shift, made of tan

plant fibers, the other women were wearing. The fibers were silky if you stroked with the grain but extremely rough and scratchy if she ran her fingers up the dress instead of down it. Sylvie felt incredibly vulnerable in it.

The treeture took away her clothes and boots and handed out the silver bowls. Then he pushed the cart out of the small room and shut the door behind him, locking them in again.

Dinner was some kind of protein mush served cold. It tasted as bland as cardboard and Sylvie didn't really want it. But when she offered her portion to Lorna, the goat-girl's slotted eyes went wide.

"Oh, no—you can't give it away. Youhaveto eat it," she said earnestly, shoving the offered bowl away.

"But what if I'm not hungry?" Sylvie protested. She usually never skipped meals, but recent events had completely robbed her of her appetite. She felt like she might actually be sick if she tried to eat the bland protein mush.

"Doesn't matter if you're hungry or not—you have to eat every bite they give you," Hersha lectured. "If you don't want to end up like Grolla, over there."

She nodded at the girl with long green and yellow hair who had been rocking and keening on the far bed when Sylvie first came in. Her skin was pasty pale though Sylvie couldn't tell if it was her normal coloring or the pallor of long captivity. She was eating her own bowl of mush slowly but steadily, though her big green eyes were filled with tears that kept dripping down her cheeks and landing in the bowl. It was a pitiful sight and Sylvie wished she could help the girl, though she had no idea how.

"What...what happened to her? She refused to eat her meal?" she asked in a low voice.

“Refused for days and days. She was washing it down the sink or the toilet—trying to starve herself to death,” Hertha answered.

“Not that we blame her—Dr. Barbarous killed her fiancé when he captured their ship,” Shredda, the third goat-woman murmured.

“None of us said anything, but somehow Barbie found out,” Hertha said grimly. “And then he punished her.”

“Punished herhow?” Sylvie demanded in a whisper. She wanted to know what kind of treatment she might receive herself for refusing to allow the collector to take samples from between her legs.

“He gave her to the treetures for breeding—allof them at once,” Hersha said and shivered. “They’re all male you know. He keeps trying to make a female one, but he can’t seem to get the formula right. So he lets them have one of us if we’re disobedient.”

“Hewhat?” Sylvie felt all the blood drain out of her face. “You’re kidding!”

“Wish I was.” Hersha shrugged. “Bet you’re wishing you’d let the collector take those samples now, aren’t you?” she added, raising an eyebrow at Sylvie.

“Hush, Hersha—don’t be unkind,” Lorna said, frowning.

“So he just...gave her to them?Allof them?” Sylvie remembered the huge member swinging between Manlow the moss-man’s legs and felt sick. To be used by a creature like that—something that wasn’t even fully humanoid...and not only one but all of them at the same time...

“He’s a sadistic bastard,” Hersha said angrily. “He claims to be ‘asexual’ and thinks

he's above it all just because he doesn't assault us himself. But helovesto watch. Fucking creepy perverted asshole!"

"Hersha, be quiet! What if he's listening through the screen?" Lorna hissed. "You don't want to be chosen out of turn, do you?"

"Chosen out of turn? What doesthatmean?" Sylvie asked anxiously.

Hersha sighed.

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“Every night one of us has to go service one of the treetures. Barbie mixes and matches us, hoping that one of us will get pregnant by his plant-based monstrosities. So far two of us have but both times we miscarried.”

“It happened to me,” Lorna said in a small voice. “The thing in me...it didn’t look humanoid at all. It was just a ball of bloody roots!”

Sylvie had been about to force herself to take another bite of the protein mush but she put her spoon back down in her bowl and winced.

“I’m so sorry—that’s horrible.”

“He keeps tweaking their DNA, trying to make changes so they can get us pregnant,” Shredda whispered. “He wants a plant-humanoid baby he can experiment on.”

“That’s why he went out of his way to capture me,” Clemina spoke up for the first time, sounding more subdued than usual. “My people already have plant DNA in us,” she added, nodding at the tiny clusters of flowers growing from her knees. “But I don’t think I’m compatible with the treetures at all—my people’s heritage has been millennia in the making. His tree-men are artificially constructed—the two of us just don’t mix.” She sighed unhappily. “But that doesn’t stop him from trying.”

“I think he’s onto something new lately,” Hersha said darkly. “Maybe something even worse. I heard him saying something about a ‘personalized aphrodisiac’ last time he had me in the lab room. Something that would make a woman ‘unable to resist a male’s advances.’”

Sylvie couldn't think of many things worse than being raped by a tree-man in order to make a half-plant/half-humanoid baby but there were other things she was worried about.

"What...what do you think he'll do to Kross? To my protector?" she asked in a small voice. She'd told the other women about Kross and how the two of them had both been captured, but that the big Kindred had been dragged away to a separate room.

"Dunno." Hersha shrugged.

"I hate to make you feel bad, but Barbarous killed Grolla's fiancé," Lorna said apologetically. "He said he had 'no use for male specimens.' Whatever that means."

Sylvie felt her stomach clench. Surely the mad scientist wouldn't just kill Kross out of hand, would he? Then she remembered what Barbarous had said.

"Wait—but he told his two uh, tree-men to lock Kross in the 'new specimen room,'" she said. "He said he wanted to start working on him immediately."

"Huh—well then, at least he's probably still alive," Hersha said. "Though I wouldn't want to guess what's happening to him."

Sylvie wanted to cry.

"This is all my fault," she whispered. Looking down, she stirred her protein mush aimlessly with her spoon. "I'm the one who insisted on coming to this horrible planet to look for thetangelvine! Kross tried to warn me it was dangerous but I wouldn't listen to him! If he is still alive, he probably hates me right now and I don't blame him!"

"Oh now, you can't—" Lorna began but just then the door to their prison opened

once more.

There was a collective gasp and all the women shrank away as Manlow shouldered his way into the small, dim tree trunk room.

“You.” he pointed one stick-like finger at Lorna. “Come.”

“Me?” the goat-woman shrank back against the wall. “Please, no—it’s not even my turn!”

“You come now!” Manlow insisted. Charging forward, he gripped her by the arm and dragged her out the door.

The last thing Sylvie heard before it slammed shut was the sound of the other woman crying pitifully. The sound made her heart ache and her stomach clench.

Oh God, what was she going to do? How could she possibly get out of here?

10

KROSS

Kross didn’t eat the fucking mush they gave him. It tasted as bland as paper and he couldn’t stomach it—not when he was so worried about Sylvia. Several more times he’d tried getting through the pain barrier, but it was no use. He finally had to admit to himself that he was exhausting and hurting himself for no reason. There was just no way to get past it—not without passing out from the pain.

Shortly after his last attempt, a hole appeared in the wall of his jail and a round silver droid floated into the room. It ordered Kross to extend his arm for “specimen collection.”

In answer, Kross kicked the fucking thing as hard as he could. It ricocheted off the wall, making a mechanical wailing sound like a siren. At once, the screen on the far wall turned on and Barbarous appeared, frowning.

“I suggest you cease abusing my droid and allow it to take your blood and any other specimens it asks for,” he said, glowering at Kross.

“Like hell I will, you fucker!” Kross growled. “You can have my blood when you tie me down and take it!”

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“That can be arranged you know,” Barbarous said coolly. “Or I could give the punishment you just earned to the lovely lady you came here with. Sylvia, I believe her name is. Would you like that, Mr. Kross?”

Kross felt sick with fear and rage.

“Leave Sylvia alone!” he roared at the screen. “Leave her the fuck alone!”

“I will...if you cooperate. Now will you give the collector your samples or not?”

“Fine. As long as you promise not to hurt her.”

“I give you my word as a gentleman and a scientist,” Barbarous said gravely. And putting one long hand over his heart, he made a little bow.

“All right.” Kross extended his arm to the silver droid, which hovered nervously at the other end of the room, as though it didn’t trust him. He knew there was no way to be sure the mad scientist was telling the truth or that he wouldn’t go back on his word. But there was nothing else he could do—no other way to protect the woman he loved.

The droid finally took some blood and a scraping from the inside of his cheek. Then it hovered through the air to the round hole it had come from and disappeared into the wall again.

After that, there was nothing to do but pace his cell and try to get through the pain cage again, even though he knew it was useless. He was aware he was probably

punishing himself for not being strong enough to protect Sylvia. The pain felt good in a way—it was what he deserved. He never should have let those two tree-looking bastards sneak up on him...

Just as his thoughts were becoming a loop of guilt, anger, and anxiety for the woman he loved, the door opened again and two of the treetures entered. One of them stood by the door and the other held the arm of a sobbing woman.

At least, Krossthougtit was a woman. She had breasts and was wearing a kind of short dress made of some kind of tan plantfiber. But she also had hair like wool and small, curling horns on her forehead.

The treeture holding her arm walked her right up to the closest hazy red pain shield while Kross watched, wondering what the hell was going on. Then, abruptly, the pain shield was gone.

It only lasted a split second and before Kross had time to react, the sobbing girl was shoved into his area and the red shield was reactivated.

The treeture by the wall must have hit the control button at the same time that the other one pushed the girl in, Kross thought. Either way, he had missed an opportunity. He wouldn't miss again if he could help it.

But in the meantime, he had the crying woman to deal with.

“Hey, are you all right?” he asked her. “Did they hurt you?”

She looked up, taking her hands from her face and he saw that her eyes had horizontal pupils. They were also red from crying.

“Did they hurt you?” Kross asked again.

“No...butyouwill.” The woman looked at him mistrustfully. “They sent me here for you.”

“For me?” Kross frowned, shaking his head. “I don’t understand.”

“No, but you will, Mr. Kross.”

Kross turned and saw that the screen on the far wall was lit again and Barbarous was smirking at him from it.

“What are you talking about?” Kross demanded. “You think I’ll hurt her just so you can get off watching it? I don’t fucking think so!”

“If my formula works, you won’t have a choice,” Barbarous told him.

“Formula? What for—” Kross started to ask. But at that moment there was a hissing sound and the tree trunk room began to fill with pink smoke, pouring in from a hidden vent somewhere.

It was cloyingly sweet—Kross coughed as he inhaled it. He felt like he was choking on cotton candy—a confection that humans were fond of though it was nothing but sugar.

The girl they had shoved in the room with him was choking too. Kross wondered if the plan was to kill them both with poison gas—what else could Barbarous be doing?

But after a moment, the smoke cleared leaving nothing but a lingering, too-sweet scent hanging in the air. Kross looked down at himself. His body looked fine and he certainly didn’t feel any different.

The woman looked pretty much the same too, he thought. She was just standing

there, blinking, as though she had been stunned.

“Well?” Barbarous demanded eagerly from the screen. He was staring at Kross avidly. “Well, how do you feel?” he asked.

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“Fine. The same.” Kross shrugged. “Why? Am I supposed to feel something? Because I don’t. I guess that formula you’re so proud of is a dud.”

Barbarous scowled at him.

“Impossible! There must be some effect!”

“Ohhhh!”

The noise startled Kross and he looked away from the screen to see that the woman with the goat’s horns was moaning and rubbing her body. One hand was touching her breasts and the other was between her legs.

“Ohhh,” she moaned again, looking up at Kross. “Oh, please!”

“Please what?” he asked, frowning at her.

“Please take me!” the woman begged.

Kross was taken aback. Just a moment ago she’d been afraid he would hurt her—now she was begging him to have sex with her. What in the Seven Hells was going on?

It has to be that damn cotton candy gas, he thought, as he backed away from the pleading woman. It must have affected her somehow. That’s what Barbarous meant when he was talking about his “new formula.”

Speaking of Barbarous, he was glaring from the screen on the far wall.

“Well? Why do you not take her? Fuck her!” he demanded.

“She’s been drugged,” Kross growled, glaring at him. “I’m not going to fuck a drugged woman—that’s called rape!”

“No, that is what we call scientific progress,” Barbarous corrected him. “So you feel no urge at all to mount the lovely Lorna here?”

“Of course not!” Kross was disgusted. As if he would take advantage of a woman that way! It went against everything the Kindred stood for—everything he had ever believed.

But more than that, the idea of rape went against his very DNA. It was so deeply ingrained in Kindred males that females were sacred and not to be harmed that he couldn’t have brought himself to hurt the woman or take her against her will even if his own life was on the line.

“Hmm...interesting. Very interesting.” Barbarous nodded and made some notes. “Well, it seems that this version of the formula isn’t useful for males though it does appear to work quite well on females.” He nodded at the girl named Lorna, who continued to rub herself and moan. “Are you certain you don’t want to put her out of her misery? She won’t be satisfied until she’s been penetrated, you know.”

“Fuck you—I won’t do that!” Kross shook his head. There was only one woman he was interested in and he wasn’t going to go fucking around with a complete stranger who he’d never even seen before.

“Fascinating.” Barbarous made another note. “Very well—it’s back to the lab I suppose. I must study those samples you gave us.”

Just as though Kross had offered his blood freely, instead of being coerced.

The fucker! Kross thought fiercely. But before he could say anything, the screen went blank once more.

The goat-woman continued to cry and rub herself but after a moment, the door opened again. This time three of the tree-men came in and one of them was holding Kross's own blaster, which they had stolen from him when they caught him in the forest.

"Send the girl out," the one with the blaster demanded.

"Fine—take her." Kross held up his hands, though he was wondering if there was some way to take the blaster away. He edged closer to the pain wall, waiting for the tree-man closest to the switch to turn it off.

The minute the wall went down he dropped low and lunged forward. He was just about to go for the blaster when Barbarous's voice came from the screen again.

"Try it and the girl dies," he said. "And if I have to kill Lorna, I'll kill your Sylvia too—that's a promise, Mr. Kross."

Kross turned and saw that one of the creatures had its long fingers wrapped around the goat-woman's throat and was choking her.

"Fuck!" he growled. Standing quickly, he put up his hands. "All right—leave her alone!"

He couldn't stand idly by and watch a woman get hurt or killed. Again, it went against everything in his Kindred heritage and DNA. Also, he feared for Sylvia. He didn't want to do anything that would get her hurt or punished.

"Very well. Clipcut, loosen your hold on her throat," the mad scientists instructed.

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The tree-man did as he said, though he still kept his long fingers loosely around her neck.

“Good. Now you and Manlow and Pushplant take her out and fuck her,” Barbarous said casually. “For once I think she’ll welcome it.” Then he looked at Kross. “And you—get back into your area. If you try anything like that again, it’s your Sylvia who will be getting fucked by my treetures. Do I make myself clear?”

“Fucking crystal,” Kross growled. He went back to stand by the bed and watched as the wavering red pain walls came back up.

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other. I’ll be speaking to you later after I rework my formula.” He pointed a finger at Kross. “Don’t get too comfortable. I will find a way.”

Kross didn’t know what he was talking about and he didn’t fucking want to know, but he asked anyway.

“Find a way to do what?” he demanded.

But the screen was blank once more and since the three tree-men had already dragged the moaning goat-girl out the door, he was alone with his thoughts.

Sylvie waited, on pins and needles, to see if she was going to be punished for her refusal to give the collection droid what it wanted but nothing else happened for hours.

The women all milled around silently, clearly trying not to think about what Lorna was going through. It was obvious to Sylvie they were completely demoralized. Nobody even seemed to have any hope of escape and Barbarous knew it—he didn't even bother to make sure the treetures locked the door to their prison.

Sylvie had hope, though. The flight plan Kross had filed for their mission had been for a week because she hadn't been sure how long it would take her to find the tangeline vine. When the two of them didn't contact the Mother Ship or return on time, someone was bound to come looking for them. The Kindred took care of their own.

The question was, could she survive here for a week or should she attempt to get out of here now? After all, she had no wish to be gang-raped by the treetures. If she could just get out of the tree trunk prison and find Kross, she was sure the two of them could get back to their long-range shuttle. Then they could send help back for the hapless women Barbarous was holding captive.

She thought about trying to get some of the other women to come with her...but Hersha shut down that idea fast.

"You know, maybe next time they come in, if there's only one guard—" she began, but stopped abruptly when the goat woman glared at her.

"Shut up with that talk!" she hissed at Sylvie fiercely. "You never can tell when he's listening!" And she nodded at the blank screen, which just looked like part of the wall when it wasn't lit up.

“Fine, I just thought?—”

“Well, don’t,” Hersha snapped. “That kind of thinking is what gets you punished or even killed.”

“But if we all work together—” Sylvie began.

“You think we didn’t try?” Hersha demanded. “I’ve been here for five fucking years! And so have Lorna and Shredda. But what you don’t know, is that we used to have a fourth—her name was Zeela. She got caught sneaking out one night near the beginning and Barbarous killed her for it.”

“He...he did?” Sylvie’s voice was faint.

Hersha nodded.

“He didn’t just shoot her with a blaster, either. He had the creatures pull her apart—piece by piece. First her arms...then her legs...” She shook her head, looking down at her hands. “By the time they ripped off her head, she was dead. But we still had to watch—he wouldn’t let us look away. There was so much blood...”

Sylvie’s stomach twisted into a fist.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “That must have been...beyond horrible to watch.”

“Better to watch it than to have it happen to you personally,” Hersha said fiercely. “So when I tell you to shut the fuck up, I mean it—shut the fuck up.”

She got off the cot closest to the door where they had been sitting together and moved to the furthest cot, pointedly putting room between herself and Sylvie. As she did, she cast a look at the blank screen, as though someone was watching her. Which, maybe

they were. Who knew in this crazy place, Sylvie thought.

After that, she didn't try to broach the subject of escape with anyone else. If Hersha, who seemed to be the fiercest of the women, was so spooked by even the beginning of a discussion about it, she couldn't imagine that anyone else would be willing to entertain the notion.

A little while later the door opened again and Lorna was shoved inside. She fell to her knees, crying, and the other women came to surround her at once.

"Are you all right?" Hersha asked, kneeling beside her.

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“Is there anything we can do, my dear?” Clemina murmured.

“What happened?” Sylvie asked, before she thought. She wished at once that she could take the question back—it was clear what had happened to Lorna. Her plant-fiber shift had been ripped half off her body, it was barely hanging together to hide her nakedness.

Nonetheless, it was Sylvie’s question that she answered when she finally stopped crying. It took some time—Shredda wrapped her in a blanket and sat her on the side of one of the cots. The other women gathered around her, murmuring support. Finally, Lorna seemed able to talk.

“They put me in the new specimen room—along with your man, I think. Kross, right?” she said, sniffing as she looked up at Sylvie.

Sylvie felt her heart jump in her chest.

“Yes, that’s him! Is he all right?”

“He’s fine—a lot better than the treetures.” Lorna made a face. “Barbarous tried to get him to...to take me, but he wouldn’t,” she went on. “So then he pumped some sweet-smelling gas into the room. It made me feel so...sostrange. But it didn’t seem to affect Kross, because he still didn’t want to take me. He said it would be ‘rape.’” She let out a sad little laugh that was more than half sob. “Like that’s anything new around here.”

Sylvie felt a surge of pride in her Protector.

“Kross is a Kindred,” she explained. “They worship a Goddess and believe that every woman has a little bit of the Goddess within her—a ‘spark of the divine.’ They absolutely refuse to hurt or force women—it’s considered the worst crime a Kindred warrior could commit.”

“It must be nice to live among men who feel that way,” Lorna said dully. “Anyway, Kross wouldn’t do it—he wouldn’t take me. But I almost wish he had—it would have been better than the treetures.” She shuddered.

“I’m so sorry,” Shredda said softly. “Did they...” She trailed off, delicately.

Lorna nodded.

“Yes, but the awful thing was, the gas Barbarous gave us made me...” She swallowed, as though having difficulty getting the words out. “It made me want them to.”

“What?” Hersha looked at her with obvious disbelief. “You’re not serious.”

“I wish I wasn’t.” Lorna swiped at her eyes. “But it’s true. It made me...made me want it so much. I was almost relieved when the treetures dragged me outside and...”

Her eyes filled with tears and she shook her head, obviously unable to continue.

“It’s all right—none of this is your fault, dear,” Clemina said, rubbing her shoulders soothingly. “Just try to relax. It’s almost lights out and then we’ll all get some sleep. Things will look brighter in the morning.”

As though her words had triggered something, the room was suddenly plunged into total darkness.

Sylive's heart caught in her throat and she looked around the pitch-dark room in wide-eyed panic. Oh God, what now?

It took her a moment to realize, by the sounds of the other women around her, that this was totally normal.

"Gods damn it—already?" Hersha muttered. "I swear they're calling lights out sooner every night."

"No use in complaining—might as well try to get some sleep," Clemina answered her.

There were sounds of rustling and soon everyone was settling down in a cot. Sylvie wound up on the one closest to the door, which she didn't love. It felt like she would be the easiest target if any of the treetures came over in the middle of the night. But she couldn't exactly ask to trade either—all of the other women in the room had endured so much more than she had. So she cuddled in the cot, drawing her knees up and huddling in on herself for warmth.

As she drifted off into a sleep thinner than the gray plant-fiber blanket she'd been given, her last thought was of Kross. She was glad he was keeping his Kindred values intact but she wondered again how angry he was with her and if he would ever forgive her for landing them in this mess in the first place...

12

## SYLVIE

The next day the women were given bowls of the same pasty white protein mush for breakfast and then herded out into the sunny clearing. There, under the watchful eyes of seven or eight treetures, they trooped around in a circle for about an hour.

Every time they passed the place where she knew the small hole in the underbrush was, Sylvie cast a longing glance in that direction. She thought about making a break for it, but if she ran, would they punish Kross? Also, could she make it before the treetures caught her and what would they do to her if she didn't get away? The mental image Hersha had painted of being literally pulled limb-from-limb by the plant/humanoid hybrids was still fresh in her mind.

Eventually they were herded back into their tree trunk prison and her chance was gone. Sylvie wondered if she was going to regret not taking it.

The day passed slowly with nothing to do but talk to the other women, most of whom were too cowed to do more than whisper. Even Hersha seemed subdued. It wasn't until it was nearly time for their evening mush that the door opened and two of the treetures pushed inside.

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“You,” one of them said, pointing at Sylvie. “Come.”

Sylvie felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of ice cubes into her stomach.

“What, me? But...but I just got here yesterday!” she protested. “It...it can’t be my turn yet—can it?”

She hated how cowardly she sounded, but she couldn’t help the fear in her voice. She didn’t want to be raped by these evil bastards! Or used in any of Barbarous’s sick experiments, either.

But protest was useless. Two of the tree-men grabbed her by her arms and dragged her out of the hut, slamming the door behind them.

I’ll try to run, Sylvie told herself as they dragged her to the other side of the compound. Or if they try to rape me I’ll fight! I won’t let them take me without a struggle!

She was so grimly determined to defend herself in any way she could that at first she didn’t register what was going on when they took her into another hollowed-out tree trunk. Then she heard a voice calling her name.

“Sylvia? Are you all right?”

Her eyes, dazzled momentarily by the sunlight from outdoors, took a moment to adjust. But then she saw him—Kross was staring at her from behind a hazy, red energy shield. The shield enclosed a kind of room inside it with a large bed, a sink,

and a toilet. Kross was standing on the other side of it, a look she couldn't read on his face.

"The girl goes in. If you move, she dies," one of the treetures said, clearly speaking to Kross.

He nodded.

"I understand. I'll stay here—just don't hurt her."

The treeture didn't answer. But a moment later the hazy field of red energy disappeared momentarily. Strong hands shoved Sylvie forward and she stumbled right into Kross, who caught her and wrapped his arms around her protectively.

The field of energy came back on and the treetures exited, leaving them alone together.

"Kross?" Sylvie asked, looking up at him uncertainly. "Are you all right?"

"I should be asking you the same thing. Did they hurt you?" he studied her face anxiously. "Did they...do anything to you?"

"No." Sylvie shook her head. "Well, other than taking my blood and scraping the inside of my cheek." It felt strange to be held in his arms like this, considering the animosity that had always been between them. But it felt good too—safe and warm and oh-so comforting.

"They did the same to me," he murmured. "I think Barbarous is going to use our DNA to experiment on us."

"I think you're right," Sylvie said grimly. "The question is, can we get away from

him before he can do that?”

“And the answer to that is a resounding ‘no,’ my dear,” a familiar voice said.

Sylvie jerked and looked around. She wasn’t a bit surprised to see a screen on the far wall with Barbarous on it. The mad scientist was watching her and Kross with what she could only assume was a glint in his eyes—though it was indiscernible behind the strange black goggles he wore.

Kross let go of Sylvie and stepped in front of her instead, shielding her with his body, as though he could keep her safe from their captor that way though the other man wasn’t even in the room.

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing to us, you’d better think again,” he growled. “Sylvia and I work and live aboard the Kindred Mother Ship—they will come looking for us.”

“Oh, I’m not concerned about anyone finding you.” Kross made a shooing motion with one hand. “Our compound has excellent camouflage shields around it. You can’t spot it from the air, no matter how you try. The two of you stumbled in here by accident—one that I’m sure won’t be repeated.”

Sylvie’s heart sank. He might very well be right. Even if the Kindred sent a search party to come look for them, the tiny opening in the foliage was hard to see and if the compound wasn’t visible from the air...well, the Kindred could search for months and never find them!

“Why can’t you just leave us alone and let us go home?” she asked in a trembling voice. “We never did anything to you—just let us go!”

“I am afraid I can’t do that—I need the two of you for my experiments,” Dr.

Barbarous remarked coolly. “Especially now that I’m working on my new formula which is sure to make me rich enough to fund my other, more important research—that of breeding a whole new species of plant people.”

“What formula?” Sylvie asked apprehensively. She couldn’t forget the story that Lorna had told—about breathing in the sweet-smelling gas and then having a terrible urge to let the treetures penetrate her. She shivered at the thought—how horrible!

“You’ll learn in due time,” Dr. Barbarous drawled. “But first, I wish to understand the nature of your relationship. Are the two of you ‘mated’ or ‘Bonded’ as the Kindred say?”

“No.” Sylvie shook her head. “Kross is just my Protector—my bodyguard.”

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“I see. So there is no sexual relationship between the two of you at all?”

Sylvie felt her cheeks get hot when she remembered the way her big Kindred Protector had healed her nipples on their last mission, but she shook her head again.

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Not that it’s any of your fucking business,” Kross growled.

“Oh but it is my business—now that the two of you are my subjects, everything about you is my business,” Barbarous informed them. “Though I must say that knowing that there is no existing sexual relationship between the two of you makes my experiments both more interesting and more valid.”

“What experiments?” Sylvie couldn’t keep the fear out of her voice.

“This one to start with,” Barbarous said, and then there was a faint hissing sound and the room began filling with white smoke.

Sylvie clapped a hand over her mouth and tried not to inhale, but the white stuff seeped between her fingers, making her cough and choke.

“Ugh—why does it smell like cotton candy?” she gasped.

“I don’t know.” Kross coughed too. “I...I thought the same thing.”

A moment later, the smoke cleared, leaving Sylvie feeling lightheaded. She took a

step and swayed...only to feel Kross catch her.

“Hey, are you all right?” He looked down at her anxiously.

“I...I think so. Let me just sit down,” Sylvie said.

He led her to the bed and helped her sit on the side of it. Then, to her surprise, he knelt in front of her and took her hands in his.

“Are you really all right, Princess? How do you feel?” he asked softly.

Sylvie opened her mouth to reassure her Protector...but the truth was, she was beginning to feel extremely strange. She had a tingling in her nipples she'd never felt before and her breasts... She looked down at herself and gasped.

“Oh my God...they're growing!”

13

KROSS

Kross's eyes widened as he saw what was happening. Sylvia was right—her breasts were growing. As they both watched, her already large breasts swelled until they were almost twice as big as they had been. The thin tan shift she wore began to rip right down the middle, making the formerly round neckline a V-neck. Though Sylvia tried to hold her dress together, the flimsy plant fibers shredded in her fingers, leaving both breasts bare.

“Oh my God!” She tried to cover herself, but Kross shook his head and caught her small hands in his.

“No, wait, Princess—let me see,” he said gently.

Sylvia blushed a deep red but stopped trying to hide her breasts. Still on his knees in front of her, Kross lifted one heavy globe to take a closer look. What he saw made him frown with concern.

“What is it? What’s wrong with me?” Sylvia sounded close to tears.

“I’m not sure, but you seem to be, uh, leaking.” Kross nodded down to the breast he was holding. Her nipple was a much darker color than he remembered from the last time he’d seen her breasts and there was a droplet of clear amber fluid beaded on her tight peak. A moment later it welled up and broke, sliding in a sticky trail down the underside of her breast.

“Oh my God—what is that? It’s not...not milk, is it?”

“No—that my dear, is nectar,” Barbarous’s voice said from the screen.

Kross angled his body so he was blocking the scientist’s view of Sylvia’s bare breasts.

“What the fuck did you do to her?” he demanded, glowering at the other male.

“It’s my latest formula at work.” Barbarous sounded proud. “It causes a female’s breasts to fill with sweet nectar which must be sucked out. If it isn’t, the pain to the subject and the damage to the breast tissue can be severe.”

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“You fucker!” Kross growled. “Why in the Seven Hells would you want to do something like that?”

“Because I can.” Barbarous gloated at them. “I must say, your little friend’s DNA is much easier to work with than my prior subjects. So much so that almost anything is possible! Such as this little scenario—which I think will be as much for a social experiment as a scientific one.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Kross demanded.

Barbarous arched an eyebrow at him.

“You’ll see. You refused to fuck Lorna earlier when she was under the influence of my formula because you claimed that would be ‘rape’ and you didn’t want to take advantage of her. But now the female who is in pain is one you are sworn to protect. Would you rather ease Sylvia’s pain by sucking those sweet, tender nipples to drain her breasts of nectar...or watch her writhe in agony because you’re too much of a prude to help her while she’s being affected by a drug?”

“You son of a bitch!” Kross growled but Barbarous’s image was already fading.

“Your choice, Kindred,” he murmured. “Let’s see what you choose.”

Kross wished he could go punch the blank screen, but that wouldn’t do any good. And when he looked back at Sylvia, he could see the pain in her lovely eyes.

“Hey, Princess,” he said softly. “You all right?”

She bit her lip and looked away. Kross could see the red stain of embarrassment on her cheeks.

“Come on, talk to me,” he urged her. “Do you need me to, uh, help you out?” He didn’t want to sound like he was taking advantage of the situation—he just wanted her to feel better. But considering the recent animosity between them, he could understand why she would be hesitant to accept any kind of help from him. Especially sexual help.

“It hurts, all right?” she whispered tightly. “But I don’t expect you to...you know, do what he said. I’ll probably be fine.”

“Like Hell you will,” Kross said, frowning. “You need me to suck your nipples, Princess. Just admit it.”

“I know you don’t like me...likethat.” Sylvia still wouldn’t meet his eyes.

Kross felt his heart fist in his chest. Gods, if only he could tell her the truth! But this wasn’t the right time to admit his love. There was never going to be a right time, considering the fact that he could never Claim her.

“Hey, look at me,” he murmured. When she wouldn’t, he took her chin in his hand and tilted it gently until their eyes met. “Sylvia, I don’t mind,” he told her. “I want to help you—to protect you. I know this is a strange situation...”

“A situation I got us into,” she said bitterly. “This is all my fault. I made you come here and I’m the one who ran away when you were just trying to keep me safe. Maybe I deserve to suffer.”

“Don’t say that!” Kross exclaimed. He stroked her cheek until she looked into his eyes again. “Princess, I never want to see you suffer or in pain,” he told her softly.

“Please, will you just let me help you?”

“Well...” She nibbled her lower lip again, her cheeks still hot with a blush. “What if you don’t like it?” she asked at last. “The weird, uh, nectar stuff, I mean?”

“Let me try it,” Kross said reasonably. Leaning forward, he took her right nipple into his mouth and sucked experimentally.

A gush of sweetness that reminded him of thin, slightly diluted honey flooded his mouth. At the same time, Sylvia threw back her head and moaned.

“Ohhh!”

Kross stopped sucking and looked up at her.

“Did I hurt you, Princess?” he asked. Though to be honest, her moan hadn’t sounded like one of pain. A look at her eyes told him he was right—they were heavy-lidded with sexual desire.

“No, it didn’t...didn’t hurt exactly,” she panted. “It was just...just a really, uh, intense sensation.”

“An intense sensation, huh?” Kross frowned slightly. He was pretty sure he knew what kind of sensation she was getting when he sucked her nipple.

The gas Barbarous gave us must have been laced with pleasure compounds, he thought, looking at her. It must feel really good when I suck her.

The thought made him hard and he shifted, trying to make some more room between his thighs for his suddenly aching cock.

But this was no time to get aroused—he still had to finish helping Sylvia.

“Do you want me to go on?” he asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

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“Do...do you mind?” she asked breathlessly.

Kross shook his head.

“No, baby,” he growled softly, looking into her eyes. “I’ll suck your sweet nipples all night if you need me to.”

“Oh, Kross...” She didn’t seem to know what to say but her small hand found his head and soon he felt her soft little fingers slipping into his hair. Without a word, she tugged him forward, arching her back to offer her over-full breasts. There was a mute plea on her lovely face that he was helpless to deny.

Leaning forward again, Kross took her nipple between his lips and began to suck again—softly at first and then harder as Sylvia began to moan.

“Oh...oh,Kross!”she panted and her fingers tightened in his hair—which he fuckingloved. He cupped the breast he was sucking in both hands, massaging gently to help the nectar flow.

Kross was pretty sure she came when he switched to her second breast. He didn’t know if she was one of those women who could orgasm just from having their nipples played with or if the gas had made her extra sensitive. But the scent of her female desire rose to tease him and he was certain if he reached under the ragged skirt of her shift, he would find her soft little pussy hot and wet and ready for him.

“Oh...oh my God!” she gasped, her back arching as he sucked hard, taking as much of her breast into his mouth as he could. “Oh, Kross...I can’t...can’t help it!”

Can't help coming, baby?he thought, feeling his cock surge again. Despite the bizarre situation, he couldn't help taking pleasure in her pleasure. It was the Kindred way to want to make his woman come and though Sylvia wasn't actually his, it still made him fucking hot to please her.

He finished drawing the nectar from the second breast but Sylvia didn't seem to be done yet so he switched back to the first breast and teased her nipple gently with his teeth. At the same time, he pinched the other one, stimulating both tender peaks at once.

"Oh my God!" she gasped and her hips bucked, making him sure she had come yet again. Goddess, whatever was in that gas, it was certainly potent!

At last, Sylvia collapsed back on the bed, breathing hard. She looked so fucking beautiful, with her long, red-gold hair haloed around her head and her cheeks flushed. Her eyes were like stars—almost sleepy with sated pleasure.

Kross crawled on beside her and drew her close to him. She hesitated for a moment...then turned and pressed her face to his chest and nuzzled against him.

"That was...intense," she whispered at last.

Kross wanted to ask if she had come—he was sure she was but he wanted to hear it from her. But he didn't want to embarrass her again.

"Yeah, I could tell," he murmured instead. "You okay, Princess? Feeling better now?"

She nodded and looked up at him. He could see she was blushing again.

"Much better. Er, thank you for doing that. I know it was kind of awkward."

“We’re being held prisoner here—awkward is the least of our worries,” Kross said grimly. He stroked her flushed cheek. “And what you were saying earlier...I want you to know, I don’t blame you for us being here. I blame myself—I should have protected you better, Princess. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Her eyes widened.

“Kross, you don’t have to say that! You were the one who tried to warn me against coming here.” She sighed unhappily. “I wish I would have listened.”

“Well, you can’t change the past,” Kross pointed out. “What’s done is done. Now we need to think about getting out of here.”

“I wouldn’t think about that too hard if I were you—not if the two of you want to live.” It was Barbarous again, watching them with interest from the screen on the far wall.

As before, Kross shielded Sylvia’s body with his own, so the bastard couldn’t see her.

“What the fuck do you want now?” he growled.

“Just to see how you’re getting on. And to get some samples from sweet Sylvia.”

As he spoke, the hole in the wall irised open and the spherical silver droid hovered into the room.

“What are you doing? Stay the fuck away from her!” Kross growled. He was ready to drop-kick the fucking thing again until Barbarous spoke.

“You will not commit violence against my droid and you will allow it to take samples,” he said coldly. “If you do not, the subjects staying in the women’s quarters

will all be terminated.”

“What?” Sylvia sat up, looking horrified. “But you can’t kill them!”

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“Why not? I have superior subjects now—you and Mr. Kross.” The mad scientist shrugged as though killing the other women in the compound would be nothing to him. “Of course, the treetures would be upset if they had no more playthings to fuck, but they can all take turns with you, my dear,” he said, giving Sylvia an evil smile.

She went pale and her eyes were huge with fear. But she lifted her chin and glared at the screen.

“You’re a psychopath!”

“Actually, I’m more of a sociopath,” Barbarous said. “And an unrepentant one at that. Now are you going to allow my droid to take samples or shall I kill your new friends?”

Kross wanted to protect her from this—he balled his hands into fists, wishing he could punch the fucking scientist in the mouth! But he knew it had to be Sylvia’s choice.

“All...all right,” she whispered at last, her voice trembling. “What kind of samples do you want?”

“You know what kind, my dear,” Barbarous said, smirking. “Kindly lie back on the bed and spread your legs.”

Sylvie felt sick. Was she really going to have to go through with this? It seemed she was if she didn't want her companions in the women's prison to die.

Kross was looking at her anxiously as she made up her mind.

"You don't have to do this, Princess," he rumbled softly.

"Yes, I do," Sylvie said, wishing her voice sounded less weak. She sounded like she was going to cry, even to her own ears.

The silver collector droid hovered closer, extending an arm from the center of its bottom sphere as it did. This time, instead of a needle or a spoon, the instrument at the end of the long silver arm was a metal phallus—abigone.

Sylvie felt her eyes grow wide as she took in its size.

"Surely you don't expect to fit that thing in me!" she exclaimed.

"Actually, I believe it will fit quite nicely," Barbarous said, still smirking. "And considering that you orgasmed twice just a few minutes ago, there shouldn't be a lubrication problem."

Sylvie flushed, looking down at her hands. How had he known that she was coming? She hadn't even wanted Kross to know that! It wasn't like she usually came when someone sucked her nipples but the gas they had been given had made her tenderpeaks much more sensitive—until it almost felt like they gave her as much pleasure as her clit. So much so that when Kross had been sucking on them, she couldn't help coming.

Speaking of Kross, he had an angry, frustrated look on his face—an expression that spoke of how upset he was that he couldn't protect her from this.

“Fucking bastard,” he growled, looking balefully at the image of Barbarous on the screen. “If I ever get my hands on you...”

“Kross, it’s all right.” Her words came out sounding high and trembly. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I’ll be fine—honestly.”

“Time is wasting, Sylvia,” Barbarous said from the screen. “Are you going to lie back and spread your legs or should I alert my treetures to start killing your friends?”

“No, no—don’t do that!” Sylvie exclaimed quickly. “I’ll do it. Look, see? I...I’m doing it.” As she spoke, she lowered herself to the bed and spread her thighs. But her last words ended in a half-sob of humiliation and horror.

Then Kross was beside her. He slipped his left arm around her shoulders and cupped her cheek with his right hand.

“Hey, baby—it’s okay,” he murmured, swiping away a tear with the pad of his thumb. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Sylvie didn’t see how it would be okay. The droid hummed closer, the arm with the thick silver phallus attached pointed directly at her, and she couldn’t help watching it. She felt like a small forest animal, hypnotized by the menacing sway of a snake—unable to look away from the awful thing that was coming.

Then Kross turned her face towards him.

“Don’t look,” he said softly. “Don’t watch it, Princess. Look at me.”

Biting her lip, Sylvie did as he said. She looked deep into his eyes, which were a soft purple-blue at the moment. She wished she knew what the different colors his eyes turned really meant and what emotions they corresponded to. She wished?—

“Oh!” she gasped as the cold metal of the silver phallus touched her pussy. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to clamp her thighs closed and deny it entry.

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“Easy, baby—easy,” Kross growled, stroking her cheek. “Keep your eyes on me, all right? I’m going to help you get through this.” His hand slid down to find hers, clenched into a fist at her side. “Here—hold on to me. Squeeze if you need to,” he told her.

As his fingers entwined with hers, the silver phallus slid inside her.

Sylvie moaned as she felt her inner walls stretching to accommodate its girth. Was it her imagination or was it actually getting bigger inside her?

“Easy, baby,” Kross growled again. “Just relax. I’ve got you.”

“I...I’m trying.” She stared into his swirling, multicolored eyes, doing her best to keep her mind off what was happening. But it felt like her pussy was being stretched by the biggest cock she’d ever taken. “It...it’s just sobig,” she moaned softly.

“I know, Princess. I’m so fucking sorry.” He looked earnestly into her face and Sylvie thought he had never been so sweet to her before. There wasn’t a trace of his usual sarcasm—just a deep concern for her and what she was going through.

“Very nice,” she heard Barbarous say from the screen. He sounded like he was gloating. “And now, let’s see how tightly you can squeeze, my dear.”

“What?” Sylvie started to turn her head to look at him but stopped herself just in time. She didn’t want to make eye contact with their captor during this. “I...I thought you were just taking samples!” she panted.

“I also like to gauge your reactions,” he replied. “To this for instance.”

Suddenly a buzzing hum filled the air and Sylvie felt something vibrating against her clit.

“Oh!” she gasped and nearly jumped out of her skin!

“Gently, my dear,” Barbarous cautioned. “Do try not to break my equipment!”

“But...but it’s...” Sylvie broke off, unwilling to say that it was giving her pleasure—that it felt good. She wondered if Kross could tell by the look on her face—she hoped not!

Speaking of her Protector, he was watching her anxiously.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” Princess,” he murmured. “Look at me—focus on me.”

Sylvie did as he said, trying to ignore what was happening below. But it was impossible. The silver phallus had started moving inside her now—thrusting in and out almost as though it was actually fucking her. And at the same time, the vibrator continued to tease her clit, sending sparks of unwanted pleasure through her entire body. And all the while, she was staring into her Protector’s eyes.

“Oh, Kross,” she moaned as she shifted her hips.

“What is it, Princess? Tell me all about it,” he urged gently.

“It...it’s so deep in me. It’s fucking me!” Sylvie panted. “And it...it’s teasing me—my clit. Oh!” she gasped because the vibrator part of the arm was buzzing even faster and she was beginning to feel like she was right on the edge.

“I’m here,” Kross told her. Gripping her hand tighter, he squeezed comfortingly.

“But I’m afraid...afraid it’s going to...to make me come!” Sylvie panted. God, this was so embarrassing! And yet, it was incredibly intimate too. Looking into her Protector’s eyes while she was being fucked like this...even though it was against her will, it still felt like the closest she’d ever been to any man during sex. Even though it wasn’t actually Kross she was having sex with.

“Come if you need to,” he told her. “There’s no shame in it, baby. It’s a physical reaction to stimulation—if you come, you come and it’s not your fault.”

His words made her feel better and Sylvie stopped fighting the growing tide of pleasure that was rising in her. It felt like an ocean wave swelling bigger and bigger—soon it would crash over her and she would drown in the intense sensation.

And then it happened—the droid’s arm fucked deep inside her and held still just as the vibrating attachment reached an even higher speed. Suddenly, she was coming—her back arching and her toes curling as the droid forced an orgasm from her.

“Ohhhh!” she moaned, her eyes still locked with Kross’s. “Oh, Kross—I’m coming! Coming so hard!”

“Gods, I can see that, baby.” His deep voice was hoarse and his eyes had gone reddish purple. “Coming hard, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes!” Sylvie moaned, squeezing his hand convulsively. “Oh God, Kross—I can’t stop!” She could feel her inner walls squeezing the silver phallus as the orgasm went on and on and on.

“Don’t try,” he murmured. “Just let yourself come, baby. Let yourself go. There’s no

shame—just come as hard as you need to.”

Sylvie cried out again as another orgasm was torn from her—the vibrator part of the arm just wouldn’t stop! And then she came again and again and again until she was panting for breath. Finally it was like one long intense orgasm that threatened to push her past the limits she could stand.

“Please!” she begged, writhing on the bed. “Please, I can’t...can’t take any more! Going to pass out!”

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“Stop it—you’re hurting her, you fucker!” she heard Kross growl at the screen.

“Hmm, well I suppose since she already came twice while you were sucking the nectar from her breasts, we can stop. For now,” Barbarous said. “I must say, she’s wonderfully responsive. Much more so than any of my other female subjects. None of them have ever been able to have multiple orgasms.”

At last, to Sylvie’s intense relief, the metal rod withdrew and the vibrator attachment stopped stimulating her. She was left panting on the bed, trying to recover but she felt almost raw between her legs—especially her clit.

“You all right, baby?” Kross asked anxiously as the silver droid withdrew, hovering into the hole in the tree trunk wall which closed seamlessly behind it.

“I...I think so.” Sylvie became aware that she was lying on the bed with her shift hiked up past her thighs and her pussy and breasts on display. Wincing, she tried to sit up and close her legs...only to gasp with pain.

“What? What is it?” Kross’s eyes were filled with concern for her.

“I’m just...I’m almost raw down there,” Sylvie moaned. “The droid...it really fucked me hard.”

“I know, baby—I’m so fucking sorry.” Her Protector looked angry all over again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop it—sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sylvie told him. She winced again as she tried to close her legs.

“Ow! But I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk for a while!”

The expression on Kross’s face turned from anguished concern to thoughtful consideration.

“Actually, I might be able to help you with that,” he offered. “If you want me to.”

“How?” Sylvie shook her head.

He cleared his throat.

“I could...heal you. With my essence.”

“You mean the same way you healed my nipples?” Sylvie asked.

He shook his head.

“Not exactly. Since you’re already so tender, I don’t know if you could stand to have my fingers in you.”

“Oh, you’re probably right.” The thought made her wince again. “Then how?—”

“With my tongue,” Kross answered before she had even finished asking the question.

“That’s the best way to spread my essence and it’s much softer than my fingers.”

“You...you want to lick me?”

Despite the fact that she’d just had multiple orgasms, Sylvie felt a little shiver of desire run down her spine as the forbidden idea.

Slowly, he nodded.

“Yes, Princess—I want to heal you.”

“But...you don’t think you’d mind?” she asked uncertainly. “I mean, putting your mouth on methere?”

His eyes flashed a burning red for a moment.

“Of course not, baby. Kindredlovetasting their women—don’t you know that?”

Actually, Sylviehadheard that from several of her friends who were Bonded to Kindred. But it still surprised her that Kross wanted to do it to her.

“You don’t even like me,” she blurted. “Why would you want to...to heal me like that?”

A look of almost pain came over his face and he sat up and pinched the bridge of his nose, as though he was trying to drive back a headache.

“Idolike you, Princess,” he said at last, looking at her. “I know I can be an asshole sometimes, but please don’t think that I don’t like you. And please don’t hate me.”

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Sylvie was surprised. It seemed to her that all they ever did was clash...but now things felt...differentbetween them.

“All right,” she said softly. “I don’t hate you, Kross.”

“I don’t hate you either.” He gave her a dry smile. “As I hope you can tell.”

“I can tell,” Sylvie said softly. “So...” She cleared her throat. “You, uh, really want to...to heal me?”

He nodded earnestly and cupped her cheek.

“I couldn’t protect you from that fucking thing’s assault,” he said and his voice was filled with shame and regret. “But now that it’s over, at least I can heal you. If you’ll let me. Will you, Princess?”

“Don’t call me Princess,” Sylvie said softly. But as she spoke, she lay back on the bed and spread her legs for him. “And yes, you can heal me, Kross. If...if you really want to.”

“Gods, baby—you have no idea how fucking much I want to!” he growled.

And then he was leaving the bed to kneel between her thighs.

Kross rubbed his hands up and down her inner thighs soothingly, urging her mutely to spread wide for him. Her poor little pussy was all red inside, he saw. Her clit looked especially swollen and painful. He would have to be careful with her there.

At least Barbarous had left when the droid did. The sadistic bastard didn't give a damn how much damage his little "experiment" had done to his subject—he was probably in his lab somewhere analyzing what the droid had collected without a single thought given to how Sylvia was doing.

Kross hated himself, but he couldn't get the erotic sight of her coming out of his mind. He didn't want to be aroused by it—Sylvie hadn't wanted to let the droid in. She'd been coerced into letting it fuck her. And yet the sight of her moaning and writhing in pleasure as he held her in his arms just wouldn't leave his mind.

But he wasn't here to relive those moments, he reminded himself. He was here to heal her. Already his fangs were producing copious amounts of the pale blue essence that all Blood Kindred had. His Fated Mate was wounded and his body sensed it and wanted to help.

"I'm going to be really gentle at first, baby," he told Sylvia, who was trembling slightly. "Just going to give your soft little pussy a tongue bath and spread my essence all over. Okay?"

"O...okay," she agreed, nodding. She was watching him as he leaned forward and spread her tender lips with his thumbs. Good, Kross thought, let her watch him work. Let her know exactly what he was doing—it might help her to relax some.

When she was spread wide enough, he dipped his head towards her. Flattening his tongue, he started at the bottom and dragged it upwards, spreading his essence as evenly as he could over the tender flesh.

“Oh!” Sylvia jerked at first. But then, after the first lick, she seemed less tense. “Oh, Kross...that feels so much better,” she whispered.

He looked up for a moment.

“Good, baby—I’m glad. Just try and relax for me. This might take a little while. This is a very delicate part of you and the essence will take some time to penetrate and heal everything.”

“All right,” she murmured and he felt her sweet, curvy body relaxing under his hands.

Her trust in him moved Kross.

“That’s right, good girl,” he murmured. “Just relax and let me heal your sweet pussy, baby. Just be open for me and let me lick you.”

He spent several more minutes just bathing her pussy all over with his tongue. He even slipped it inside her, healing her inner channel where the metal phallus had battered her sensitive core. Sylvia moaned and wiggled a bit, but she didn’t try to get away. She remained spread wide for him, obedient and trusting as he licked her pussy thoroughly.

Kross’s shaft was hard as a spike in his trousers. Gods, how many times had he fantasized about this—dreamed of tasting the woman he loved? And she was fucking delicious! Her juices were salty-sweet and utterly addictive. He could have stayed between her legs all night.

At last, he turned his attention back to the most sensitive place of all—the tight little button of her clit. Being forced to come over and over again with such intensity might have damaged her nerves, he thought. He wanted to be certain that he spent extra time healing this part.

Being extra careful, he sucked the tender little bud into his mouth and began bathing it over and over with the tip of his tongue, spreading his healing essence.

“Oh...Oh, Kross!”

Small, soft fingers slipped into his hair and he felt Sylvia tugging.

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Reluctantly, he stopped what he was doing and looked up.

“Too much?” he asked, his voice coming out hoarse with desire.

“Not...exactly.” She was panting again and her beautiful eyes were dilated with need.

“It...it feels really good. Maybe...too good.”

“Too good?” Kross frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I think...if you keep it up, I might come again,” she confessed.

Kross felt a growl of pure lust rising in his throat and could barely swallow it down.

“How do you feel about that, baby?” he asked. “Letting me make you come with my tongue?”

“Well...” Her cheeks were stained with a blush. “I guess I shouldn’t want to come anymore. With the droid, it was forced. But with you, well...” She nibbled her lower lip.

“Go on, baby—say what you want to,” Kross urged her.

“It feels good to not be forced,” she said at last. “And to feel like...like you want me to come. Not just as some kind of sick experiment, but because you want me to feel good. Do you?”

“Gods, baby—that’s fucking all I want,” Kross assured her. Leaning down, he placed a

soft kiss on the top of her mound. “Want to feel you coming under my tongue, want to give you pleasure and know you’re actually enjoying yourself.”

“I do enjoy it when...when you taste me,” she admitted. “It feels so good and your tongue is so gentle.”

“You taste so sweet,” Kross told her. “I never dreamed I’d actually get to taste you.”

Her eyes widened.

“So...you’ve uh, fantasized about...about doing this? About...tasting me?”

“Fuck yes,” Kross admitted. “It’s like I told you—all Kindred love tasting their mates. It’s a biological urge—we need to go down on our woman.”

Sylvia nibbled her lower lip some more, obviously unsure how to feel about his words. Kross hoped he wasn’t overwhelming her. He shouldn’t have said that about Kindred tasting their mates—she might get the wrong idea. Or the right idea.

“Not that you’re actually my woman or my mate,” he said, trying to smooth things over. “But you’re fucking gorgeous—a curvy Elite. How could I not dream of tasting your sweet little pussy and hearing you moan for me?”

Her cheeks got redder and her breathing, which had started to even out, got ragged again.

“Oh, Kross. All this time...I never knew you felt that way.”

Because I couldn’t tell you, he thought but didn’t say. He still had enough self-control not to spill all of his secrets.

“I’ve always wanted to taste you and make you come, baby,” he growled softly, instead. “Can you be a good girl and let me? Can you let yourself come while I lick your sweet pussy and tease your little clit?”

“Yes, Kross.” Her words were almost a moan and her eyes were half-lidded. Clearly she liked his dirty talk. That was good—Kross fucking loved talking dirty to her.

“Good girl,” he growled, stroking her inner thighs. “Then just relax and let me taste you—relax and let me make you come.”

She’d been propped up on one elbow but now, with a little moan, she lay back on the bed again. Her eyes never left his as he leaned forward again and began bathing her tender clit with his tongue.

16

## SYLVIE

Sylvie couldn’t believe she was doing this. Couldn’t believe she was lying there spread open for her big Kindred Protector letting him lick her and make her come.

But though it seemed strange that her sarcastic antagonistic coworker had somehow turned into a sweet, caring partner, it felt right too. It was like Kross had always had this second personality inside him—a part of him that he’d been hiding from her for some reason. Now, though, he was letting the sweet, caring part of him out and Sylvie found that she loved it.

She watched through half-lidded eyes as Kross tasted her. At first she’d been afraid that she wouldn’t feel anything at all. The harsh vibrator had made her feel numb and painful at the same time. But after he had bathed her pussy over and over with his essence, the pain began to fade and the feeling in her most sensitive areas began to

return.

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Now it was as though she'd never had the vibrator used on her at all. Her pussy felt soft and extremely sensitive but in a good way. She could feel every soft stroke of Kross's tongue as he made love to her with his mouth and she couldn't help loving the tender way he was tasting her. It was as though she could feel his emotions through his actions—the way he treated her made her feel that he cared, that he wanted to protect and treasure her always.

She slid her fingers into his long silver hair again as he sucked her clit into his mouth and began to trace it over and over with the tip of his tongue. At the same time, two long, strong fingers slipped lower, into her pussy. Sylvie moaned as he began to rub inside her, concentrating on her inner wall, finding a spot she hadn't even known she had that brought intense pleasure.

Oh my God—is that my G spot?

If so, Kross knew exactly how to treat it. The fucking she'd taken from the silver droid had been rough and harsh. The massage he was giving her now was healing, but no less intense for all that. Sylvie felt the pleasure flowing through her as yet another orgasm began to build.

But if the orgasms she'd had with the droid had been a tidal wave, the one Kross was coaxing from her was more like a slow, gentle swell. When her pleasure peaked, Sylvie felt as though pure light and healing were pouring through her.

“Kross!” she moaned, arching her back and gripping his hair tighter as she bucked her hips up to meet his mouth. “Oh, Kross—yes...yes!”

He growled hungrily and kept licking as his long fingers continued their internal massage. The pleasure swelled to its highest point...and then Sylvie collapsed, panting on the bed.

Kross stopped when she stopped pulling his hair. He gave her one last kiss on the top of her mound and then climbed back on the bed and gathered her into his arms.

Sylvie came to him willingly, pressing her face to his broad chest and breathing him in. His warm, masculine scent which had irritated her previously because he smelled too damn good, now seemed just right. She breathed him in and felt tears pricking at her eyes.

Before she could stop herself, she started crying.

“Hey baby, are you all right? What’s wrong?” Kross asked anxiously. He ducked his head to get a better look at her face. “What is it?”

“I...I don’t know,” Sylvie sobbed. “I just...that was...it was so intense.”

More intense, even than the orgasms she’d had from the droid. Maybe it was because the droid was a cold, dead thing that had forced her pleasure. But with Kross it was different—she could feel how much he cared for her with every gentle touch. And he hadn’t just given her pleasure—he had healed her and now he was holding her and making her feel safe for the first time since they’d been captured.

Her big Protector held her close, rubbing his big, warm hands up and down her trembling back and shoulders. He murmured soothing nothings into her ear, telling her everything would be all right and that she was going to be okay. Sylvie breathed in his warm, masculine scent and pressed herself against him, completely undone by the intense emotions and sensations of the past hour.

At last her tears slowed to a trickle and she was able to look up at him.

“You feeling better now, Princess?” he asked softly, looking down to meet her gaze.

“I think so.” Sylvie sniffed and swiped at her eyes. “Sorry I cried all over you. I don’t...don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s been a rough couple of days—that’s what came over you,” he murmured. Stroking a strand of hair out of her eyes, he leaned down and kissed her forehead. “It’s okay to cry if you need to.”

“Thanks.” Sylvie sniffed again and then buried her face in the side of his neck. “We have to get out of here,” she breathed.

She could feel Kross’s big body stiffen at her words. Clearly he hadn’t expected her to switch gears so quickly. Sylvie hadn’t expected to, either. But it occurred to her that they couldn’t go on like this, subject to every whim of a mad scientist who took sadistic pleasure in their pain and wanted to perform crazy experiments on them. She definitely didn’t want her breasts blowing up like balloons again!

“I mean it, we need to escape,” she murmured, keeping her voice so low that only he could hear her.

“Don’t know if that’s possible, baby,” he murmured back, his deep voice so soft she could barely hear it. “Might be too dangerous.”

“Not any more dangerous than staying here and getting experimented on,” Sylvie argued softly. “They don’t even have a lock on the women’s prison—they think we’re all too afraid to try and get away.”

“I don’t think they have a lock on this door either, but they do have that button on the

far wall that you push to take down the pain walls around my area,” he breathed.

“Good—so I could sneak out in the middle of the night and come set you free,” Sylvie whispered. She kept her face close to his neck, pretending like Kross was still just comforting her.

“I don’t know if we should risk it,” he objected. “The Mother Ship should send someone to look for us in a few days.”

“We might not have a few days—and they might never find us. You heard Barbarous—they have shields to hide the compound from the sky. We need to get out of here and get back to the shuttle so we can escape!”

Kross seemed about to say something else but at that moment, the door opened again and three treetures stepped in. One of them, Sylvie saw, was holding Kross’s blaster. She wished fiercely that she hadn’t been stripped of her own pack when she’d been taken—there was a blaster at the bottom of it that would really have come in handy.

“The girl leaves now,” the treeture with the blaster said, waving it at Sylvie.

“No!” Kross rolled over, shielding Sylvie with his big body and glared at the tree men. “No—leave her here.”

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“Dr. Barbarous says no. The girl goes,” the treeture with the blaster insisted.

Suddenly, the screen on the far wall lit up again.

“Must we argue about every little thing?” Barbarous demanded. “Really, this is most exhausting!”

“Leave Sylvia here with me,” Kross demanded.

“Alas, I cannot. My next round of experiments will necessitate the two of you spending some time apart,” The mad scientist shook his head, as though he was truly regretful about their separation. “Please let her go with the guards—I promise no harm will come to her. She’s far too valuable to me to damage. So you can either let her go with the guards now...” His voice grew more menacing. “Or I can start killing off the other females in the complex.”

“No—don’t do that!” Sylvie exclaimed.

She didn’t want to go. She stiffened in Kross’s arms, hanging on hard for a moment. But she knew well enough that she didn’t want to have the guilt of the other women’s deaths on her head.

At last, she reluctantly let go.

Kross was every bit as reluctant. Even after she released him, he clung to her and buried his face in her hair.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Princess,” he breathed in her ear. “Just stay safe.”

Then, at last, he let go of her.

Straightening her torn shift as well as she could to try and hide her breasts, Sylvie climbed off the bed and went to stand by the hazy red pain wall. She could hear it humming faintly and the energy it was putting out made the tiny hairs on her arms stand up.

One of the treetures pressed the button and the pain wall in front of her disappeared abruptly. Sylvie stepped quickly forward and the pain wall came back again, humming right behind her.

“Come—back to the women’s tree.” It was Mandow—the “moss-man” as she thought of him. He took her by the arm and pulled her towards the door.

At the last minute, Sylvie turned her head. She saw Kross standing just behind the pain wall, a frustrated and worried look on his face. His big hands were curled into fists at his sides as he watched her. She could almost feel his longing to be with her so he could watch over her and protect her.

It made her feel warm inside and she promised herself that somehow she was going to get out and then the two of them were going to escape.

She just didn’t know how yet.

17

SYLVIE

But there was no opportunity for escape for the next several days. Dr. Barbarous must

have sensed how desperate Sylvie felt because the guard around the women's prison was doubled. Every time she dared to look outside, there were three or four treetures standing there with their arms crossed, looking like bouncers in front of an exclusive nightclub.

Then, just at lights-out on the fifth night since they had been captured, it started to rain.

“Ah, listen to that—rain!” Hersha exclaimed, cocking her head at the pattering sound from outside.

“Rain!” Clemina echoed. “Thank the Nature Goddess!”

All the women in the room cheered but Sylvie was bewildered.

“Rain?” she asked, frowning. “Why does rain make everyone so excited?”

“Because it means the treetures will be busy soaking in the water—it keeps them from wanting to take us,” Lorna explained. “It kind of immobilizes them— as long as it's raining they just stand there, looking up at the sky.” She shivered. “I really hope it keeps raining all night!”

Her sentiment was echoed by the other girls, especially Shredda whose turn it was to “entertain” one of the tree-men that evening.

Sylvie hoped it kept raining too—she was beginning to think that this was the perfect night to escape. The pattering sound of the rain falling on the huge tree's leaves continued through suppertime when they were served their protein mush, not by a treeture but by the collection droid, which handled the metal bowls using its long silver arm. By lights out when everything went dark, it was still raining.

Sylvie wanted to leave at once, but she didn't want anyone to know she was sneaking out. She made herself wait until the small, dark room was filled with the soft sounds of regular breathing before she sat up and slipped out of her cot.

She was in the cot nearest to the door and just a few steps took her there. Holding her breath, she dared to pull the door open just an inch so she could see out.

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Standing right outside the huge tree that housed the prison were three of the massive treetures. Every one of them had their faces turned up to the sky as the rain beat steadily down on them.

Sylvie's heart leaped in excitement but she made herself move slowly. She waved a hand to see if any of them would react...but none did. It was like the rain had hypnotized them.

It made her wonder why none of the women had ever tried to escape on a rainy night before. But of course, even if they did get away, where could they go? According to Hersha, the space-net that Barbarous had used to capture their ships had also damaged them beyond repair, so it wasn't like they could fly away. And how long could they survive, lost in the endless jungle?

Moving quickly and quietly, Sylvie slipped through the motionless guards and made her way around the edge of the compound. She kept to the shadows of the trees, not caring that she was getting soaking wet until she finally made it to the tree where Kross was being held.

To her relief, there were no guards outside. Clearly Barbarous thought the pain walls were enough of a deterrent to keep her Protector from escaping. After feeling around the bark for a moment as she had seen the treetures do, Sylvie found the hidden release and the door swung silently open.

She slipped inside the darkened room, which was lit only by the red light from the pain walls. Kross was lying on the bed, but he wasn't asleep. His eyes went wide when he saw Sylvie standing there.

She put a finger to her lips and pressed the button on the wall. At once, the wavering red walls of energy that had been enclosing Kross in his prison disappeared, leaving the room in pitch blackness.

Sylvie was going to try to make her way across the room in the dark, but she didn't have to. A moment after the pain walls went down, Kross was at her side. He buried his face in her hair and breathed in her ear,

“What the fuck are you doing and how did you get in here?”

“It's raining,” Sylvie murmured back. “It incapacitates the treetures. Come on—let's get out of here!”

She'd been half afraid that the rain would stop, but it was still pouring steadily when she pushed open the door. She and Kross slipped silently out and headed for the place where they had entered the compound in the first place.

Kross took the lead. Holding her hand, he moved soundlessly forward through the trees and towards the rustling underbrush. It was too dark to see very well, but the big Kindred had much better night vision than Sylvie did. She followed his lead, her heart pounding against her ribs. They were doing it—they were actually escaping!

“There it is,” Kross murmured, keeping his voice low despite the rain. “I can see the opening up ahead. You go through first and I'll follow.”

“Can you get through it?” Sylvie asked anxiously.

He nodded.

“I'll force my way through if I have to but I want to be sure you're safely through first.”

Sylvie was just ducking to go through the small hole in the underbrush when a cold, horribly familiar voice stopped her in her tracks.

“I don’t think so—neither of you is going anywhere.”

18

SYLVIE

Sylvie froze, a cold hand gripping her heart.

Oh no...no, please!she thought desperately.

“Ithoughtthe two of you might take this opportunity to try and get away—it really is soinconvenientthe way my treetures react to inclement weather,” the familiar voice continued. “Turn around now, both of you. Or I shoot.”

“Don’t do it—go Sylvie—just go!” she heard Kross growl. “Get back to the ship—I’ll take care of him.”

But she couldn’t do it—she couldn’t leave Kross to get shot trying to save her. Reluctantly, Sylvie turned around.

Standing in the rain with a cold grin on his thin-lipped face was Dr. Barbarous. The mad scientist was holding a sleek silver blaster that looked utterly lethal and he had it trained on both of them.

Kross had turned too and he moved quickly to put Sylvie behind him.

“Let us go,” he growled. “Or you’re going to be fucking sorry!”

“I think it’s you who are going to be sorry for trying to escape my hospitality without so much as a ‘thank you,’” Barbarous purred.

Almost before he finished speaking, a round silver shape came from behind his back and darted forward.

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It must be the collection droid, Sylvie thought, but she had never seen it move so fast. Before she could even shout a warning, it had zipped forward and stabbed Kross with a needle.

“Fuck!” he growled and batted it aside. But a moment later he suddenly fell to his knees, groaning.

“Kross?Kross!”Sylvie took his face in her hands, staring anxiously into his changeable eyes. She couldn’t see what color they were in the dim light, but she could tell the big Kindred was in a bad way. “Kross?” she said again. “Talk to me!”

“Hurts.” His deep voice was husky and faint. “Fucking...hurts.”

Sylvie glared up at Barbarous, who was smirking. Rage rushed through her—she wanted to wipe that smug expression off his face with her fist!

“What did you do to him?” she demanded. “What did you give him?”

“A fast-acting poison,” Barbarous said blandly. “If you help me get him back to the lab, I might be able to save him. Or you can simply leave him here and go back to your ship.” He shrugged his bony shoulders as though he didn’t care either way. “It’s up to you.”

“Of course I’m not going to leave Kross to die!” Sylvie snapped angrily.

“Then if I were you, I’d try to help him up.” Barbarous waved the blaster at her. “Now.”

Kross was seven feet tall and extremely muscular—Sylvie wasn't sure how she got him on his feet. But somehow she managed to push him up until he found his footing.

“Go...Princess,” he muttered as she draped one of his long arms around her shoulders. “Want you to...get away.”

“No, I'm not leaving you!” Hot tears pooled in Sylvie's eyes and ran down her cheeks, mixing with the cold raindrops that were still coming down. “We're in this together, Kross. Until...until the very end.”

“Such a touching sentiment. However, if I were you, I'd hurry—that poison can't be counteracted after it's been in the bloodstream for fifteen minutes,” Barbarous said dryly.

Sylvie shot him a look of pure hatred as she slipped her arm around Kross's waist.

“Come on—we have to hurry,” she told him tightly.

Somehow they made their way, staggering through the downpour, back to Kross's prison cell. The minute they got inside, Sylvie helped him to the bed and he fell across it like a dead man.

“Kross, are you all right?” she patted his cheek—he was lying on his stomach with his face turned to the side.

“Huuuurts!” he groaned and his big body convulsed.

Sylvie turned back to Barbarous, who was still standing there, just inside the door, holding the blaster.

“All right, we're here—now give him the antidote like you promised!”

“Ah, but I never promised any such thing.” Reaching out, he slapped the button beside the door. Immediately, the red walls of pain energy blazed up around them, making Sylvie feel like she was trapped in the middle of an encroaching fire.

“Wait—what are you doing?” she demanded.

Barbarous was already leaving the tree-trunk lab but he turned to look at her.

“Why, I’m going back to my control center, of course. This experiment has only just begun and it’s going to be my best one yet!”

“What experiment? What about the poison? What about the antidote?” Sylvie asked desperately. “Please—you have to save him!”

Barbarous smirked at her.

“I don’t have to do anything. But don’t worry, my dear—that wasn’t poison I gave him. It was a specially tailored formula I’ve been working on that should provoke some rather interesting effects shortly.”

“What effects? What did you do to him?” Sylvie demanded.

“I may decide to explain further...or I may not,” Barbarous told her. “But first, I must go get out of these wet things before I catch my death of cold.”

Then he closed the door behind him, leaving Kross groaning on the bed and Sylvie with no idea how to help him.

19

KROSS

“Kross? Kross, are you okay? Please, tell me you’re okay!”

The soft, familiar voice was distant, as though whoever was talking to him was calling from a long way away. Kross struggled to answer, but his voice didn’t want to work. His throat was burning—everything was burning.

It felt like something was at work inside him. Or maybe somethings, he thought distantly. Many millions of tiny somethings that were acting on him—changing him in some strange and irrevocable way.

He groaned and tried to move, but movement made the burning worse. What was wrong with him? What the fuck had that bastard Barbarous done to him?

“Kross? Please, be okay. Please...please don’t leave me!”

He forced his eyes to open even though it hurt and looked up. Sylvia’s worried face was hovering over his own, her lovely eyes filled with anxiety.

“Kross?” she asked, her voice thick with tears and desperation.

“Can’t...talk,” he rasped. “Hurts.”

“I know. I’m so sorry!” She stroked his face gently, her eyes glimmering with tears.

Kross wished fiercely that she'd escaped when she had a chance. He didn't want her stuck here with him, especially when he was almost sure he was dying. There was no way the burning pain inside him could mean anything else. But before he went, there was something he wanted to say.

"Love...you," he finally got out. "Always...loved you...Princess."

"What? You what?" Sylvia swiped at her eyes and looked at him uncertainly.

"Love you," Kross repeated.

And then the burning pain became too much to bear and everything suddenly went dark.

20

SYLVIE

What did he say? Did he say he loves me?

Sylvie stared uncertainly at the big Kindred. Kross, who had been convulsing with agony a moment ago, appeared to have fainted. Anxiously, she placed two fingers over the pulse point in his neck and was relieved to feel that his heart was still pumping.

Both of them were still drenched to the skin and she shivered as she knelt on the bed, leaning over him. He'd said he loved her. More than that, he said he'd always loved her. Did that mean he'd secretly had feelings for her all this time? Even though they usually fought like cats and dogs, his admission made her heart pound. Could it be true?

But what did it matter even if it was? The two of them were trapped here—trapped all over again and with zero chance of escape this time. And who knew what horrible substance Barbarous had injected Kross with? It was obviously doing something to him, but what she couldn't tell. The big Kindred looked the same...or did he?

Her heart began to beat faster as she leaned over him. Was his hair changing? Indeed, it seemed to be. His silver hair seemed shaggier somehow and it had acquired a bluish tint.

But wasn't just her Protector's hair that was changing color—his body seemed to be getting even bigger and his skin had changed from pearly gray to a deep red. What the Hell was going on?

"Kross?" said softly, patting his cheek. "Are you okay? What's happening to you?"

"What's happening is that changes are taking place in his body." It was Barbarous again, smirking from the screen on the far wall.

Sylvie frowned at him.

"Changes? What changes?"

"Oh, just a few minor tweaks to his DNA. Did you know that one of his ancestors was more beast than humanoid? Quite a savage individual, I imagine. Apparently they were able to change the color of their skin and hair as well as their eyes, as Mr. Kross is able to do. I wanted to bring that trait out in him. I've been working with plants for so long—working on a pure animal is a nice change of pace," Barbarous said.

"You tweaked hisDNA?"Sylvie demanded. "What did you do to him?"

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“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough, my dear. In fact, right now. Look, I do believe he’s awake.”

The mad scientist’s words made Sylvie turn back to Kross...only to see that his eyes were open.

But they weren’t red or blue or purple or any of the colors she was used to seeing in her surly Protector’s eyes—or rather, they were all of those together. The colors swirled hypnotically, making his irises look almost like kaleidoscopes.

“Kross?” she asked uncertainly. She was beginning to feel uneasy because there was no recognition in those swirling eyes when he looked at her—none at all. There was interest though. He sat up with smooth, cat-like grace and leaned forward to sniff her hair. A low, rumbling growl of interest rose in his throat, sending a shiver down Sylvie’s spine.

“Ah—just as I hoped. He recognizes you as his mate, my dear,” Barbarous said, sounding pleased. “And now that he’s awake, let’s see if those genetic changes I made will translate to his offspring.”

“His offspring? What do you mean by that?” Sylvie demanded. She was keeping one eye on the screen and one on Kross, who wasn’t acting like himself at all.

“Why, I mean that I intend for Mr. Kross to get you pregnant tonight my dear,” Barbarous purred smoothly. “But don’t worry—I’ll make certain you enjoy the process.”

As he finished speaking, Sylvie heard a hissing sound. The hidden vents in the room must have opened because the room filled with billows of white gas, obscuring everything for a moment.

Sylvie clapped a hand over her mouth but, as before, it didn't help. Soon she was coughing and choking on the cloying cotton candy gas as it seeped its way into her lungs.

A moment later, the gas cleared but she was very much afraid that the damage was done. She had inhaled a good portion of it—what was it going to do to her this time?

Anxiously, she pulled open her shift and looked down at her breasts. Were they getting any bigger? Filling with nectar again? She didn't think so but she wasn't quite sure. Maybe they were a little swollen...

But she wasn't the only one with an interest in her breasts. As soon as she pulled open the top of her shift, Kross leaned down and sniffed at her chest like a curious cat.

"Kross, no!" she exclaimed, trying to move away from him. "What are you doing?"

"He's just doing what comes naturally, my dear," Barbarous said from the screen. "Just relax and let him do it."

"I will not!" Sylvie exclaimed, moving away from Kross again. "He's not even in his right mind! There's no way I'm having sex with him like this."

"Oh no?" Barbarous raised an eyebrow mockingly. "Well, just give yourself a little time. I promise in a moment you won't feel quite so stand-offish."

"What do you mean by tha—?" Sylvie started to ask but just at that moment, Kross leaned down and sucked her right nipple into his mouth.

“Oh, Kross!” she gasped, looking at her Protector. “What...what are you doing?”

What he was doing was sucking hard—and it seemed that she could feel each deep pull on her nipple in her pussy as well.

“Kross!” she moaned and tried to push him away. “Please—we can’t do this right now!”

But Kross was clearly too far gone to reason with. He continued sucking her nipple and then he pushed her over so that she was lying on her back on the bed.

As the big Kindred leaned over her and began sucking her other nipple, Sylvie began to feel a mixture of fear and desire. She was no longer trying quite so hard to push Kross away—not that she could. He was simply too big and too strong—he could take whatever he wanted. And to her mingled horror and arousal, she found that the idea of him doing exactly that didn’t upset her as much as it had a moment ago.

Then Kross released her nipple and she gave a sigh of relief. He must have realized she didn’t want this. He must be in there somewhere, and the inner Kross—her Protector—was winning over the beastly personality that had taken over his body. He must?—

Her thoughts were cut short when Kross began to sniff his way down her body. Before Sylvie could stop him, he was pushing up the ragged hem of her plant fiber shift to get to her bare pussy.

“Kross, no!” she wailed but when he pressed his face to her pussy mound, she found that her thighs seemed to be parting on their own. Oh God, she shouldn’t be doing this—not when he was out of his mind! But somehow she couldn’t stop. Her whole body felt like it was catching fire with lust and she couldn’t resist the big Kindred.

She tried though—she squeezed her thighs closed and swore to herself that she was going to hold out...that she wasn't going to let him in...

But Kross forced his way between her legs, parting her thighs easily with his big hands. And then he leaned down to rub his scratchy cheek against the tender skin of her inner thighs, like a cat marking its territory.

“Ohhh!” Sylvie moaned as he began to rub against her pussy mound as well. But it was only when he began to lick her that she knew she was well and truly lost.

Kross growled low in his throat, his long tongue sliding into her pussy slit to invade her fully. Sylvie cried out as her hips jerked—oh God, how did he know just where to lick her, even now that he was out of his head?

She had no answer for the question but it seemed clear that even when he wasn't all there mentally, Kross had a Kindred's instincts for pleasing a woman with his tongue. He slipped it into her inner folds, sliding the tip around and around her sensitive clit until she moaned and arched her back helplessly. Then, when she was wet enough, he dipped lower and slid his tongue deep into her channel to collect her juices. Once he had done that, he came up again to suck and tease her clit some more, which made her wet all over again.

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This combination of licking and deep penetration with his tongue—which was surprisingly thick—soon had Sylvie right on the edge. She told herself she shouldn't want to come this way—shouldn't want to let the pleasure Kross was giving her overwhelm her when he wasn't even in his right mind. But God, the way he was licking her was driving her crazy and there was no way to stop him! The big Kindred had her pinned to the bed, her legs spread wide as he feasted on her at his leisure. There was literally no way to get away and to be honest, Sylvie wasn't even trying anymore.

“Please!” she moaned and found that she was tugging at his hair. “Oh Kross, please!”

He growled again—a low, hungry sound—and redoubled his efforts—licking and sucking and stroking her with his hot tongue. The last time he'd gone down on her, it had been sweet and gentle—he'd been healing her. This time there was an animal hunger in his actions—an urgency she'd never felt from him before.

It's like he's getting his mate ready to be bred! a little voice whispered in her head. And you're the mate!

Sylvie was very much afraid that the voice was right—but what could she do? She had a seven-foot-tall, immensely muscular warrior on top of her and he was clearly intent on licking her until he made her come. She was helpless under him—helpless to get away or do anything but submit and let him lick her.

“Kross,” she moaned, relaxing at last because there was no point in fighting. “Oh, Kross...”

And then she felt her orgasm overtaking her as the sensations of being teased and licked overwhelmed her with their intensity. Her climax broke and rushed over like a tidal wave, drowning her in pleasure.

“Kross!” she cried. Her hands tightened in his hair and her hips bucked helplessly as his tongue traced her clit over and over. “Oh God, Kross!”

The orgasm seemed to go on and on—mainly because the big Kindred wouldn’t stop licking her. He seemed determined to make her come as hard as possible and then to clean away all of her juices. At last, however, he looked up at her, panting.

Sylvie, also panting, stared at him uncertainly.

Her Protector’s mouth was shiny with her juices and his swirling, multicolored eyes were still wild and filled with animalistic lust. And inside herself, she felt the same lust growing.

Now that she had finished coming, she would have thought that her desire would lessen...but the opposite seemed to be happening. She was feeling an emptiness inside her—a deep need to be filled. Moaning uncomfortably, she wriggled on the bed, not sure how to ease the ache between her legs.

“You’re feeling it now, aren’t you? The effects of my lust gas.”

Barbarous’s voice startled Sylvie—she’d forgotten that the mad scientist was watching them.

“Leave me alone—go away!” she moaned, feeling her cheeks heat with shame. To think that she’d let Kross go down on her with an audience in the room! Well, not exactly in the room but the way Barbarous was watching from the screen was bad enough.

“The more you fight it, the less chance you’ll have of surviving the effects,” the mad scientist told her. “I’d advise you to let Mr. Kross breed you at once—before the urges you feel become too painful...and too deadly.”

“Painful urges...what the Hell are you talking about?” Sylvie panted.

But she was afraid she already knew. The emptiness inside her was growing—the need to be filled and fucked and bred—it was undeniable. And it really was becoming painful.

Kross seemed to sense her pain because he rubbed his cheek against her inner thigh and gave her a worried look. A low, questioning rumbling sound came from his throat. It was almost like he was asking how he could help her, Sylvie thought distractedly.

But the only way he can help is by fucking me—by breeding me!she thought. She wasn’t on any kind of birth control—she hadn’t been in a serious relationship in ages.

Isn’t it better to risk getting pregnant than to die, though?whispered that same little voice in her head.The emptiness is getting worse—admit it. You need to be filled.

And Kross seemed eager to fill her. There was a definite bulge in the tight black flight leathers he was wearing—she could see the thick ridge of his cock outlined clearly.

Sylvie bit her lip—what was she going to do? Kross was still dressed in his uniform shirt and trousers and it didn’t seem likely that he could get undressed himself. He was still in his “animal state” for want of a better term. Should she unfasten his trousers and let him take her—let him breed her?

No, she absolutely shouldn’t, she told herself. But then she felt a painful cramp between her thighs—it was almost as though her pussy was disagreeing with her.

She could stand the pain, Sylvie thought, but she wasn't willing to risk death. Kross would just have to be understanding—if he ever came back to his right mind, that was. In the meantime, she would do what she had to do to survive.

“Here, Kross. Let me...let me help you.” Her voice faltered but her fingers didn't. Reaching forward, she found the magno tabs that held his flight leathers closed and popped them open.

His cock sprang out as though it had been waiting for her. Sylvie's eyes widened when she saw its size. She'd never seen her Protector naked before—he was hung like a horse! Even though it was only half hard, his shaft was huge. The silver dildo the collection droid had fucked her with was small in comparison.

“Okay, no,” she said aloud. “No, I think this was a mistake. Let me just, uh, put this back.”

But when she took him in her hand and tried to push his shaft back in his trousers, it wouldn't go. It only got harder and longer and Sylvie also noticed something new about it. At the base of the shaft was a thick swelling.

That's right—Kross is half Beast Kindred, she remembered. This must be his Bonding Knot. Oh my God, I can't take that thing inside me—I can't take any of it! He's way too big!

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She couldn't even fit her fingers all the way around the girthy shaft. And the more she tried to push it back into his trousers, the harder and longer it got. His warm, masculine scent was stronger here too. It seemed to get into her senses and make her dizzy with desire. Why did he have to smell so good when she was trying so hard to resist him, damn it?

Kross allowed her to try for a minute longer, then he growled and wrapped his long fingers around her wrists to pull her hands away.

Sylvie felt a rush of relief mixed with regret. All right, so he was saying no to her in the only way he could. He wanted her to stop touching him, he wasn't going to let her?—

Her thoughts cut off abruptly when he turned her over so that she was on her hands and knees on the bed in front of him.

“Hey, wait a minute!” she exclaimed, turning her head to look back at him.

But Kross had waited long enough—he was ready to fuck. He opened his mouth and two words came out in a thick, guttural voice that barely sounded like him.

“Breed...now,” he growled in that low, rumbling, animalistic tone that sent shivers straight down Sylvie's spine.

“But we shouldn't!” she pleaded. Even as she spoke, though, she felt another sharp pang of emptiness shoot through her. “Ohhh!” she moaned, feeling her knees go weak as she pitched forward onto the bed. This had the effect of putting her head in her

arms and pushing her ass up into the air.

Before she could change position, she felt Kross behind her. His muscular body surrounded hers and his big hands were already on her hips and spreading her thighs, putting her into a more open position.

“Kross, no!” she moaned, but she made no move to close her thighs and she didn’t try to get away when she felt the blunt head of his cock sliding over her slippery folds. In truth, the emptiness inside was getting too painful—all she could think of was being filled.

And Kross seemed eager to fill her. After rubbing the head of his cock over her slippery clit several times, he found her entrance and began to push inside.

Sylvie bit her lip to keep from crying out. She was terribly afraid she wouldn’t be able to take the big Kindred’s massive shaft. But to her surprise, though she felt herself stretching to the limit, there wasn’t too much pain as he slid inside her.

“Oh...ohhh,” she moaned softly as she felt him bottom out inside her. She had never felt so filled in her life and her inner walls were protesting, but again, it didn’t hurt—it just felt like she was more full than she ever had been her whole life.

And then Kross gripped her hips in his big hands and began to fuck.

No, not fuck—he’s breeding me! Sylvie thought as he pulled halfway out and then thrust in again, deep and hard, the head of his cock giving the end of her channel a rough kiss with every stroke. Oh God, breeding me so hard! And he might get me pregnant!

She had only one hope—she’d heard that Bonding Sex was different with different kinds of Kindred. With Beast Kindred, they couldn’t get you pregnant unless they got

their Bonding Knot inside you. With Blood Kindred, they had to bite you, injecting their essence at the same time. So far Kross hadn't knotted her and he hadn't bitten her. So as long as he didn't do that, it should be safe to just let him fuck her.

As if she had any choice! She couldn't believe she was in this position—with her head buried in her arms and her ass in the air, thighs spread wide as her Kindred Protector rammed into her from behind, his thick cock stretching her open with every deep thrust.

With every stroke, his heavy balls slapped against her tingling clit, making her more and more certain that she was going to come again whether she wanted to or not. And there was nothing she could do to stop him—nothing she could do but submit completely. Moaning, she opened her thighs even wider, giving him what he was demanding, offering herself completely.

“Oh God, Kross!” she moaned. “Fuck me! Do it—fuck me hard!”

Her answer was a low growl and then he was thrusting even deeper inside her and something even thicker than his cock was sliding into the mouth of her pussy. Somehow, though he was already hitting bottom with every thrust, she could feel herself opening as he went even deeper.

Sylvie froze. Oh God—was that thick swelling she felt his knot? Was he going to put it in her? Was he going to knot her and tie the two of them together? If he did that, she really might get pregnant! Was there any way to stop him?

There wasn't. When Sylvie tried to pull away, Kross gripped her hips tighter and growled. Then he thrust even harder and she felt the knot enter the mouth of her pussy.

“Kross, no!” she moaned. “Oh my God, you're going to get me pregnant!”

Her only answer was another low, animalistic growl and then he was thrusting the knot in and out as his heavy balls slapped her sensitive clit.

At that moment Sylvie started to come again—she couldn't help it! The feeling of being taken and fucked—of being bred—so deep and hard while her clit was being teased at the same time was too much to endure. She could feel her orgasm coming at her, barreling down the tracks like a train that had lost its brakes and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Sylvie had never felt so helpless or so hot. She could feel her inner walls clenching around the thick invader, could feel her pussy spasm as the knot slid fully into place and began to swell inside her.

“Kross!” she wailed, as her body betrayed her utterly. “Please, you can't...can't do this!”

But he was and he wasn't going to stop until he'd gotten what he wanted and flooded her with his cum, she realized dimly. There was nothing she could do but let him have her—open herself to his cock and his seed and let him come inside her.

And then Kross leaned over and nuzzled his face in her hair. Sylvie felt his hot breath on the side of her neck and realized a moment too late what he was doing.

“Kross!” she moaned. “You can't?—”

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Too late, she felt the sharp points of his fangs. He was usually so careful with them that she hadn't felt them once either time when he went down on her. But now the animal side of him was revealed and there was no more gentleness. Sharp points pierce the side of her neck, making her gasp in pain—but only for a moment. Because the next minute his essence hit her bloodstream and she was coming again—coming so hard she could barely breathe.

Oh God—too much...too much!she thought as the second, much more intense orgasm went on and on. She could feel her inner walls milking the thick cock thrust to the hilt inside her and it was clear Kross felt it too. A moment later something hotand wet spurted from the broad head and bathed the mouth of her womb.

Sylvie had never been able to feel a human man coming inside her, but Kross was Kindred and it was clear things were different with them. Jet after jet of heated wetness filled her, making her moan as it filled her womb and pussy to overflowing. Even as it leaked down her inner thighs, Kross was pumping fresh heat inside her, fucking her, filling her,breedingher and making her his...

Oh God, too much!she thought again.He'll get me pregnant for sure! Oh please, Kross—please!

And then, to her surprise, she heard an answering voice in her head.

“Sylvia? Is that you?”

“Kross?”she sent back tentatively.“What...how can I hear you in my head?”

“I don’t know—it’s impossible for me to Bond a woman to me. What are we doing? How did this happen?” he added, sounding truly mystified as he finally withdrew his fangs from her neck. “How did I get inside you? Oh Gods—did I hurt you?”

“Nothurt exactly but you’re really big.” Sylvie shifted, groaning softly. She was still impaled on his thick shaft, the knot having swelled so that the two of them were tied together. Her pussy felt so crammed full of his shaft that she was sure it would never be the same.

“You’re in me so deep!” she moaned aloud.

“Gods, baby—I’m so fucking sorry!” He made as if to pull out, but the knot was still too big and it made Sylvie feel like he was pulling her insides out.

“No, please!” she gasped, putting a hand out to stop him. “Please don’t—that hurts!”

“So fucking sorry!” Kross repeated. “I’m afraid we’ll have to wait until my knot goes down.”

“But...but when will that be?” Sylvie protested.

“Don’t know,” he said grimly. “It could be as little as five minutes...or as long as an hour.”

“An hour? I’m supposed to have you in me for an hour?” Sylvie demanded. It wasn’t that it felt bad exactly, but now that Kross was awake and himself again, it was extremely awkward. Especially since they apparently had this new mental connection which was very strange.

“Sorry—it’s called a Soul Bond, but I still don’t know how it’s possible,” Kross sent. “I’m a Hybrid—I’m not able to Bond with anyone.”

“Think you’re wrong about that,” Sylvie sent back. She was getting used to using the new link, but it still felt strange. Almost as strange as being impaled on her Protector’s massive shaft.

“Are you uncomfortable, baby? Here...” Kross put his arms around her waist and rolled them both over onto their sides. “Was...was I very rough with you?” he asked in a low voice, speaking in her ear. “I’m sorry, I can’t remember much. But if I hurt you, I’m so fucking sorry. I never wanted to do that, Princess—never.”

Sylvie started to answer but just then, to her shock, the door of the tree prison banged open. For a moment she couldn’t see anything through the red haze of the pain walls surrounding them. But whoever it was must have slapped the button because all at once, the walls disappeared.

Standing there, framed in the doorway were two Kindred warriors with blasters in their hands.

And one of them was their boss, Commander Sylvan.

21

SYLVIE

Sylvie wanted to die. She had never been more embarrassed in her life. Here she was, literally stuck together with her coworker, caught in flagrante delicto and now their boss could plainly see what they had been doing.

“Oh my God!” She looked for something—anything—to cover up with but there was nothing. The bed didn’t have a sheet or blankets or even pillows on it—it was just a bare mattress.

She fumbled uselessly, trying to hide herself, tugging at the plant fiber shift she wore which promptly tore and disintegrated in her hands. Apparently getting it soaking wet earlier was too much for the fragile material—now she was completely naked and stuck to her coworker!

Oh my God, I can't believe this—so embarrassing! I wish I was dead! she thought, trying desperately to cover herself with her hands.

“You wish you were dead? Just because I'm knotting you?” Kross demanded and she realized he must have heard her through their new link.

“Yes—this is humiliating!” she sent back. “We're stuck together right in front of our boss! Isn't there anything you can do to make your knot go down faster? Come on—I need to get someplace and cover up!”

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“Here,” he sent stiffly and struggled briefly to get off his uniform shirt so he could drape it over her.

“Thanks, but can’t you get out of me now?” Sylvie demanded.

“I’m doing my best, Princess. It takes some time.” This time his mental voice was distinctly sarcastic, which made Sylvie bristle.

“It’s not like I’m making an unreasonable request!” she exclaimed. “Our boss is standing right there—get OUT of me!”

“Fine, Princess!” Kross growled out loud. With a convulsive yank, he pulled his shaft out of her, despite the fact that his knot was still only half-deflated.

“Ahh!” Sylvie gasped as pain lanced through her. The removal was far more painful than any of the wild sex they’d had earlier.

“Fuck! Are you all right?” Kross demanded. He sounded half worried and half angry, she thought.

“Fine. I’m fine.” She sat up and drew his shirt closer around her. She could feel his seed leaking out from between her thighs—sticky and hot and embarrassing.

Kross fastened his trousers and sat up as well. Both of them faced Commander Sylvan, who had been standing there this entire time, apparently at a loss for words.

He cleared his throat.

“Are the two of you all right?” he asked uncertainly.

“We’re fine,” Sylvie said quickly. “We were captured by Dr. Barbarous—that’s why you saw what you saw. We never...I mean, we didn’t actually want to be doing what...what we were doing. He drugged us!”

She could feel Kross’s irritation through their link—for some reason he didn’t like the way she was explaining the situation. Whatever—at this point she was trying to save their jobs!

“How did you find us?” she asked quickly, trying to keep things going and hoping Commander Sylvan wouldn’t ask any more about the awkward position he’d found them in.

“Well...” He cleared his throat again. “Er, we’ve been worried about you two on the Mother Ship since you haven’t checked in for days,” he said. “And then the Goddess spoke to me and told me you were in trouble.” His eyes swept the room. “I can see that’s true.”

“Yes, absolutely. In a lot of trouble,” Sylvie agreed.

“That bastard, Barbarous has been experimenting on us,” Kross agreed. He looked down at his arms. “Fuck—what happened to my skin? How am I all red now?”

“It had to do with the injection the droid gave you,” Sylvie told him. “Your hair has a blue tinge now, too,” she added.

“The fuck?” Kross growled, reaching up to feel his hair as though he could tell what color it was that way.

“You do look considerably different,” Commander Sylvan told him. “Did Dr.

Barbarous make any other changes in you?"

"I don't know." Kross sounded bewildered.

"He turned you animalistic for a while," Sylvie offered. "That's why we were...uh, together that way. You got all growly and started..."

She trailed off because there was real horror on her Protector's face.

"Are you saying I raped you? Goddess, Syliva!"

"Not rape exactly," she said quickly. "I mean, I wasn't totally on board with the, uh, idea but then he filled the room with lust gas and it really affected me. One thing led to another and we just..."

She trailed off, unable to think of a nice polite way to say that she'd been overcome with lust and had welcomed her Protector plowing her as hard as he could. She kept that thought strictly to herself—it was so embarrassing!

Kross seemed to be about to say something else but just then two more Kindred warriors arrived and they were dragging Dr. Barbarous between them.

"Here, Sylvan. Got the bastard just as he was running away," one of them—a huge Beast Kindred, growled.

"Thanks, Baird." Commander Sylvan nodded at the Beast Kindred warrior. "Who else is in this compound?"

"Besides all those fucking tree-men there's another hollow tree trunk filled with women," Baird told him. "They look traumatized—I think we need to take them back to the Mother Ship for medical care and therapy."

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“Let’s do it then.” Sylvan nodded. “Get everybody in the shuttles and we’ll fold space and get back to the Mother Ship as soon as possible.”

“Wait, Commander.” Kross put out a hand. “Those women...they can’t fold space. They need to be transported via wormholes back to the Mother Ship.”

“I see.” Commander Sylvan’s face went tight. “It’s like that, is it? They might be pregnant?”

“Yes, they might—any of them might be filled with new life that is half-plant!” Dr. Barbarous exclaimed, struggling against the warriors who were holding him. “Any one of them may be the mother of a whole new race—a superior race of plant-based beings!”

“Shut up, you sick fuck!” Baird growled at him. “I don’t know what you did to those poor women and I don’t fucking want to know! But I do know where you’re going—to stand trial for all your fuckery.”

“You can’t take me now! I’m so close to a breakthrough!” The mad scientist struggled in vain against the strong hands holding him. “Let me go! Let me finish my work!”

“I don’t think so,” Baird growled. “You’re coming with us.” He looked at Sylvan. “How about if I take him on ahead in my ship and you bring the women along via the wormhole route in yours?”

Sylvan nodded.

“Yes, that sounds good.”

“I’ll come with you,” Kross said, getting off the bed.

“Then I guess I will too.” Sylvie started to follow him, but he put a hand out to stop her.

“No, Princess,” he said in a low voice. “You’d better ride with the other women.”

Sylvie felt her stomach drop.

“You mean because you think I might be...” She couldn’t finish the sentence—couldn’t bring herself to say the word “pregnant.”

“Would it really be that bad if you had my baby in you?” Kross sent through their mental link.

“What do you mean would it be that bad? I’m a scientist! I never signed up to get pregnant!” Sylvie sent back in a rush of irritation. “How the hell am I going to handle a baby when I go out on missions?”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” Kross’s mental voice was stiff. “And I’m sorry for what I did—more sorry than I can say.”

“You don’t have to—” Sylvie began but he was already turning away. And when she tried to send him something else, she found that the big Kindred had erected some kind of mental barrier between them.

“Kross? Kross!” she sent but no matter how much she shouted and screamed mentally, he didn’t answer.

It was almost like they had never formed the Soul Bond in the first place and though Sylvie was still irritated with her Protector, she couldn't help feeling bereft by the deep silence that now existed between them.

22

KROSS

Kross fucking hated himself. He'd hurt her—forced her. He'd done the worst thing a male could do to any woman and he'd done it to his Fated Mate. No wonder Sylvia didn't want anything to do with him or any baby he might have planted in her belly! No wonder she'd been so eager to get him out of her!

The thought of what he'd done to the woman he loved stabbed him like a dagger in the heart. He wanted to go back to the Mother Ship where he could be punished properly.

And he knew after the punishment was done, he would leave and never see Sylvia again. How could he face her after what he'd done? Even if he hadn't been in his right mind, nothing could excuse the way he'd forced her. She would never be able to forgive him.

And he knew, sure as all the Seven Hells, he would never be able to forgive himself.

23

SYLVIE

Sylvie tried several times in the days after she got back to the Mother Ship to make contact with her Protector, but the mental block Kross had put between them remained firmly in place. It was frustrating to feel him in the back of her mind and

not be able to contact him.

Several times she thought about going to his suite to talk to him...but if he didn't want to communicate mentally, it seemed reasonable to assume he didn't want to talk face-to-face either.

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She told herself she would leave him alone and let him be for a while. Clearly what had happened between them had upset him. Maybe what he needed was time to himself.

She took an early pregnancy test in the Med Center two days after they got home and found out that she wasn't pregnant. She was surprised at the mingled feelings of relief and regret she got, holding the little white flower in the palm of her hand.

Aboard the Kindred Mother Ship, the pregnancy tests gave flowers as results. A pink flower meant a baby girl—a rare occurrence among the Kindred who were 95% male—and a blue flower meant a boy. A white flower was negative.

Sylvie kept the flower with her—though she didn't know why. She could just throw it away but somehow she wanted something to remember their encounter...even if it hadn't resulted in anything lasting. Well, other than the mental link that Kross stubbornly refused to use.

She couldn't stop thinking about how sweet the big Kindred had been to her during their captivity. How he'd healed her and comforted her and held her while she cried. He'd acted completely different...and now he wouldn't even talk to her!

She was musing about the separation between them one night about a week after getting back to the Mother Ship as she walked in the park that was at the center of the ship. The artificial green sun that powered the ship had been dimmed for the night and it gleamed softly, putting out "moonlight" that turned the purple and green grass silver.

It was late and no one else was around. Sylvie was just thinking of going back to her suite when she saw a figure in a long white robe gliding towards her over the rolling parklands.

Surprise made her freeze to the spot and she recognized the figure as one of the priestesses who served the Kindred Goddess. The priestesses lived in the Sacred Grove, which was at the very heart of the parklands. It was a small forest of green and purple trees that served as a shrine to the Goddess. Sylvie had been there once when she was attending a wedding or “Joining Ceremony” as the Kindred called it. It was beautiful inside but the priestesses rarely left, which was one reason she was so surprised to see one now.

She was even more surprised when the priestess raised an arm and waved at her. Sylvie actually looked behind her, wondering who the other woman could be waving at because she was sure it couldn’t be her. However, there was no one behind her—no one else in the entire part, that Sylvie could see—so she turned back around and waited until the priestess came to a stop in front of her.

“Daughter,” she said. “I have a warning to give you.”

In the moonlight the green streaks that all priestesses of the Goddess had looked silver and her green-within-green eyes gleamed mysteriously.

“A warning? For me?” Sylvie put a hand to her own chest uncertainly.

The priestess nodded solemnly.

“From the Mother of All Life herself,” she said, which, Sylvie knew, was another name for the Kindred Goddess.

“All right,” she said uncertainly. “What is it?”

“You are very close to losing the whom you love, though you do not know it,” the priestess told her. “The warrior that I have put aside for you is contemplating leaving—he may even go tonight. And if he does, the distance between you will eventually erode your Bond.”

“You mean Kross? He’s thinking of leaving?” Sylvie felt as though her stomach had dropped to the ground. “Really? How do you know that?” she demanded.

“The Goddess knows everything,” the priestess said gravely. “She sent me to warn you before it is too late. Will you heed her warning and seek the male she sent for you to love?”

Sylvie’s heart started pounding.

“Are you saying that Kross loves me?”

“He has always loved you, for you are his Fated Mate,” the priestess assured her. “Go and speak to him now, before it is too late and you will learn it from his own lips.”

It seemed crazy to Sylvie—other than their brief time together in the compound of Dr. Barbarous, Kross had never been anything but sarcastic and irritating towards her. But now the priestess was telling her that she was his Fated Mate, whatever that meant. Could it really be true that he cared for her?

“Will you go?” the priestess asked again, breaking into her train of thought. “The time grows short—even now he prepares to leave.”

“I’ll go—I’ll go!” Sylvie said quickly. “Er...thank you for telling me,” she added.

The priestess nodded and tucked her hands into her long sleeves.

“Go daughter and may the Goddess grant you success,” she murmured.

Sylvie nodded again and left her there, standing barefoot in the moonlight.

She hurried through the parklands, towards the tram station that would take her to Kross’s end of the huge Mother Ship. By the time she passed the clusters of restaurants and shops that ringed the lush green center area, she was almost running. If Kross really was leaving, she had to speak to him before he left. She tried to call him through their mental link, but the barrier was still in place, keeping her from getting through.

“Damn it, Kross!” she cursed under her breath. “You’d better still be there when I get to your suite!”

If he was already gone, she didn’t know what she was going to do.

24

KROSS

Kross did a last sweep of his suite to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything. It was hard, leaving the Mother Ship like this, but it was the only think he could think to do. After what he'd done to Sylvia, he didn't deserve to live in any proximity to her. So even though it wounded him deeply to leave his Fated Mate behind, he had decided to go.

Where he was headed, he didn't exactly know. He had given his notice to Commander Sylvan after a discrete inquiry to the Med Center and let him know that Sylvia was not, in fact, pregnant. His Commanding Officer had seemed both surprised and disappointed by the news.

"Are you certain about this?" he'd asked, when Kross handed in his resignation. "Have you spoken to Sylvia about it?"

Kross shook his head.

"After what happened between us, I don't think she ever wants to see me again. Not that I blame her," he added morosely.

"If it makes you feel any better at all, she hasn't lodged any kind of complaint," Sylvan had offered. "And she reiterated to me several times on our trip home that the two of you had been drugged by Dr. Barbarous. It's possible she doesn't blame you at all for what happened between you."

“If she doesn’t, she should,” Kross growled. “I took her against her will. And the way she was so eager to part from me lets me know there’s no love lost between us.”

“Do you think she might have been embarrassed?” Sylvan asked, raising one pale blond eyebrow. He was a Blood Kindred and had the blond hair and ice-blue eyes to prove it. “After all, I’m your Superior Officer and I walked in on the two of you while you were...er, stuck together.”

“It’s more than that,” Kross said moodily. “I could feel how much she wanted me out of her—away from her—through our Bond.”

Sylvna’s eyebrows shot up.

“So the two of you actually had Bonding sex? You bit her as well as knotting her?”

“Apparently so—I can’t remember,” Kross admitted. “Everything that happened is just kind of a haze up until I heard her sweet voice in my head.”

He could hear the longing in his own voice but he shut it down fiercely. He didn’t have a right to long for Sylvia anymore—not after the way he had treated her.

“She woke me up—brought me out of the weird animalistic state the drugs Barbarous shot me up with put me into,” he said, making his voice firmer. “And not long after that is when you walked in on us.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Sylvan said mildly. “We were there on a rescue mission. I never expected to see the two of you, er, engaged in Bonding sex.”

“I know you didn’t. I didn’t expect to engage in it either,” Kross had admitted. “Anyway, what’s done is done but Sylvia deserves to live her life without constantly having me at the back of her mind. So I’m going somewhere far away—someplace

where we'll be out of metal contact range."

"I understand." Sylvan nodded. "But are you certain you don't want to talk to her once more before you go?"

Kross had shaken his head firmly.

"No—that wouldn't be fair to her. She needs to heal and she can't do that if I keep popping back into her life. I'll have to let her go."

His heart felt like a stone in his chest as he said the words...and it felt like a stone now as he looked around his bare suite. Most everything he owned was packed in his long-range cruiser—he was only leaving the furniture and the appliances. He'd only come back to do one final sweep before leaving the Mother Ship for good.

Satisfied at last that he hadn't forgotten anything, Kross was just putting out a hand for the front door control...when a loud pounding on the door itself stopped him.

"Kross?" he heard a familiar voice shouting. "Kross, are you in there? Open up, God damn you!"

Surprised, he touched the controls and the silver door to his suite slid silently open. Standing on his doorstep, her hair a wild golden-red mass around her head and her eyes wide, was Sylvia. She was panting as she looked up at him and he couldn't quite read her expression.

"There you are!" she exclaimed, sounding both irritated and relieved. "I've been calling and calling—why don't you ever answer your...your...the thing—whatever it is in both our heads?" And she tapped the side of her own head for emphasis.

"The mental link?" Kross asked, raising his eyebrows. He was shocked to see her

standing there. Had she finally come to “tell him off” as the humans said? Maybe it had taken this long for her to process her trauma and now she wanted to fight about it.

Kross supposed he couldn’t blame her...though her timing was exquisitely bad.

“Yes, the link—thelink!” she exclaimed. “You put up some kind of barrier between us and you never pick up the phone! I mean, you never answer me.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to talk to me,” Kross admitted heavily. “Not after what I did.”

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“You didn’t do anything!” she snapped, shoving her way past him. “Or at least, not anything I didn’t want you to.”

This was news to Kross. He shut the door and followed her back into his mostly empty suite. Sylvia was in his living area, pacing in front of the overstuffed leather sofa. She was wearing a green dress that made her eyes look smoky in the dim light. Kross thought she had never looked more lovely but he needed to know what she meant.

“Do you mean I didn’t force you?” he asked, coming back to stand beside the couch.

“No, not exactly.” Her face was turning red, but she seemed determined to keep talking. “After the stuff Barbarous injected you with started to take effect, you started doing a few things but?—”

“Wait.” Kross held up a hand to stop her. “What things exactly? I need to know everything that happened between us. I can’t remember any of it up until the time your voice in my head woke me up.”

“Well, you, uh, sucked my nipples,” Sylvia’s face was even redder now, her cheeks rosy with a blush. “And then you got between my legs and licked me there too.”

At the memory of tasting her sweet pussy, Kross’s shaft went instantly rigid in his trousers. Gods, he loved the taste of her juices! Not to mention the sound of her moans and sighs and the feeling of her small fingers pulling her hair as she bucked her hips to meet his tongue...

“Mmm, I did, did I?” he growled, giving her an interested look as he settled on the couch. “And then what?”

“Then he gassed me—with that awful cotton candy gas,” Sylvia explained. She had stopped pacing and was just standing there, her hands balled into fists and her face pink with embarrassment. “He told me that if I didn’t let you, you know, breed me that I would have painful urges. So painful that they could kill me.”

“So you...?” Kross raised his eyebrows, waiting to hear the rest.

“So I unfastened your trousers,” she admitted in a low, embarrassed voice. “I mean, I really was in pain. And you couldn’t do it yourself—you were in ‘animal mode,’”

“So you let me breed you?” Kross could barely believe it. He was half relieved and half angry. “All this time I thought I’d forced you! I’ve been fucking hating myself, Princess,” he growled.

“Have you?” Sylvia looked stricken. “I’m so sorry! I tried to contact you, but you weren’t picking up on our link.”

“Yes, well—I didn’t think you really wanted to talk to me,” Kross said, looking away. “I thought you must hate me and I didn’t blame you.”

“I don’t hate you!” Sylvia came to stand between his legs. “In fact, I think ...I think I might love you, Kross,” she said in a low voice.

Kross felt his heart stutter in his chest.

“Are you serious?” he asked, his voice coming out hoarse and uncertain. “But the way you acted—you wanted me out of you, you couldn’t wait to get away?—”

“Our boss walked in on us while we were tied together like a couple of dogs in heat!” she exclaimed. “Of course I was embarrassed and wanted you out of me. I mean, it was sounprofessional.”

Kross didn’t know whether to laugh or be irritated. But her words kept coming back to him.

“So now that I know I didn’t force you, go back to what you said before, Princess,” he told her.

“What I said before?” she looked at him uncertainly.

“You know? About loving me?” Kross took her hands in his and looked at her hopefully. Their height difference was so great that they were almost eye-to-eye, even with him sitting and her standing. “Did you mean it?” he asked.

Her cheeks went pink all over again.

“You said it to me too, you know,” she said, slightly defensive. “When you were under the influence of that injection Barbarous gave you. You told me you loved me—that you’vealwaysloved me.”

Kross decided to risk everything.

“I do, baby,” he said honestly. “And I have always loved you—you’re my Fated Mate. I just didn’t think I could ever Claim you because I’m a Hybrid.”

“Fated Mate?” Her eyes went wide. “That’s what the priestess said.”

“What priestess?” Kross frowned.

“I don’t know her name.” Sylvia shook her head. “She came to me when I was walking in the park just now and told me you were about to leave and I needed to go see you before it was too late.” She nibbled her lower lip. “It’s not too late, is it, Kross? Please say it’s not.”

“Of course not, Princess...” He drew her down into his lap so that she was straddling him and kissed her gently. “You got to me just in time,” he murmured. “I was just about to leave the Mother Ship for good.”

“Without even saying goodbye?” She looked incensed.

Kross shrugged.

“I thought you never wanted to see me again. So after I found out you weren’t pregnant, I decided to leave so you wouldn’t have to have me in the back of your head. I was going to go somewhere outside the bounds of our mental link.”

“I don’t want you to go anywhere,” she said softly. “And I wish you’d remove the barrier you put between us. I want you in the back of my head, Kross.”

“All right.” Kross reached into his mind and tried to dislodge the barrier...only to find that he couldn’t. It felt like a door in his mind that was stuck closed somehow, though he couldn’t say exactly how or why.

“What’s happening? I still can’t hear you,” Sylvia complained. “I want to hear your voice in my head again, Kross—I miss it.”

Kross shrugged.

“I’m sorry, Princess—it won’t budge. I feel like I’m trying to open a door but there’s a heavy weight behind it.”

She looked stricken.

“So...that’s in then? Our Bond is broken before we even got to use it?”

“Not broken, exactly,” Kross said quickly. “Just...dysfunctional.” He frowned. “Honestly, I don’t know how we even formed it in the first place. I’ve never been able to Bond with a woman before—I thought it was impossible.”

Sylvia looked thoughtful.

“Do you think it might have something to do with the way Dr. Barbarous manipulated your DNA? I mean, you still have the red skin and blue hair.” She gestured to him. “Maybe he also inadvertently ‘fixed’ the part of you that made Bonding with a woman impossible.”

“That’s possible,” Kross said, nodding. It had been difficult getting used to his new “look” but when he considered that it was an outcome of the DNA manipulation that had allowed him to Bond with his Fated Mate, it seemed like a small price to pay.

“So if it was possible for us to Bond once, it should be possible to do it again,” Sylvia said.

“Bond again?” Kross frowned at her. “You mean you want to?—”

“Have Bonding sex. Right now.” She wiggled against him and he was suddenly aware of how her soft little pussy was pressing against his crotch and her full breasts were nearly in his face.

“Mmm, baby—are you serious?” he growled, putting his hands on her hips.

Sylvia nodded.

“Didn’t you say you didn’t remember anything from the first time?”

“It’s all a blur,” Kross admitted.

“Then we should do it all over again. Maybe it will ‘unstick’ the door that’s keeping us from communicating mentally.” She sounded so reasonable Kross couldn’t deny her. Also, the way she was looking at him, from under her long lashes and the feeling of her soft, warm body pressed against his own was making his shaft so hard he could feel it straining against his trousers.

“That sounds good to me, Princess,” he growled. “How do you want to do it?”

“I’ll tell you how—this time I want to be in charge.” She arched an eyebrow at him. “Last time I was pretty much helpless, so I want to call the shots this time around.”

Kross felt his cock surge even more. He fucking loved it when his Princess got bossy!

“Sure, baby,” he growled. “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

“First of all, hands at your sides,” she ordered.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Kross took his hands off her hips and put them at his sides.

Sylvia frowned.

“You know I hate when you call me that! In fact, I think it calls for a punishment.”

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“Awhat?” Kross’s eyebrows shot up—he hadn’t seen this coming!

“A punishment,” Sylvia repeated.

Then, to his surprise, she rose to her feet, standing on the couch cushions. Still facing him, she lifted the skirt of her green dress, revealing white lace panties.

“Kiss me.” Her voice was slightly breathless and her cheeks were flushed. “Kiss my panties, Kross. That’s your punishment.”

Kross couldn’t believe his luck—only a thin panel of sheer lace was separating her sweet, soft pussy from his hungry tongue.

“Yes, Princess,” he growled and reached up to grab her hips again and pull her towards him.

“Uh-uh.” Sylvia slapped his hands away. “Keep your hands at your sides. You’ll get what I give you—understood?”

Kross felt yet another surge—gods if she kept this up, his cock was going to wear a hole in the fabric of his trousers!

“All right,” he murmured. “I’ll wait for you then.”

He didn’t have to wait for long. Before he knew it, Sylvia was leaning towards him, pressing her soft, lace-covered pussy mound against his face.

Her sweet scent was fucking intoxicating! Kross rubbed his face against her eagerly, wanting to mark her as his own as he inhaled deeply. Gods, he couldn't wait to invade her with his tongue!

And why should he wait, he reasoned? The lace panel was thin and narrow. He could just slip his tongue in on the side to get a taste of her sweet juices.

He did exactly that, finding a way in and slipping his tongue deeply into her slit.

"Oh!" Sylvia gasped, looking down at him in surprised pleasure. When she saw what he was doing, Kross thought she might scold him at first. But then the tip of his tongue found the tight little button of her clit and she moaned and her hips jerked again. "Oh, Kross!" she exclaimed. "Is that what you want?"

Kross didn't have to answer because she was already reaching down to pull the lace panel to one side. She spread her thighs wider and suddenly he had full access to her tender flesh.

Goddess, she tasted good! Kross lapped her eagerly, sliding his tongue from the bottom of her slit all the way up to tease her clit again.

Sylvia moaned and threaded her small fingers through his hair. She pulled him forward with surprising force and Kross licked her more deeply, sliding his tongue low to gather her salty-sweet juices before teasing her clit again.

"Oh, Kross!" Her soft, throaty moans made him feel like he might come in his fucking trousers! Forgetting that he was supposed to be keeping his hands at his sides, he grabbed for her generous hips and tugged her forward.

Burying his face between her thighs, he lost himself in her.

## SYLVIE

“Oh...oh, my God!” Sylvie moaned. The feeling of the big Kindred’s tongue deep in her pussy sent shivers of pleasure down her spine and through her entire body. She loved how he was gripping her hips in his big hands and basically feasting on her, as though he couldn’t get enough.

She’d never had a man go down on her like Kross did. Oh, she’d had a few partners who were willing to “go downtown” back before she swore off dating, but it always felt like something they were doing as a favor—just a prequel to the main event of sex. With Kross, she got the feeling that going down on her was the main event.

But as good as it felt, she wanted more—she wanted to feel him inside her again, stretching her inner walls with his thickness. She wanted to take him deep—even his knot. The feeling of being so thoroughly penetrated was one thing she hadn’t been able to forget about their last sexual encounter and she wanted it again.

“Kross!” she moaned, tugging at his hair. “Kross, I want you in me—can’t...can’t wait anymore!”

It took a while to get his attention—he was so into teasing and tasting her and every time he swirled his tongue around her clit, Sylvie nearly lost her train of thought. Finally, though, she managed to tug his head up so she could look down into his changeable eyes, which were glowing reddish-purple with lust.

“Gods, baby, you taste so fucking good,” he growled hoarsely. His mouth was wet with her juices. “I could taste you all night!”

“But I don’t want you to,” Sylvie said breathlessly. “I want you in me, Kross—but you

have to sit still and let me take you—not the other way around.”

His eyes flashed but as before, he seemed to like it when she got bossy.

“As you wish, Princess,” he murmured. He spread his hands. “I’m at your service. Use me however you want to.”

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“I will.” Sylvie took a moment to take off her panties completely—they were only going to get in the way. Then she sank to her knees and began tugging at the maggotabs that held his trousers in place. She was pleased when they popped open easily, releasing his long, thick shaft.

Without hesitation, she took it in her hand and began rubbing it against her open pussy, moaning as it stroked against her heated clit.

“Gods, baby!” Kross growled hoarsely. “I can feel how wet your little pussy is! Come on and put me in you—need to feel your heat wrapped around me!”

“And I need...need to feel you inside me,” Sylvie panted.

She slid the broad head of his cock from her clit down to the entrance of her pussy. With a little moan, she felt him slip inside her. And then, with one upward thrust of his hips, she was impaled on him completely, with only his thick knot outside her pussy.

“Ohhhh!” Sylvie gasped, throwing back her head. She could feel her inner walls stretching to take him and it felt so good to have her lover so deep inside her again. It was that same sensation she’d been missing ever since their last sexual encounter—the feeling she’d been craving.

“Gods, look at you take me so deep,” Kross growled and she saw that he was looking down at the place they were joined. “Such a good girl to take my cock so deep in your pussy, Princess!”

His words made her hot all over again, but she was still in charge here, she told herself.

“Maybe I should say you’re a ‘good boy’ for filling me up so nicely.” She arched an eyebrow at him challengingly.

“Mmm, like this you mean?” he growled and thrust up into her again. This time Sylvie felt his knot go halfway into her pussy before he pulled out again.

“Yes, Kross—like that!” she moaned. “Oh God, fuck me! Take me! Bond me to you all over again.”

“I thought it was you taking me, Princess,” he rumbled and thrust up into her again.

Sylvie buried her hands in his blue-tinged silver hair and dragged him forward for a frantic kiss.

Kross growled hungrily and kissed her back. She could taste her own secret flavor on his lips, which only made her hotter somehow. Kissing him even more deeply, she rode him hard, grinding herself against him as his cock skewered her again and again and again...

She didn’t know how long the thrusting went on—it felt like forever as he fucked deep inside her, filling her completely and stretching her inner walls to the limit. But finally, just as she knew she was getting close to coming, she felt the thick knot lodge deep inside her and begin to swell.

“Kross!” she moaned, breaking their kiss and digging her nails into his broad shoulders. “I’m close...so close!”

“Then let me help you, Princess,” he growled. And baring his fangs, he sank them into the side of her throat.

The minute his essence hit her bloodstream, Sylvie began to come. The pleasure rushed over her like a waterfall, filling her whole body with sparks of light until she felt like she was flying. And as her inner walls clenched around his thickness, she felt Kross coming too—shooting jet after jet of hot wetness deep into her pussy.

It occurred to her, dimly, that he might really be getting her pregnant this time. But somehow she didn't care. She couldn't care about anything but the feeling of being fully and completely filled by the man she loved and wanted to be with forever.

“Want to be with you forever too, Princess,” she heard Kross growl. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.” And this time his voice was coming from inside her head.

Sylvie felt a surge of pure joy.

“Kross—is that you?” she sent.

His mental chuckle was as warm as his arms around her.

“Who else would it be? As far as I know, I’m the only one having Bonding sex with you, baby.”

“Then it worked!” Sylvie sent back. “It really worked! We’re Bonded again!”

“Stronger than ever,” Kross agreed. Pulling her close to his chest, he kissed her until she was breathless. “And now that I finally have you, my Fated Mate, I’m never fucking letting you go!”

“I’m never letting you go, either,” Sylvie promised, snuggling against him.

She felt a surge of love and gratitude—thank the Goddess she had listened to the priestess and come to see him before it was too late! But she had a feeling that this wasn't the only time the Mother of All Life had taken a hand in her relationship with

Kross. After all, if they'd never gone on that last mission together and been captured by Dr. Barbarous, they wouldn't have been able to Bond at all.

She owed her happiness and the love she now shared with Kross to divine intervention and a strange twist of fate. After all, if they'd never gone on the mission to find the tangeline vine, they never would have been Bonded because they were... Forced to Mate by the Mad Scientist.

THE END?

OF COURSE NOT!