



Kryxis

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Description: He's ruining her mission, disrupting her plans, and making it impossible to escape. Worst of all, she can't shake the feeling that he's not just toying with her—he's courting her.

Dani has spent her life following the rules. All she wants is to earn her blue suit, make it to the science sector, and prove she's more than a collector sent to scavenge artifacts from dead worlds.

She just has to survive this one last mission.

But the planet isn't as empty as it should be. Something is stalking her in the ruins—fast, relentless, and far too intelligent. A deadly alien with sharp instincts, strange features, and an unsettling fixation on her. They're ruining her mission at every turn, and she's certain they want to harm her. Or worse.

Kryxis has spent his life in solitude, a predator feared by all. And he prefers it that way. But lately, the silence has grown hollow. He craves something more—someone to share his den, his hoard, his hunger.

Then a ship arrives. And with it, her.

The human is fearless, reckless, and utterly captivating. At first, he thinks he'll devour her. But now? Now he's determined to claim her, to prove he's more than a monster in the dark—he's a warrior worthy to be her mate.

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BEFORE

Kryxis

The cry came from afar. A piercing howl, echoing off metal and rock. It started as a yelp then turned into a long drone, a call.

Kryxis crouched on the roof of a metal ruin, his head tilting toward the sound. Something hunted nearby. As he scanned the area below, he saw movement in the dark, along the side of one broken wall.

An itch started at the back of his neck, that instinctual need to leap off the roof and go hunting for the thing that hunted others. Stalk it, observe it, make it think it heard him one way when he approached it from the opposite side. Seeing the creature bark in surprise or watching its eyes widen in terror when it realized he was right there was an amusing game.

Or in those rare times he was hungry, he'd take a bite. But usually, the things that hunted other things tasted awful.

As the shadow of the creature slithered away, he remained crouched, his tail sliding to one side with impatience.

Bored.

He was bored.

His gaze shifted across the tops of crumbling buildings, a burial ground of stone and metal. To the east was a green cloud rolling slowly down one hillside.

He'd counted the many cycles he'd been here but didn't remember much of his time in this strange, forgotten place, save for the small moments where a memory slipped through the cracks, something setting it off—a bright light, a strange sound, a familiar smell. He'd jerk away from the memory like that of a painful jab right between the eyes. And he let the memory slip away. A moment long past in his youngling years, where all he saw was metal. Metal that hurt to touch.

Fuzzy but annoying memories.

Still, all he knew was this place, his home. His kingdom, where he hunted, and played, and created. Where he had only himself because the other creatures were either too scared or too unintelligent to make a friend.

It was growing lonely here.

If only he had someone to hunt with. To play with. To share a meal. To speak and listen to.

For many nights, this hadn't even occurred to him. He was so happy to be free to do as he liked; to have no one and nothing stand in his way. Now, the excitement was beginning to dull.

He let out a growl of frustration. A furry little creature skittered too close, and he hissed at it, making it bolt. He tugged on one of his horns, black fangs slipping from his upper lip.

Maybe he would go break something instead. Break everything in his path just because he could.

How he wished he wasn't alone.

Letting out a slow breath, he rose and went to hop off the roof to go skulking into the dark when something sparked like fire above him. His eyes shot up to the brilliant sky above, to the blue planets hovering.

Through the rocks and debris floating past, he saw it. A ship. Orange and pink fire streamed behind as it hit the atmosphere. Far above, a much larger ship from which the smaller one must have come floated along the dark. His eyes followed the smaller ship as it fell toward the ground.

It was going to land here. Not far away. He watched its light like a beacon in the night. His eyes widened, his body trembling with excitement. His mouth thinned as the dull ache in his hearts faded.

Finally, someone had come.

Finally, something new to play with.

He leapt off the building and started for the ship.

CHAPTER ONE

Dani

The ship shook, causing the orange lights along the walls to flicker. Dani didn't so much as flinch or gasp at the turbulence or tighten her hands around the handles of her seat like she used to on her first dozen trips. Instead, she took the moment to examine her crew.

Six in total. Most had their heads bowed or tilted back, eyes closed, waiting to feel

the ship slow as it reached the ground. Only Morse and Phen had their eyes open. Morse stared down at the ground with his teeth bared as if trying not to get sick, and Phen stared up at the twinkling lights like they were the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

Myrell cursed softly beside them, her hand plunging into her suit pocket as she gripped something within. Tom smirked next to her, humming softly. Sheek—barely fitting in her seat—hardly stirred, while Lex snored with their head on Sheek's arm.

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Dani watched them, pushing down her anxiety. She took a deep breath, shifting her eyes over to the cockpit, beyond the faceless scibot pilots to the dark windowpane. She couldn't see the ground yet, but she knew what to expect. A dreary world. With the ruins of some city built by a company that had decommissioned and abandoned it some time ago.

Just like the many others she'd gone to, down to collect the remnants of these lost cities—machines, energy resources, expensive tech, sometimes even weapons. Things that were left behind but later wanted back, either for spare parts or to recycle or to sell. The cities were built to mine resources and make products until something made them stop, leaving everything behind.

Usually, it was funding. Sometimes it was because of an unknown disaster. The report for planet X110 didn't make it fully clear, just that it had been abandoned some years ago.

Dani straightened in her seat as the ship began to slow down. It didn't matter, really. A job needed to be done, and she'd get it done, so help her.

And when you do, you'll be wearing the blue suit in no time, she said silently to herself.

She glanced down at her orange one, making her and the others look like they were wearing prison uniforms, only more durable with belts and several pockets. On her right wrist was her garometer. It reported life on this world, so she could collect more than the artifacts they were assigned to find. That excited her at least.

Yes, they'd get back in record time, she'd collect some samples along with the artifacts, and then...

She closed her eyes and took another slow breath.

Then she'd be moving up to the science sector. Nadine promised. The heads agreed.

"You've done good work, Dani," Nadine had said several days ago, smirking at her from the opposite side of the conference room table where they sat. Around her had been five other company heads in their sleek black uniforms. Those whomanaged over the lower ranks. They had nodded in agreement. "You proved yourself on that last run, despite the unfortunate events."

By unfortunate events, Nadine meant the death of their collection leader. He'd mistakenly opened a vault door inside a lab which had been pressurized from inside by lethal gas. As soon as he opened it, the blast took down half the building, taking their collection leader out with it. They said his body shattered into a thousand pieces like glass. His blood vaporized.

Thankfully, she and her crew hadn't been inside. Because their collection leader thought he could make a quick run in despite the risk.

This wasn't anything new for the collectors. Danger was part of the job. Out of all the sectors, it was the most lethal, with more deaths than any other in their company. Even with the drones and a security team, accidents happened. A lot.

Once their collection leader was gone, she knew someone had to step up for the remainder of the mission. Without hesitating, she started directing the others, grabbing what they could find and getting out of there before anyone could panic.

Showing that kind of leadership in a stressful situation was a straight ticket to

meeting with the heads at the top. And getting a chance at promotion. When asked where, Dani had one answer.

“The science sector would welcome you,” Nadine said. “And you’d be given rank as junior officer to start. But we still need a little more from you. This was just one incident, after all. We are going to assign you and your team to a new mission and give you the reins.” With the tap of her finger, the table lit up, showing planet X110. “We were just contracted by Marityne Industries. They want us to go to one of their company cities near the Iron Belts. A little off the radar for a resource world like this, and it’s been abandoned for some time. There are several materials they want us to retrieve, including cryo-batteries, a datachip, and storage capsules among other things. Complete this run and we’ll give you a spot on the science team.”

Finally. Where she should have been placed. Just like her mother, a head scientist many years ago. The one place where she could really prove her skills. Prove her father and siblings wrong. Prove to the others what she was made of. Prove to the organization that she was as dedicated as anyone could be.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the slogan along the ship’s wall.

NEXACOR. REBUILDING WORLDS.

Nexacor went to these decommissioned worlds in hopes of repairing them. They’d collect data and materials companies wanted to recover before scraping the rest and working on cleaning it and making it new. Even re-terraforming. They could make farming worlds instead, or reserves. Turn these metal and stone graveyards into something tangible.

Most had potential to be rebuilt. Only some had to be left to rot. Usually, a demolition team came down to destroy the cities after collectors scraped what they could.

“It’s always for the best,” her mother had said once. “A clean, better world, without all the toxic, ugly things.”

“Be careful on this world, though, Dani,” Nadine said after the meeting. “We don’t want another incident like before.”

No, definitely not.

She glanced around at her crew and saw Morse’s drool starting to slide off his chin onto the floor. The poor drogin really should be with the mechanics on the main ship. Even with his canine-like face, she could see how pained he was, his nose scrunched, dark wolfish eyes staring angrily at the ground.

She heard a low chuckle to her right and turned her gaze toward the back of the ship where four soldiers sat, dressed in armored gear, guns on their laps.

The security team was to patrol and nothing more. One thing that came about with collecting, even in a dead city, was the risk of infestation—bugs mostly, and rodents, some growing as large as a child. But other things tended to find their way in the cities too, usually from tradeships.

It was always a fifty-fifty on how bad. Sometimes the infestations were sparse, and other times it was like a plague.

Shifting in her seat, she studied the soldiers talking softly to one another. They wore the Nexacor insignia on their breast plates, a sunrise with four stars above. One soldier, grinning ear to ear, pointed his hand like a gun and pretended to shoot something. He made a crazed face, his eyes rolling back, his body shaking, as if reenacting someone or something dying by electric shock. The others laughed.

Dani looked away, gaze returning to the sign on the wall.

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Don't think about any of the dozen worst case scenarios you've heard of or witnessed, she thought. Everyone is going to be fine. You got this.

The ship made one last jolt as the rockets underneath ignited. Dust and smoke blanketed the windows.

When the ship finally grounded, it let out a slow hiss of decompressed air followed by a dull thud. A soft bell rang overhead as the main lights flashed on. That was everyone's cue to unlatch from their seats.

Rising from her seat, Dani looked at the time on her garometer, set to the cruiser's standards. 6:00 AM.

They had twelve hours by shiptime to complete their task. As the dust settled and she looked out the window, she could see it was nighttime where they'd landed. X110, from what she learned, had an eighteen-hour cycle—or day by the old Earthen clock.

Confusing to be sure for those not used to being off the ship and working on different worlds constantly. But she'd grown accustomed to it.

"Fucking hell," Myrell grumbled as she slowly got up from her seat. Even Dani heard her bones cracking in her knees and back. "I need my skeleton replaced stat."

"You're in luck," Tom said as he readjusted the collar of his suit. "Marityne Industries used to make synthetic limbs and body parts for amputees and soldiers. Really good cybernetic enhancements using special metal alloy they mined here from the—"

“Save the speech, Tom.” Myrell sighed as she stretched, wagging her head as her graying silver hair got in her face. “I don’t want to hear it this early.”

Tom shrugged, his baby-blue eyes much more awake and excited than the rest. “Just thought you’d like to know. You might just find a spare cybernetic skeleton somewhere. I’d be happy to look for you.”

She snorted. “Sure. Thanks, Tom.”

Close to them, Sheek elbowed Lex to wake up. Lex’s snore turned into a snort and then a groan as Sheek attempted to place them upright before standing. Phen had finally focused away from the lights to pat Morse gently on the back as he lurched in a metal box found under his seat. Poor guy forgot to take his motion sickness meds again.

The soldiers at the back took up their helmets and guns and filed out toward the stairs to ground level. One caught her eye and winked before disappearing.

Dani cleared her throat and brought up her wrist, tapping on her garometer. They had already been debriefed on X110 about its atmosphere, weather patterns, and environment. But her garometer kept readings in real time in case of any changes.

Oxygen levels were stable, but there was a rolling smog that tended to come through every so often from some unknown source. And then there were the dust storms. Best to gear up.

Dani took a deep breath. All right, time to get this show going.

Taking out a pillbox from one pocket, she plucked out a little yellow pill. She waited for Morse to stop puking before handing him the pill along with his canteen which she slipped from his belt. Morse took them and popped the pill, chugging the water.

She patted him on the back before turning to the others.

“Everyone else okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” most of them replied.

Lex was still snoring, now sitting upright with their head back, mouth wide open. Dani went over and shook them gently, then pinched them when they didn’t respond.

“Ow!” They jumped awake with a start.

“Time to go, Lex.”

“All right, all right.” They rubbed their head of short black hair.

The crew made their way down to storage and started preparing. The soldiers were already outside, scoping the area. A couple shots were heard, and a few of the group flinched as they were putting on their helmets.

Either the soldiers were target practicing or they found something already. That was enough to put them more on edge.

While the team geared up, Dani stared at herself in the small mirror stuck to her locker, helmet in her hands. Two dark-brown locks fell in waves on either side of her face while the rest was pinned up tight against her head. Honey-colored eyes stared back as she willed herself not to see the tension in them, only the determination. On her left breast was Alveraz, her mother’s last name, not her father’s, even if he was a captain and everyone knew that she was his daughter.

Some might have wondered why she was placed with the orange suits instead of black. Why she wasn’t up in the ranks with her siblings. But those who knew

understood.

A bastard child didn't get the blessing of nepotism within Nexacor. Especially when one of the VPs was her father's resentful wife.

Dani inhaled slowly. The science sector was the second highest rank. It was good enough for her. At least she could make it on her own unlike her half brothers and sister.

She slipped on the helmet and locked it into place. Little lights along the sides turned on, and fresh air seeped in from the small tanks connected to her suit.

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Dani slipped her stunner gun in the holster at her belt then clipped on a few necessary tools around the other side.

She waited for the others to be ready. Lex and Phen took their time—Lex, because they were still trying to wake up. Phen, because something on her gloves was fascinating her, her large black eyes staring down at them as her antenna twitched. Myrell was taking generous swigs from her canteen—not filled with water, Dani knew—before putting on her helmet, while Morse grumbled over a few pieces of equipment. Tom stood ready by the door, talking to Sheek about the difference between cryo-batteries and lithium ones as Sheek struggled to lock in her helmet.

Dani went over and helped her, having to stretch up on her toes to get the helmet over the grex's head. Sheek hissed in thanks, her reptilian face visible through the glass.

Fifteen minutes later, they were finally ready, with suits on, packs over their shoulders, and carrier drones at their sides. Before Dani opened the large bay door, she stood in front of them.

“You know the drill. If you see anything useful outside the list of artifacts, report it to me. If it's useful, bring it back as long as it doesn't wear you down. Tom, I'm looking at you. If you see anything interesting, record it. Let's make this a clean run,” she said, forcing on a smile.

Lex raised their hand half-heartedly, dark eyes still filled with sleep. “Do we get a long break this time?” they asked, their voice crackling with static inside Dani's helmet.

“If all goes well, at the halfway point.”

Tom raised his hand next. “Can I at least grab any cargo pods I see? They are very useful for storing lithium grade medical machinery and are very—”

“No.”

He dropped his hand, bowing his head.

“Anything else?” she asked.

Phen rose hers next, enthusiastically. “Can I use the flamethrower again?”

Dani was about to say, “No”, then remembered the last infestation they dealt with and how handy the thrower had been. “Maybe,” she said.

Phen’s one look of emotion was her eyes blinking. Her antenna, too hard to see under her helmet, were probably trembling. Luma weren’t known to show much more emotion than that.

When no one else spoke, Dani turned and pulled down the latch to the bay door. As it slid open, a greenish fog spilled inside and around their feet.

“Look alive, people,” Myrell spoke as they made their way outside, treading carefully.

The planet wasn’t as cold as it looked. It was, in fact, a little balmy. The star which the planet circled might be dimmer than some, but it was close enough for X110 to feel the heat. That along with the heat generators used to terraform kept it warmer. The smog which they treaded through was thick but low to the ground. Dani searched across and saw the buildingssurrounding them, some towering, some split and

crumpling down the sides. Others were nothing more than dark giants in the distance.

A monorail sat in its station nearby, one side bent, dark windows crushed. Wires hung from the rails and along pillars like dozens of snakes. The ship's harsh light cast shadows across the landing area, making everything more ominous in the dark. Lights on her helmet beamed a few feet in front as she led them along the other side of the ship where security now grouped.

They were laughing again, one soldier pointing his gun at a statue several yards away in a small courtyard—a faceless stone man with four arms, two of which looked to be made of silver, reaching out to the sky. There were several bullet holes along the statue's torso and a few across his head.

The soldier fired a few more rounds, catching the statue along the shoulder and head, blowing off a chunk of its face.

They laughed some more until their laughter died once they saw her and her team.

“Area is clear,” one soldier remarked. She couldn't see their faces through their helmets like she could her team—their eyes were obscured by dark lenses and their mouths covered by filters. But she imagined they were smirking at her.

Dani glanced at the statue then back at them and pursed her lips. She turned to her crew. “Myrell, the map?”

Myrell took out a small tablet from a side pocket and brought up a grid of the area for them all to see.

“We start on the west side and work around,” Dani said, pointing to a cluster of buildings. “We pick up what we need in the manufacturing sector then turn north to the labs.”

“Looks like the main passage to one of the buildings is blocked,” Myrell noted.

“We’ll get around it another way. Here.” Dani traced a passage a few flights up then to a bridge.

The others didn’t argue. She turned back to security. “Can you scan the buildings?”

One soldier took out a small black orb and threw it into the air. The orb dropped a little then stopped. A red light shined along its surface. It circled a few times then flew off. The soldier checked his wristpad and tapped on the screen.

“Tristan and I will stay around the ship,” said one soldier, patting his buddy next to him. He had a red X on his helmet, while his buddy had a black star. The one who was scanning the area had a heart, and the fourth—who’d fired his gun at the statue—had a smiley face with x’s for eyes.

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At least she could tell them apart if it mattered.

A slight breeze kicked up wisps of smog at their feet. With it came the smell of copper and burnt rubber. Sheek broke from the group and raised her head.

“Strange...” she hissed. “Do you smell that?”

Morse tilted his head back and grunted. “Odd thing to smell,” he mumbled.

“The copper?” Dani asked.

“Must be the burnt wires,” Tom said.

Sheek shook her head. “No. Smells like that brown liquid humans crave so much that tastes like shit, especially when burned.”

Dani frowned. “Coffee?”

“I don’t smell anything,” Lex said.

“Me neither,” said Myrell.

“You wouldn’t,” stated Tom. “Humans’ sense of smell isn’t as good as otherkin. It must be too far away for us to sense.”

“But close enough for me,” said Sheek, turning toward a set of buildings to the east.

“You’re sure that’s what you smell?” Dani searched across the dark.

“I have to smell that smell every day in the break area. I’m sure.”

“What do you think it is?” asked Lex, suddenly more alert. “A chemical or something that’s giving off a similar odor?”

“I don’t know,” Sheek said. “But it’s getting stronger.”

A sudden shrill noise sounded far off in the distance. Almost like a cry or a shrieking howl. A chill ran down Dani’s spine.

“Welp, that settles that we aren’t alone,” said Myrell.

The soldier with the X on his helmet stepped forward, aiming his gun with the light attached to the top of it toward the dark.

“Ryatt, anything?”

The soldier with the scanner shook his head. “No movement around the buildings or up top. Could be inside.”

The soldier with the smiley face cocked his gun then aimed it toward the entrance of the buildings. A burst of flame came from the pointed end of the gun, brightening the area in warm orange light.

Nothing but shadows moved along the walls.

Didn’t matter. They knew how to deal with bugs and rats. If there was anything else, surely it was nothing too threatening. Nothing they couldn’t handle.

She started off toward the west gate. “Let’s get going. We need all the time we have.”

CHAPTER TWO

Dani

The manufacturing sector was a labyrinth of warehouses and rooms with all kinds of machinery, some as small as Phen—the shortest of the crew—others as large and as towering as the ship outside. There were assembly lines where materials were made, prosthetics of every kind—Marityne Industries’ signature product. In long rows, metal arms and limbs hung from wires and chains, abandoned. Just as Tom had predicted, there was a line of metal and plastic skeletons, all sizes and shapes depending on the species.

“There’s several human ones to choose from, Myrell.” Tom pointed at one hanging. “You could even grow a couple inches.”

“Haha,” Myrell commented as she eyed it. “I’ll pass.”

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They made their way through without touching anything. Several times, someone had to pull Phen away to keep her with the group so she didn't stop and stare.

There wasn't much else to note. Just the sight of empty workstations, offices, and security rooms, computers collecting dust, and the floor littered with debris. Coffee mugs sat molding where they were left behind on desks. Lockers were still stuffed with jackets and bags. It was as if the workers had gone quickly from this place, not having the time to take anything with them.

There was no sign of life until they got deeper in. The evidence of creepy crawlies started with dried up hives in the corners then of dead husks and shells of bodies. After passing through the first sector, they heard them skittering.

"Bugs," said Ryatt near the back, shining the light of his gun along the ceiling and walls.

The hives looked small, but that didn't mean there weren't bigger ones lurking within. Dani brought up her garometer to check.

The screen on her wrist displayed a set of data, first detecting energy levels within the distance of a large room. The garometer had been her mother's, a tool she used to detect the presence of plants, but it could scan for all energy sources, ranging from the small levels given off by flora to the energy levels of the crewmen around her.

If the energy levels were no lower than a one or two, it was likely nothing more than plant-life. Three or four meant something like rats or bugs. Five or six meant something larger but could still be nothing more than giant pests. She and her crew

were around the seven and eight marks. Anything higher than that might be something to worry about.

The highest she'd ever seen was ten. It had been on a small planet inside an industrial city. They were collecting hydrogen cells when a giant creature with long arms and claws had somehow hidden itself within the walls. They had to send back-up because it ate one of their security officers. Snatched him up right in front of them, munching on the man's head like a candy bar, slurping up his brains.

Not something she wanted to ever see again.

Adjusting the garometer's settings so it didn't detect just her crew, Dani waited as it scanned the area while they walked from one room to the next. The little device made a soft crackling noise, growing louder as they approached another doorway.

The officer ahead of them shoved the door open, and they saw several bugs shrink away from the light.

Energy levels were around the four and five marks. Not bad but if there were a lot of them it could be a problem. The officer went through first and set his torch on them and they disappeared through the vents.

They snuck across the wide hallway beyond until they came to a set of thick double doors. Finding them sealed, Sheek and Morse worked together using small torches to cut through the metal lock.

Once broken, the officer pushed the doors aside. A small breeze like a soft breath touched her back. With it she caught the scent of...

Dani turned her head back toward the dark hallway. She frowned, brow knitting as she stared.

Sheek had been right. It smelled like a fresh pot of coffee. How weird.

“You coming?” asked Myrell, as the others made their way into the room.

“Yes, I’ll be...right there.”

They disappeared inside. Dani took a step back and aimed her flashlight into the dark.

She stood for a moment in silence.

Nothing.

But why did she feel like she was being watched?

She waited a few seconds more, that prickling feeling growing along her spine, goosebumps trailing along her arms.

No. It must be her imagination.

She glanced at her garometer, but it wasn’t picking anything up.

It was odd, but she’d never felt something like that before.

Shaking off her unease, she entered the huge chamber beyond. Several levels of scaffolding could be seen from above. It looked to be the testing center. Metal limbs sat on tables, skeletons stood upright smiling at her as she passed. There were several tools and other hardware sitting around. And more machines.

Dani caught herself craning her neck up to the scaffolding before righting herself. She took several glow sticks from the side of her pack and cracked them, throwing them across to give them more light. The others followed suit until the place was bathed in

low blue light. Working around one machine, she saw more bugs scatter. They looked like wingless wasps with red and purple bodies. One was the size of her head. She could see their stingers curling out their backsides.

Carefully, she aimed her light around and stilled when she saw something on top of one broken machine.

“This is it.” She started toward the machine and picked up a slim, round, yellow and silver object in the shape of a battery. She recognized it from one of the pictures given to her back on the ship.

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The cryo-batteries were used for powering certain machines and computers, with enough energy to power whole cities. They were in demand and very expensive. She showed it to the others. “Looks like this is the place. We can start searching here.”

“A lot of them are still in these machines,” Tom noted as he studied one of them.

“Then we’ll have to break them apart,” Dani said, turning to Lex and opening their backpack to place the battery inside.

“Also, look for zatium metal sheets,” Myrell added. “Those are on the list too and should be in this area.”

They went to work as the soldiers scoped the place out, letting off streams of fire away from the machines and taking out the infestation as they did.

Dani went around the back to the next room, searching for more batteries. They had to obtain as many as they could find. As she took out another glowstick, she smelled that odor again. Freshly brewed coffee. It smelled good to her, almost comforting, like being back on the ship, but it still confused her.

She threw the glowstick across the room. As she did, the hairs at the back of her neck stood on end.

She flinched as something moved at the corner of her eye. She whirled around and noticed one of the soldiers standing nearby, the officer with the smiley face on his helmet. He took one shot at a large bug on the wall, and it dropped instantly.

“You should be careful shooting in here,” Dani advised. She looked around again, shivering despite it not being so cold. She didn’t usually feel this on edge. She looked at her garometer but only saw readings for the bugs.

Her helmet lit up, showing the oxygen levels. They were stable here, the oxygen tanks and air purifiers still working despite no one being around. Feeling a little out of breath, she unlocked her helmet and took it off, setting it on a nearby table. She wiped her brow and found little beads of sweat on her hand.

Damn, maybe she was just worried about this run.

Officer Smiley crunched another bug under his boot. He took off his helmet, revealing a handsome face with dark eyes, his shoulder-length, dark hair loose around his face as he smiled at her. He swiped a hand through his hair as he placed his helmet under his arm. It was the soldier who had winked at her back on the ship. He chuckled a little. “You got it, boss. I’ll try not to shoot.”

“I’m not your boss.”

He shrugged. “Right now, you are.”

She caught him sizing her up. “Shouldn’t you be looking for bugs?”

He smirked, leaning back against a table. “Probably. But having all this fun wears you out, don’t it?”

“I wouldn’t call this fun.”

He cocked his gun. “Maybe not for you guys. Hell, I feel sorry for you collectors. This job is the dirtiest by far and I’ve dealt with some shit. I would rather be cleaning stalls on the ship than do what you guys have to.”

She crossed her arms. “It’s not that bad.”

“If you say so.” He smirked. “I’ve seen you around, heard you’re like the queen of collectors.”

Dani pursed her lips. Was that supposed to be a compliment?

He laughed. “My name’s Garret. You’re dating Officer Iqara, right?”

She stiffened. “No. That was a year ago. He’s on a different station.”

“Shit, that’s right. Officer Killian then?”

Were they really having this conversation? “No, that was...a few months ago.”

“Ah.” He swiped a hand through his hair again, looking around at the crew still working in the other room. “My mistake.” He looked back at her and smiled. “You got a level head on your shoulders, especially dealing with this.” He waved his hand around.

“Hopefully I won’t be dealing with this for much longer,” she mumbled.

He arched a brow. “Oh, yeah?”

Damn her mouth. She hadn’t exactly told the others her plans. “Yeah. It’s nothing.”

“You’re trying to get into another division, aren’t you? Is it security? If it is, I can show you—”

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“No. It’s not.”

He chuckled again. “All right. Well, maybe I can persuade you over to the dark side. Give you a shooting lesson, how about?”

“I know how to shoot.”

“Or maybe show you how to take someone down with one move, huh? Every cute girl should know how to put a guy on his back.”

“Can I practice on you first?”

He laughed.

“I gotta get back to work.” She took her helmet.

There was another sound behind her. A low sound she couldn’t quite place. She looked back but only saw shadows.

“All right. You’re stressed. Sorry to bother you. Maybe we can talk again back on the ship?”

She didn’t answer but studied the dark.

“Yo, Garret, more bugs over here,” Ryatt called.

“I’ll be right there,” Garret called back. “Hey, Dani?”

She blinked and glanced back at him. He actually looked a little concerned, “You cool?”

She gripped her helmet. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

He winked at her. “Talk later.” He put his helmet back on and slipped into the other room.

Her face warmed a little.

Damn him.

Not so long ago, she would have let that kind of flirtation pass, would have pulled him into a room and let him strip her, pinning her to a wall without another thought. She let Vincent and Killian get away with a whole lot just to have those kinds of moments. She wasn’t ashamed to admit she’d been active, especially at the academy. Men, sometimes women.

But she’d gotten tired of the fights, the drama, the betrayal. And word always got around. Even in her more serious relationships, she couldn’t stifle that feeling that she wasn’t enough. That they just weren’t in sync, that she was being overlooked, and that she was only temporary. A temporary lover, not a serious companion. They called her pretty, cute, curvy. They liked her eyes and her smile. They liked how she talked to them.

But she was still a low-level junk collector.

Sometimes she felt like her mother. Her mother was so brilliant, so steadfast, hardheaded. She was also Father’s little sidepiece. Mom did find another partner for a time before she passed away, but it took many duds, many people who didn’t take her seriously.

She didn't want that. But she needed to prove herself. So, no more dates. No more late-night flings until she got what she wanted and where she needed to be. And then she'd worry about how lonely she felt.

She adjusted her helmet back into place, focusing again on the room. She found a couple more machines and went to work taking out the cryo-batteries, ignoring the unease that still gnawed at her. Carefully setting the batteries in her pack, she went across a large section of computers, searching for more. Her light went across the rows of slim monitors then froze.

There was a set of doors to one side. A few bugs scattered from her lights as she approached. Through the glass of one door, she could see a dark room beyond, only—

Dani frowned. She touched a switch on her wrist, dimming her lights.

Was that a light inside?

Her eyes narrowed. There was a soft blue glow...

From a small crack between the opening of the doors, she could see faint shadows within. Curling her hands around the doors, she tried to pry them open.

The doors groaned as she slid them apart then refused to budge after a few feet. She peered inside. Yes, there was something glowing inside.

Unfortunately, she couldn't fit through the entrance with her pack. Shrugging it off, she left it beside the doors. Before entering, she checked her garometer. There were readings, but they were low energy levels.

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Which might mean...

Pulse drumming in her ears, Dani cautiously slipped between the narrow entrance and into the room.

There were large glass tanks, reaching several feet high. Computer stations hugged around them. Hoses attached to the sides, as big as her arm, snaked around the room.

All the tanks were empty. A few were broken.

She searched for the source of the light and found it within one of the tubes closer to the center.

She stared at the bottom of the broken tank and a smile crept onto her face.

It was a mushroom. A small blue fungus with little red dots on the top. It had some bioluminescent qualities which gave it a soft glow.

“Yes!” she whispered. Not only would they make it back in time, but she had plant matter to bring back with her, a perfect addition to the collection. Maybe she’d even get to study it in the labs once she was promoted.

Quickly, she went to grab a small capsule from her pack. Returning to the tank, she used a set of tongs to carefully pick out the mushroom and set it inside.

As she capped the capsule tight, her garometer started crackling.

Strange. She didn't see anything around. No other mushrooms or even bugs.

Her brow furrowed as she studied the screen on her wrist. There was nothing lower than a level two energy, coming from the mushroom. Why would it be going off so much?

Then she realized her settings were wrong and it was only displaying low-level readings despite detecting others. Instead of re-adjusting manually, she reset the settings altogether.

The levels shot up.

To fifteen.

She felt the blood drain from her face.

That feeling of unease turned to instinctual panic.

Her eyes flicked up to the glass of the tank. In the reflection, she saw it. A hulking shadow lurking right behind her.

A heavy breath pressed against her back, sending a sickening chill down her spine.

"Yessss," came an awful hiss. That sounded just like...

Just like her.

Her stomach dropped. She couldn't even look behind her. The crackling of the garometer was a roar in her ears.

A soft whimper escaped from her lips.

Oh, my fucking god, I'm dead, she thought. For a split second, she had a vision of the security officer in the clutches of the hulking monster, head being munched on, brain slurped up.

She felt something bump against her helmet and another harsh breath. Sniffing. It was sniffing her.

Something slithered up her leg. Something sharp.

She trembled. Her knees locked up. A drop of sweat went down her neck.

She watched the shadow move in the reflection of the glass, its head coming down as it leaned close. Whatever slithered up her leg now trailed along her thighs.

“Xiha marish isha esh xu,” it hissed, its voice now guttural.

What the fuck was it saying?

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She shut her eyes as the thing slithering along her thigh went across her stomach. It was going to cut her open.

The blood rushed in her ears, her heart hammering. Then the thing sliding across her stomach fell away.

She took a shaky breath.

Please...please...

It was silent. She opened her eyes and didn't see the shadow.

Maybe it was gone. Maybe it had only been an awful hallucination.

Then she heard it behind her.

"Dani?" came Garret's voice. Only it wasn't him.

She screamed. Snatching the stunner gun off her belt, she whirled around, letting it off blindly into the dark.

It hit the thing square in the chest. It didn't move, didn't even grunt in pain. The electricity danced along its body, and she got a good look at it.

Seven feet, if not more...spines, twisted horns...large red eyes.

It cocked its head and stared at her curiously as if it hadn't just been zapped by

several volts of electricity. Its mouth thinned and blue-black fangs curled out.

She screamed again, backing into the tank, making it shake and tip over.

Glass shattered everywhere.

“Dani? Dani, what’s happened? Where are you?” came a voice inside her helmet.

She heard the shouts of others. Her crew. She let off another round of electricity as the monster moved again, reaching for her. This time, she hit one of the hoses on the ground. It ripped open, and steam came barreling out, hitting the thing in the face, blocking it from her sight.

She stumbled and fell. Even as she hit the ground, she tried to crawl back, to get as far away as she could.

The shouts grew closer, then more breaking of glass. Hands came around her and pulled her up just as light brightened the room.

One of the soldiers let off fire from their gun into the room. There was nothing there.

The steam slowed and evaporated, but the thing she saw was gone.

“Hey? Dani, look at me. You okay?”

She turned and looked at Garret, or rather the face of his helmet.

She blinked then righted herself, pulling away. “I’m—I’m...”

“What happened?”

She opened her mouth but couldn't find the words. She saw her team by the door looking over at her, concerned. She searched around the room again, in every corner, along the walls.

What the fuck.

“Jesus, you're shaking. Hey, let's get you out of here, okay?”

She let him lead her to the door and she let the others crowd around her.

“You all right, Dani?”

“What happened?”

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“What did you see?”

“Damn, she looks pale.”

“W-We...” My god, she couldn’t even speak. Instead, she waved for the door.
“Something. S-something here. Go. Out. Now!”

“Get the packs,” Myrell said quickly.

As the crew moved, Ryatt came out last from the room. “I didn’t see anything,” he said to Garret.

Garret looked at her.

“I saw...saw...” Fucking dammit, she couldn’t speak! She pulled up her garometer to show them so they could understand.

But there was nothing. The readings were back to normal.

She shook her head. No way. Not possible.

“Let’s just move,” Garret said. He tugged her with him and led them out, racing back to the entrance.

CHAPTER THREE

Kryxis

The green smog disappeared, a warm breeze picking it up and rolling it away, allowing him a better view of the ship. Even in the night, he could see clear as day from the top of his perch, the little people in strange suits. They were rushing around frantic-like, carrying sacks into the ship, talking and waving their arms around. They were rushing about, like panicked insects who sensed danger, while those in the armored suits aimed their weapons into the dark, letting off fire and light nowhere near to him.

Funny. They were funny. Amusing to watch. Their fear clogged his nostrils but that was okay. He kind of liked that too.

He crouched unmoving as he stared at them, his gaze drifting from one to another.

He'd been close to the ship when it landed but had stalled to watch its bright fire light up the sky. He caught them just in time, heading toward the buildings and followed easily behind. It was odd how they didn't seem to mind their surroundings despite risking their hides in this place. The smog had sent many of the creatures into hiding. They didn't like the cloying scent of it and usually it brought dust storms.

These people had weapons, but that didn't deter him, only made him more curious. Made him more excited, honestly. He sensed those in armor were some sort of protectors to the ones in orange suits. He was curious to test how good they were at their job.

But for the time being, he only followed and observed, stalking behind just out of sight. He studied them as they poked around, going from room to room. It was clear to him at one point that they were looking for something specific as they started to collect parts from the machines.

So, they were scavengers. There were other creatures within his domain who did something similar, collecting food where they could or parts for their nests. But he

doubted this was the case for this lot. No, they were all very different. He suspected they were cleverer than the creatures that called this place home. At least to some degree.

He flicked his tail ever so slightly as they went about their tasks. In the room of machines, a few of them had taken off their head covers, giving him a better idea of what they looked like, sounded like, and smelled like.

All very different. One furry, one with scales akin to his own, one with large black eyes that stared into nothing. Then the others. They seemed almost familiar to him, as if he'd seen them in a dream. Or perhaps a memory. A memory that brought on the fuzzy beginnings of a headache. Scale-less, hair on their heads, beady eyes, skin that looked soft and easy to tear. Strange like the others. They all smelled different too. Some bitter, some metallic.

Very strange. And new. He caught himself creeping closer as time went on, listening to them from above, just on the edge of the dark. Some of them had separated from the group. He'd followed one who had dared to go on their own into the next room.

His eyes flicked over to them now, a dark-haired little thing pointing and waving their hands at the others, pausing every so often to look around as if waiting for something to pounce on them in the dark.

He suppressed a low purr of laughter. Scaring them had been entertaining to say the least. It had been too tempting at the time not to. He didn't even have to try—they practically walked right into him.

His nostrils flared, trying to catch their scent even now. He had watched them from behind, their scent separating from the others. Not metallic or bitter. It reminded him of something savory.

He hadn't been hungry before then. But he certainly felt that way after. There hadn't been a plan to eat them at first, though he thought about taking a bite just to see if they tasted as good as they smelled.

No, he was still too curious and wanted to see what they'd do.

Instead, he pushed the instinct away and stood an arm's length to them, breathing them in.

By then, he couldn't help himself. They let out some excited hiss of noise and he thought, wouldn't it be funny if I replied?

The end result was not what he expected. But it was still electrifying to say the least.

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His eyes followed the one he'd scared. He liked their reaction. The scream was impressive, but few creatures took the time in their fright to try and hurt him. Only the bigger ones, once backed into a corner, would lunge at him. But the small ones always went running.

Interesting.

Once the little suits stopped running around and the armored ones let off steam, they started back onto the ship.

No. They couldn't leave. He couldn't let them.

He needed to know more, wanted to get closer still. And his fun was only beginning.

Slowly, he slipped from his perch and headed toward them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dani

She sat on the bench next to her locker, white-knuckling the helmet in her lap. Damp hair pressed to her temples as she stared at the wall, at the sign above.

NEXACOR. REBUILDING WORLDS.

She closed her eyes and tried not to shake, taking deep breaths. Her crew was in the storage dock packing the batteries and metal sheets away. Security was checking

around the ship and the outside perimeter for anything suspicious.

She must have checked her garometer a dozen times in the last minute. Ever since the smog had disappeared, the energy levels had been all over the place. Ranging from three all the way to nine.

There were things on this world that had been hiding, but they were hiding no longer. Whether it had been from the ship landing scaring them off or something else, it didn't matter. They weren't afraid anymore. Outside she heard another shrieking howl.

But that didn't really bother her. What bothered her was that sometimes her garometer jumped to fifteen.

Whatever the monstrous creature that she saw was, it had followed them out, and it was close by.

Her hands shook in her lap. She envisioned the monster again in her head. Mostly she just remembered it towering over her, but she saw the twisted horns that crowned its head, saw the large red eyes that shined in the light. Its tail—which she knew now must have been the thing that had been slithering over her body—had whipped around behind it.

She'd never seen anything like it. And yet, at the same time, it seemed oddly familiar to her. How the hell could that be?

It didn't matter. It was the freakiest thing she'd ever seen. And the way it had mimicked her and Garret's voices had made her heart drop to her stomach.

She took another deep breath. Okay. It was okay. The doors were shut tight, and security was checking the area. She heard their guns go off a few times. The thing

couldn't get in.

The lights flickered above her, making her flinch.

Damn it, she couldn't lose it now. A job needed to be done. It wasn't like she hadn't seen creepy things before. This one just scared her real good, but it hadn't technically hurt her. And it sure as shit could have. It could have grabbed her and took a chunk out of her. Instead it had...

It had...toyed with her.

That somehow made it way more terrifying.

She stood and shook out her arms, trying to ease the tension.

No. No, she was good. It was fine. Everything was fine. The soldiers could deal with it. They could still get this done.

A door nearby opened and her team piled in.

"I'm telling you," Tom said to Myrell. "Sometimes certain chemical compounds in the air can cause hallucinations and—"

Myrell elbowed him in the chest, and he went quiet. "You okay, Dani?"

Dani eyed them each, then cleared her throat. "Fine. I'm fine." She tried to smile. "Just had an... encounter." She turned back to her locker, pretending to change out her gloves, not wanting them to see the fear still on her face. "It just caught me by surprise. But I'm good. We're good."

"Are we?" Lex said. "I mean, if there's something out there, we should worry

about...”

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“What’s the game plan?” Myrell asked. “Do we let security handle it?”

“Do I get to use the flamethrower now?” Phen chimed in.

“Phen, we don’t even know what we are dealing with,” Lex said.

“Maybe we should let the heads know,” Sheek suggested. “Return early until we know what’s going on.”

Myrell snorted. “Yeah, right. They expect us to deal with these situations.”

“I say we hang out and let security do their thing until it’s taken care of,” said Lex.

“I second this,” said Tom.

Dani turned back to them. “I’ll talk to security. We’ll take a short break while I do. I’m sure...I’m sure they can figure something out.”

As they took their moment to relax, Dani went in search of the security team.

She started with the ones nearest the ship. The one with the X on his helmet introduced himself as Saul, a slightly older man with a greying beard. He seemed to be the leader of the group. While the one who had stayed behind with him—with the black star on his helmet—was Tristan. A heavier set man, judging by the fit of his suit, with a scarred lip and striking gray eyes.

“The ship is clean,” Saul assured. “But we’re still checking the outside. Seems there’s

a few nasty things lurking. What did you say this thing looked like again?”

She repeated to him what she had seen. Saul glanced at Tristan before moving back to the ship entrance.

“We have some traps in storage and a few MR-83’s—special blasters,” he said. “Tristan, get Ryatt and Garret. We’ll switch out and start setting up.”

Dani followed them back inside. She drank some water and took a moment with the others, assuring them again about what she’d seen.

“Did you notice anything else about it?” Lex asked.

“Was it one of those Reacher Bugs?” Tom asked. “They grab you from the vents, they say.”

Dani shook her head. She didn’t want to scare the others, even if the thing looked like something out of a nightmare. “I didn’t get a great look at it. It was just big and didn’t look friendly.”

“It didn’t attack you though?” Lex asked.

“No. Not exactly. But it reached for me.”

“That sounds like a Reacher—” Tom started again.

“It wasn’t.”

Saul and his team came back through to the dock entrance, this time carrying a different sort of gun—puffs of what looked like steam flowed from the ends. Garret and Ryatt also carried two large packs and a couple of wiry nets. They each nodded

their way, Garret slowing to look directly at her.

“We’ll take care of it, don’t worry,” he said before joining the others.

She watched the door close behind them, then checked her watch. Still several hours before daybreak. They had time, but they needed to get back out there soon. She checked her garometer again. The levels were still all over the place.

They sat in silence for a moment until Myrell shot up. “I’m going to check the control room. There’s a camera system in there, so we can see what’s going on outside.”

“Ooh, I’ll join you.” Tom stood.

Everyone else got up.

“Wait.” Dani rose with them. “We need to stay together.”

“That’s why we’ll all go to the control room.” Myrell pointed.

“I want to see too,” said Phen. “Maybe one of them will get eaten.”

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“So you can watch like last time?” Lex said.

Phen’s antenna flicked. “Yes.”

Lex shook their head. “You’re so morbid.”

“If they do, we can record it and show it to the heads so they know we couldn’t complete our run,” Tom suggested.

“We will complete it,” Dani said. Her gaze drifted over to the stairs which led to the control room. “Just keep close.”

They marched upstairs and crowded into the control room. From there, Dani pulled up the cameras along the ship.

The men were circling the area, their nets now placed in various spots around the perimeter. They had their guns relaxed at first, until one of them signaled to the others and aimed his weapon into the dark.

“There!” Phen pointed.

Dani saw it. Something big lurked in the corner of the screen in the dark, only seen sparingly by the light of gunfire that now went off like fireworks. Whatever the thing was, it crawled down the side of a wall with long, spindly legs.

The soldiers backed up as if the creature might be coming toward them. The crew drew closer to the screen, waiting to see, listening to the gunfire outside.

There was a loud clicking noise followed by a low groan. The screen went gray then black.

The lights flickered above them. Then everything went dark.

Someone gasped beside her. “What the fuck?”

Dani turned her suit lights on. The others did the same, barely piercing the darkness with dull white light.

“Everyone okay?” she called.

“Yes,” they answered.

Tom directed his light to the door. “The ship’s power just went down...”

“What do you think could have caused that?” said Myrell.

“Don’t know...” said Tom.

“Could be a fuse, right, Morse?” Dani asked.

Morse, who had the most mechanical expertise of the crew, seemed to consider it. “Maybe,” he mumbled. “Could be many things.” He sniffed toward the door, and she saw the hairs on his head stand on end. “It could be a power supply or the connectors. Would have to go down to the engine room to see...”

Dani stared at the blackness beyond the door.

“I’ll go,” she said even as her heart hammered in her chest.

“Not alone,” Myrell said.

“Morse will come with me to show me what the problem might be. But I want the rest of you to stay together.” She checked that she still had her stunner at her side.

“Stay in here and lock the door. Bar it if you have to.”

Morse followed her reluctantly out. She heard the door shut and lock into place behind them. Gunfire continued to ring out beyond the ship walls as they cautiously made their way below deck, her garometer crackling softly the farther they went.

Bugs. Just bugs.

They made it down and turned for the engine room. At the door, they paused. It was open halfway.

Someone just forgot to close it all the way, that’s all.

Not sure if this was the logical part of her brain talking or the delusional one, she unlatched her stunner from her belt and gripped it tight.

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She checked her garometer. The readings were as high as nine. But that could be any number of things, from the crew in the ship to those outside.

She hesitated by the door. "Morse, stay close behind me."

He grunted in agreement.

They slipped inside. She could smell the faintest odor of something burning within. She aimed her light across the room and saw the giant double engines. There was a soft red light blinking somewhere behind them.

Morse checked the engines while Dani watched his back.

"Nothing wrong that I can see," he said. "Might be the power supply or the generators."

They moved past the engines. The red light went off and on just a few feet ahead. Dani slowed as she peered across, her eyes widening.

The power box at the back had been ripped open.

Dani rushed for it to get a better look. Wires were tangled and torn, little bites of electricity zapping from them along with wisps of smoke.

Someone had sliced them.

"Morse." She tried to keep her voice steady. "We need to go. Get back to the control

room. We'll wait for the—”

She looked behind her. Morse was gone.

She whirled around, stunner at the ready. “Morse?” she called out. She was alone. Nothing but the red light and the dark.

Frozen, she stood staring into the shadows. Then she shuddered. There it was again, hitting her senses like a slap in the face. The smell of coffee. Her garometer spiked, crackling.

“Over here,” came Morse’s soft voice in the dark somewhere to her right.

Not Morse. She didn’t believe it for one second.

Run. But her damn legs wouldn’t move. She couldn’t move.

She took several deep breaths. Maybe she could stun it again. Then she could make a run for the door.

She took one step then another. Bracing herself, she prepared to bolt, still trailing her gaze across the room.

Then she saw it. One red eye peeked out from behind one of the engines.

It watched her, its eye dilating as it realized she saw it.

She watched it back for one long second before she moved, lunging over to the other side of the room as far away from it as she could get. She rushed around one of the engines, back to the wall, then halted to peer over.

The door was clear. But it might be guarding close by. She hugged the wall, closing the distance between her and the door.

Only a few more feet. She pointed her gun into the dark, ready to fire as she went to slip out.

Carefully, she stepped past the door, her hand shaking. She just needed to race up the stairs then lock herself in somewhere and—

A long arm shot out and grabbed her. Dani shrieked, firing off her gun. The electricity danced across the arm and up the monster's shoulder, along its face, ending at its horns.

It bared its teeth at her. There was a low guttural sound. It almost sounded like...laughter. The thing had her by the collar as it pulled her back inside.

Her feet left the ground, gun dropping from her hand as she instinctually grabbed hold of the arm to try to force it to let go. The monstrous face grew closer until it was only inches from her own.

A little whimper slipped past her lips as she was unable to free herself from its steel grip.

That low guttural laugh came again. "Xi sara ka dunnn na," it growled.

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She trembled as she stared at the face of a demon, its fangs curling like a snake's as its mouth widened.

What could she do?

Her gun was gone. She had no other weapon.

The monster's nostrils flared. It bent its head and pressed its face into the center of her chest, inhaling deep.

What the hell?

Out of instinct, she kicked out her leg, hitting it in the chest. It hardly moved. She freed herself enough to twist her head down and bite its hand.

It drew back as she bit down hard, only to find its skin was like biting down on smooth but extremely hard leather. Her jaw hurt, forcing her to let go.

She glanced up and saw it staring at her, its eyes wide, expression gone. It kind of looked...stunned.

It set her on her feet and released her. She stumbled away from it and still managed to trip over something, making her fall back.

"Iska ni virashi," it said in a slow, venomous voice. "Mimni lillak."

She tried to crawl away, but it was on her in a second, its long stride like a predator's,

catching up to her with ease. Its tail whipped out from behind it and grabbed her ankle, sliding her right back to it. It crouched over her, tilting its head as it stared down at her. It sized her up then puffed out its chest before letting out a low snarl.

She shut her eyes and turned her head away, cowering. She braced again for its teeth on her when she felt something sharp brush against her cheek.

Her eyes shot open, and she gasped as its talon trailed over her face and caught a lock of her hair, feeling it through long fingers. Then it set her hair behind her ear to touch at her lobe, thumb caressing over it before brushing its talon along her lips as if curious.

Dani remained frozen, stunned. The point of its nail pressed against her bottom lip then slipped between her teeth. Once more out of instinct, she bit down before flinching away. Coming to her senses, she turned her head and swatted its hand.

The creature grunted as if mystified by her. Then it knelt on top of her, pinning her. It leaned down and opened its mouth.

At first, she thought it was two dark eels coming out of its mouth until she realized they were its tongues.

Oh, please no.

It licked her neck up to her face, one tongue curling under her jaw, the other along her lips.

She turned her head away again, grimacing. As it tilted its head back, she brought up her arm to block her face.

“Mimni lillak, eshika esia variss,” it purred. It pressed itself against her, a hard body

with sharp features that she feared would tear her suit.

Don't move, Dani. Just let it do its thing, don't think about its teeth so close to your throat or what it's pressing against your thigh. No, no. It hasn't killed you yet. There's still hope.

"Dani!" someone called from nearby.

The thing stilled then growled as if in annoyance. Its heavy weight on her lifted.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed down, but eventually the voice got closer.

"Dani! Dani!"

A light spilled into the dark and a hand grabbed her, lifting her to her feet. She opened her eyes and saw it was Garret. "Hey, you okay?"

She looked wildly around him, but the thing was gone. She licked her lips and tried to speak but couldn't. He kept her steady beside him as he aimed his gun around the room.

"M—Morse," she finally spat out. "He was with me."

"Morse?"

Out from the corner of the room, Morse appeared, his face scrunched up, one hand rubbing at his head where a large bump was now forming.

“What happened?” Garret asked.

“Don’t know,” Morse said.

“It was here.” Dani looked around, even up at the ceiling. No sign of it.

“What was?”

She looked back at Garret, frowning. “The monster.”

He let her go. She and Morse stayed by the door as he searched around—and came back with nothing.

“I’ll get the others,” he said, leading them back through the door. “Lock yourselves back into the room with the rest of the team, and don’t come out until we tell you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Dani

Hours. They’d lost hours of time. She wanted to pace, to leave the room, to get the power back on, or maybe just punch a wall or scream. So much time wasted all because of that...that spinybastard.

She sat against a wall near the door, listening. Sometimes there was gunfire and sometimes it was quiet. They may never get back out there at this rate.

The others sat nearby, their suit lights and a glowstick the only things illuminating the room. They talked softly while Morse lay in a corner. She'd braved leaving the room again to grab a first aid kit with a medi-scanner to assess his injury. Based off the scanner, he only had a minor head wound. She gave him some medicine and let him rest.

She sat with them in the beginning, talking sparingly, until she eventually found herself by the door with a wrench she'd found under a seat gripped in one hand. Sheek sat near her with a knife.

Not long after they had locked themselves in the room, they caught the sound of something shuffling around outside the door. It sounded like a blade sliding against metal. Or nails grating against the walls. The crew had gone quiet then, and Dani had slipped by the door to listen closer.

"Hello?" she'd called out.

There had been no answer.

She had backed away until the shuffling stopped beside the door.

"Dani," said Garret, from behind the door.

"Is that one of the security team?" Lex asked.

"Maybe it's safe now," Phen said excitedly.

"Don't!" Dani ordered as she heard them get up behind her. "It's not him."

Sheek had come up beside her to stare at the door, sniffing at it. Dani turned to her. "It's nothin," she repeated.

Sheek studied her then dipped her head. "I believe you."

From there, they had guarded the door. The shuffling had ceased some hours ago. Her garometer had quieted some, the energy levels back down to normal, but she still couldn't help wondering if it was close by, waiting.

Now she sat by the door, anger simmering.

Since she had nothing else she could do, she ran through the details she did know. Whatever it was, it was intelligent enough to learn the insides of their ship. It either knew or learned very quickly how to disable the power and the systems. It could mimic voices, but it didn't know their language, hence why it only said her name or repeated her words. It must have heard her and Garret speaking before to learn what it did. It probably knew a lot about the workings of the city. It could move quietly and not be seen, and she suspected it could somehow hide its energy levels or make them seem weaker or it was just very good at keeping far enough from the radius of her garometer's reach to mess with the data.

It was smart. Possibly smarter than them. That was certain.

There was only one thing that puzzled her. It could have killed her and her crew in an instant. Her, multiple times, and Morse that time in the engine room. But it hadn't. The only explanation she had for that was it liked to play with its food, and it wanted to enjoy them slowly.

The memory of its tongues on her neck certainly made that suspicion noteworthy. She shuddered just remembering it. She also didn't like thinking about how it had pinned her and how her whole body was throbbing as Garret brought her back to the room and the adrenaline wore off. Must have just been a side effect of the insane terror coursing through her veins.

No. She was done being messed with by this creepy sonofabitch.

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She glanced over at the others sitting around the glowstick, at Myrell who was drinking heavily from her canteen. She rose from her spot on the wall and joined them.

“Myrell, pull up the map of the area,” she said.

They loomed over the map, Dani scanning the buildings. Their next target was the shipping yard, where they were to retrieve crates of ionized metal mined from the planet. Special enough the company wanted it back. Probably because it was worth trillions, making one wonder why they had left it behind in the first place.

She looked over the warehouses and the storage units. There was a generator room beside them.

“I have an idea,” Dani said. “Once we get to the shipping yard, I want us to go to this generator room first.” She pointed.

“You still want to go out there?” Lex said. “After that thing attacked you?”

“Yes,” she said. “If it doesn’t get caught by the security team soon, then we are going.”

They were let out of the room an hour later. This time, it was Saul at the door along with Garret. Seeing that she couldn’t fathom the monster being able to mimic two people at once, she unlocked the door.

Saul had a twinkle in his eye and Garret looked smug.

“We got it,” Saul said.

Dani raised her brows. “Really?”

“Come see.”

“Is it safe?” Lex asked, poking their head out.

“We cleared the outside and scanned every corner of the ship,” Garret assured.

“Come see.”

They followed the two outside. Dani treaded carefully as they rounded the front side of the ship.

Tristan and Ryatt were standing together, blocking what looked like a large pile of ice, guns relaxed at their sides. As Dani got closer, she slowed.

The pile of ice was a creature, frozen until it looked like a statue, its long, lithe body curled up, jaws open like it was screaming. She didn’t know why but her stomach dropped looking at it.

“Caught it lurking near the side of the ship,” Saul explained. “It tried to run from our guns and got itself trapped by our net.” He kicked at part of the net still tangled around the body.

Dani crouched down to better examine the specimen. One of its limbs was broken off, crumbling next to it. Most of it was unrecognizable as the ice melded the body to the ground. She couldn’t tell if it really was her creepy stalker or not.

She rose and went around to study its backside. There was a small section along one shoulder that the ice hadn’t fully gotten. She got closer, shining one of her lights.

There, just on the surface, was a set of flat, strange-looking blue scales.

No. Not scales. They were shaped oddly like...

Dani took out a pair of pliers from her pocket and tugged one, popping it off. She studied it closely.

“What is it, Dani?” Garret asked from beside her.

“It’s fungus,” she whispered. The head of a flat mushroom. A cluster of them had grown on this creature’s back, made to look like an extra layer of skin.

“Did you say a fungus?” Garret said.

Dani rose and the others crowded around her.

“Strange,” said Tom. “It was growing on the body?”

“Yes.”

“But it looks like scales or skin, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Weird...”

“We’ll make a note about it in our report,” said Saul. “But right now, we should get back to it. They’ll be wondering what’s taken so long.”

Dani took out a small vial from another pocket and tucked the fungus inside. She straightened, giving the creature one last look.

It’s not you, is it?

Her gaze drifted up to the shadows beyond. Saul was right. It was time to get back to work. But she would be keeping a close eye because she was done being caught scared in the dark.

The generator worked. It still had enough fuel in it, enough to grab what they needed and leave. It had been risky to try to get the power running in the shipping yard because if it didn’t, more time would have been wasted. Luckily, with a little work, it roared to life and the lights came on overhead, almost blinding.

With the power back, the computers turned on too. And with them so did the bots.

“Creepy,” Lex said as one meandered close by on eight legs like a spider, transporting empty crates across the warehouse.

“But very efficient,” Tom said, standing by a metal crate with a laser cutter in hand.

“The way they work is actually quite fascinating. They have these little ball-bearings on each joint that connect to the center of its—”

“Save it, Tom,” Lex groaned, breaking one of the side compartments to a large egg-shaped tank. Dani worked on another tank close by, eyeing the bot as it crawled away. She paused several times to check around, glad that she could see across the large warehouse, the lights above reminding her of a cloudy day in mid-afternoon. She didn’t have to wear her helmet here either, now that the air was being purified and circulating again. So, it almost felt like she was outside.

Carefully she took out a set of long black capsules from the tank which stored the ionized metal. Each needed to be carefully set inside their packs which were temperature controlled. There were no bugs or other odd creatures wandering around. Either they scattered from the light or from their presence. Or found better nesting areas somewhere else. It didn’t matter. She was just happy they were gone for the time being.

Garret and Ryatt guarded close by just in case. Saul and Tristan had stayed behind with the ship again, along with Morse so he could work to restore the power onboard. It was inconvenient to lose a member, but they were making up for it by working harder and faster.

Myrell cursed somewhere nearby. “Who took them?” she shouted. “Tom, I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Took what?” he called from another side.

“My gloves. This shit is hot. I can’t handle anything without them!”

“Haven’t seen them.”

“I’m going back to the generator room to see if I left them there.”

Dani stopped. “Wait, Myrell—”

“I’ll go with her,” Ryatt cut in. He turned to Garret. “We’ll be right back.”

Dani watched them go. Arguing would be fruitless. But at the back of her mind, she saw the creature in the ice. She still wasn’t fully convinced it was her monster. If it was still lurking...

She peered around then turned back to the tank. Ryatt would take care of her. The creature always seemed to disappear when security showed up anyway.

She glanced over her shoulder every time she put a capsule in her bag. Her stunner was back on her belt, but she knew it was pointless. Assuming the monster was still alive, zapping it didn’t do a thing.

Still, she wasn’t going to let it or anything else get her again.

Moving on to the next tank, she took her heatblade and started to cut the lock off the door. She pried it open then reached for the contents within. She did this several more times before realizing it had grown quiet.

She didn’t think anything of it until Lex shouted across the room. “Uh, guys...come here!”

“What’s wrong?” Dani called out.

“Just...look!” There was fear laced in their voice.

Dani walked over to where Lex was standing, looking down at their pack. The others

were already beside them. “This is not cool. I only stepped away for a second.”

Their pack lay empty, everything gone. Frowning, Dani peered inside. No...not completely empty.

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It took her a moment to realize there was a face staring back at her.

“Is that...a head?” Phen asked.

They stared down at it. A skullface smiled back at them like the ones seen on the skeletons in the production line.

Garret moved in and reached inside and grabbed the head. A metal skull. “What the...?” he mumbled, turning it over.

Sheek took it from him and sniffed it, then threw it across the room. She turned to Dani and nodded. “It’s here.”

Shit.

“Myrell,” Dani said out loud. She whirled around, almost knocking into Garret. “Stay with them!” she ordered as she dashed away, sprinting toward the generator room.

“Dani! Wait!” Garret called to her as she got to the wide doorway. This thing was not going to harm her crew, so help her.

The inner workings of the shipping sector beyond the warehouses were a labyrinth of hallways, storage rooms, and offices all linked by automatic doors that slid open when she approached. She ran down one hallway, skidding to a halt near the generator room.

Ryatt was just outside the door sprawled on his back. Pieces of his armor lay broken

around him.

She slid to her knees and shook him, but he didn't wake.

"Myrell?" she called. As she went to peer through the narrow window of the generator room, Myrell appeared.

"I'm here," she yelled through the glass. Dani could see the whites of her eyes. "The thing sounded just like Garret. I told the guy not to open it, but he didn't listen! It's lurking close by. It went down the hall." She pointed to her left.

"Stay there, and don't come out until we call for you," Dani yelled back. She didn't wait for a reply as she slipped back down the hall. From one pocket she took out a small ISpad and tapped the screen.

On the map, she could see herself moving. Each door was color coordinated—green meaning they were active, red meaning they were shut and locked. She rushed past one door then tapped on the control on her ISpad. Behind her, the door shut, little lights on its side turning red to indicate it had been locked.

She had Lex to thank for this very useful tool. Beside the generator room had been a security pod, and from there, she'd synched the device to the computer system controlling everything from the doors to the lights.

She hadn't come unprepared this time. As she rounded back toward the warehouse, she froze just before the edge of another door.

There it was, blocking her way.

Her blood went cold as she got a clear look at it with the lights on. It towered at least seven feet if not more. Several pairs of horns twisted along its head like a wicked

crown. Its skin was a deep red with blue stripes along its ribs, arms, and neck. Two giant red eyes shined in the light, but there were also several narrow blue ones above its brow, reminding her of a spider. She'd somehow missed them in the dark.

She'd also missed the second pair of arms that had been tucked against its back, long blue-black limbs that folded under its normal pair of arms. And here she thought it had been terrifying in the dark. Now she regretted turning the lights on.

Once it saw her, it stilled, its red eyes narrowing. Its tail slid across the ground, the pointed tip curling upward. Tilting its head at her, its black fangs peeked out from its upper lip.

She knew as soon as she moved it would too. Finger on the ISpad like a trigger, she took a slow step back.

The thing mimicked her, taking a slow step forward.

She counted the hammering beat of her heart. When it got to ten, she tapped on the screen then jolted back as the door above started to close. The thing broke into a sprint toward her as she ran. It slipped under the door just as she veered toward a storage room. She tapped the controls again. As the door to the storage room started to close, she lunged forward and slid underneath.

The door shut behind her just as the creature got there, but it didn't make it under the door in time to reach her. Dani shot from the ground as she saw it staring at her through the window. Its breath fogged up the glass as it huffed in annoyance. Then it disappeared.

She didn't stand there to wait. She moved across the room to the other end and slipped into an office space then out to another passage. She snuck through several rooms, locking doors behind her, until she turned down another hallway and dashed

for a room that said TRASH ONLY by the door. She raced past piles of junk into a large octagonal space with a set of doors leading into a control room. She rushed for them and closed the door just as a shadow loomed behind her. She gasped and whirled around as the door locked in place. The creature stood there, its fist against the window. It clawed against the glass then turned toward the large pane of glass that looked out to the octagonal room. Its talons raked across the glass as it moved slowly across.

There was no other way inside. She'd trapped herself in. And it knew it.

She didn't think it knew about the mechanic's exit though, or if it did, it knew it would take too long to backtrack through that route, a narrow passage under the floor, no more than a large vent system.

It wouldn't have time to do anything anyway. She closed off the exit to the octagonal room then set her sights on the computer console in front of the window. She turned it on and started going through the system controls.

Yellow lights flashed inside the octagon, a harsh bell going off.

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The creature looked around it, more curious than afraid. It turned back to her and tilted its head.

Dani flipped several switches then hovered her hand over a large red button that said Burn.

“See you in hell, you evil sonofabitch!” She slammed her palm down.

Fire engulfed the room, crashing into the glass like a wave. White smoke followed, making it impossible to see.

She couldn’t bring herself to watch. As terrible as the monster had been, she didn’t want to see it burning. She just wanted to get back to the others and be gone as quickly as possible. She found the mechanic’s exit and slipped inside, shutting the door firmly behind her.

CHAPTER SIX

Dani

The passageways were small as she crawled her way back, pausing every so often to check the map to make sure she was going the right way. When she finally slid out of one door near the warehouse, she struggled to her feet, knees aching from the cold metal ground.

She wished she felt victorious or proud, but she didn’t. She only felt a small sense of relief that they could finally move on with the mission as planned.

She returned to the generator room first. Ryatt was sitting against the wall now, helmet in his lap, damp blond hair in his face, bright-green eyes looking up at her, dazed.

“Fucker threw me,” he said as she went to the door.

As the door slid open, Myrell stumbled out and hugged her.

“You crazy woman.” She squeezed her then pulled away. “I thought you were done for. Is it...?”

“Yeah, it’s gone.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you.”

Dani arched a brow. “You doubted me?”

Myrell laughed. “Well, I didn’t think we were dealing with something out of a cosmic horror. I’ve seen some shit in my day but nothing like...that.”

Dani glanced back down the way she came. No, she’d never encountered anything like it either. “Let’s get back to the others.”

Helping Ryatt walk, they returned to the warehouse. Garret got to them first as they made it inside.

“What happened?” he asked, taking hold of his teammate.

“Dani took care of it,” Myrell answered plainly. “You should make her a head of security at this point. She got rid of that thing you and your team said you killed, and she did it without a gun.”

Garret stared at her. “You took it out?”

Dani shrugged as her crew crowded around her, a few coming in for a hug, grinning at her and patting her on the back.

“Dani, you are a badass!”

“You’re amazing, Dani!”

“How did you kill it?”

Her smile faltered a little. “I trapped it in the incinerator.”

Lex whistled. “Hot damn.”

Their laughter rang across the wide space.

“Wish we could have gotten a good look at it like you did,” said Tom, adjusting his goggles.

“I as well,” said Sheek.

“No, you don’t,” Myrell replied. “Trust me. It looked like...”

“Like what?”

“A devil or a demon.”

Tom frowned. “You did say it was spiny with horns across its head, right?”

“That’s right,” said Dani. “It had two red eyes and...a few blue ones.”

“Huh...” The gears seemed to be turning in his head. “Was it red?”

“Yes...except for its second arms. They were blue.”

Tom’s brow rose. “Well, that’s peculiar. Though I thought maybe...”

“What?”

He shrugged. “It sounded at first like it might be a vrisha.”

“Vrisha...that sounds familiar,” Lex said.

Phen gasped, the most expression Dani had seen her give. “Vrisha. I heard of them. They attacked one of the cities on my home world, so says my clan. But that was a long time ago when I was a childling.”

“They are a very rare species,” said Tom. “Don’t see the likes of them this far from the governing systems. They are very reclusive. Few others even know where their home world lies or have ever seen one.”

“Oh! I remember now,” Lex said. “We learned about them at the academy. But it was very brief.”

Suddenly Dani felt a little light-headed. She leaned back against a crate. So, that’s why it seemed oddly familiar. “Oh, my god, I...killed a vrisha?”

“Well, you don’t know for certain,” corrected Tom. “Double limbs and more than two eyes is definitely not a vrisha trait. But the rest...”

She stared off into the distance. “I remember they said it was unlikely we’d ever meet one.”

“Which is true.”

“How come you never heard of them, Myrell?” Lex asked.

“I grew up in a cult that colonized their own world far away,” she explained. “They didn’t teach us anything about the outside systems, and I didn’t go to academy.”

“Not everyone knows about those who come from the alliance,” Sheek pointed out. “I too don’t remember much about the vrisha. I was young as well when they had their rebellion.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?” Dani asked Tom. “When I told you what I saw?”

“Honestly, I thought it was so completely far-fetched. I mean, why would a vrisha be

here of all places? It seemed impossible.”

“A decommissioned outer world far from alliance territory, that kind of tracks,” Lex agreed. “And, like you said, Tom, vrisha don’t have four arms and double the eyes. And I remember they said they were distinctly red in color. Not blue. Maybe it just looked like one.”

Dani thought back to it standing by the doorway. Then she remembered the images she’d seen of one in the academy. She must have blocked it from her mind because it had scared her even then. But she remembered now. “I think...I think it was,” she said. “But somehow changed...”

“Surprised our good boys in armor didn’t mention it.” Myrell glared at Garret and Ryatt.

Ryatt’s face went red. “I got knocked out before I saw anything.”

“I didn’t see it either,” said Garret. “And we’ve encountered many things that are big and spiny with horns. Doesn’t mean it was one of them.”

“Guess it doesn’t matter anymore anyway,” Lex said. “Dani took care of it. And I think I agree—it couldn’t have been a vrisha because why would it stalk and threaten one of us?”

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“There were some that were against the alliance,” Tom answered. “Maybe it ran away and hid here.”

For some reason, that made a chill run down her spine. She not only killed a vrisha but a rogue vrisha?

“Well.” Myrell broke from the group to grab her pack. “Like Lex said, doesn’t matter what it was. It’s gone now. So, let’s say we put it behind us and get the hell out of here, eh?”

“Yes, please can we go back to the ship now?” Phen asked.

Dani shook her head. “We have to finish here first. Then it’s the labs.”

“You heard the woman,” Myrell said, slinging her pack over her shoulder. “Let’s go before my back gives out and I decide to grab a new spine off the rack.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kryxis

He felt alive.

That’s the best way he could describe the fire that burned inside him.

No, not the flames that had engulfed him in that strange room that had suddenly erupted into fire. That had been a bad itch more than anything. Flames that had licked

over his skin but never pierced the surface.

He'd long since shaken the ash and smoke from him and broken out of that place. Only the fire inside him remained.

And that little creature had put it there.

He suspected it started with the bite. Their little teeth attempting to sink into his flesh had been unexpected. It had also made his body light up in a way he'd never felt before. One bite and suddenly there was a heavy warmth low in his gut and a hardening between his thighs.

That had both confused him and surprised him. And he wanted to explore more, but he didn't like the idea of being caught in a small room by the armored ones. Especially with their cold weapons.

So, he'd bided his time. Played a little more and waited for his new prey to be alone again. They seemed to have a knack for falling away from their group.

Then they surprised him a second time and gave him a chase. That made the fire stir, the thought of catching them making his legs tremble and his hearts pump widely.

But it was that third surprise. He looked them in the eye as they screamed at him through the glass and watched them set him on fire. They had tricked him. He'd never been thwarted like that before. Yet, he wasn't even angry.

He was impressed. More than that, he was fascinated...Transfixed.

This strange little creature had made him feel alive.

He sat curled up against one wall in the ceiling, hearing the group moving below him.

They were starting for the building adjacent. And that was worrying. Because she lived there.

He had respected her lair only because he'd considered her an equal for some time, in the way that she hunted. He sometimes delighted in annoying her and more than a few times considered challenging her but had let her be.

He knew she would try to take the whole group if she could. But the one who'd thwarted him—the one with dark hair and soft skin and big bright eyes—was his, and if he had to break her to make that clear, then so be it.

Slowly, he unlatched himself from the wall and followed the group from above, keeping his sights on his little trickster.

This time, it was his turn to surprise them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dani

As the map had shown, the main entrance into the next sector was blocked off. Part of the building had collapsed, creating a sink hole. Thankfully, there was a bridge connecting the buildings. From there they could make their way over to the labs.

They climbed their way up to the seventh floor without any issue. There were no bugs to be seen or any other creepy crawlies lurking, which was unexpected but a relief for them all.

When they made their way onto the bridge, however, that changed.

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“What the hell is that?” Ryatt asked, poking his gun into a cluster of black goo on the railing, which stuck to his gun like glue and stretched like gum. Garret pulled at some of it and was forced to rip it off instead.

“Don’t know.” Garret took off his helmet and smelled a piece that was stuck to his glove. He grimaced. “But I have a feeling it’s not company made.”

Dani examined the goo. It was a deep purple in the light.

“Should we go back?” Lex asked.

Dani shined her light across the bridge. The goo stretched along the rails and along the sides of the building like webbing. Some of it was above their heads. She brought up her garometer, and it crackled softly.

The readings were only at a seven.

“Is there any other way?” Dani asked Myrell, who still held the map.

Myrell shook her head. “Only tunnels below and I guarantee they’re blocked. If not...you know we always find something lurking in the tunnels.”

She knew. Every time they ever tried to take a tunnel system, it was infested.

“I say we keep going,” said Garret. “We’re almost half-way.”

Dani gripped the strap of her pack, thinking. She glanced back the way they came.

“Job’s gotta get done, right?” Lex said.

It did. And they’d already lost so much time.

She eyed the pair with their guns locked and ready. “Just keep a look-out.”

Garret winked at her before putting his helmet back on. “We got this.”

He and Ryatt moved to the front. They steered clear of the webbing, aiming their lights into the dark.

The wind picked up as they went, lifting up dust from the rubble below. The bridge trembled, swaying lightly, forcing them to slow.

There were two wide pillars on either side of the bridge at the half-way point. Webbing stretched across either end. As they carefully passed through, they stopped a few feet beyond.

The bridge was broken in several places but only by a few feet. The web-like goo appeared to be keeping them together.

“Maybe it is company made. Those spiderbots might have made these to keep it together,” Lex said.

“Yeah, right,” Myrell mumbled beside her.

“It’s not that far-fetched actually,” said Tom at the back. “They do use a sort of web to lift things.”

Something moved beyond. Dani shined her light across and saw...

“A scibot, look!” Lex pointed.

The robot was standing just at the end, its faceless head bowed. The computer on its chest flashed the words HOW MAY I ASSIST YOU?

It lifted its arm and beckoned them forward.

“Do the bots usually do that?” Myrell asked her.

Dani watched as it slowly waved at them. “Maybe, if it was programmed to.”

“Why would someone program it to do that?”

“Don’t know.”

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Garret moved to the edge of the first broken part of the bridge. "I'll go first. Follow my lead."

They hopped from one part to the next, the bridge shaking with every movement they made. Several times they had to right themselves, using the railing for support, only to have the webbing get stuck to their gloves and their shoes.

"This stuff is gross," Lex commented.

"Phen, keep up. Stop examining it," Dani scolded her. She stepped where Garret stepped, trying to shake off the goo as it stuck her to the bridge. Sheek lifted Tom when he couldn't move. Ryatt nearly ripped his boot off trying to walk. Only a few more paces to go, but walking and jumping were becoming more and more difficult.

Garret halted at the last jump, trying to unstick himself. "Be careful here," he warned as he bent his knees to steady himself.

"You first," Dani said, gripping the rail. "It's a long way down."

He laughed. He leaned back then jumped. As he landed on the other side, he knocked into the bot. The bot lifted off its feet and swung.

Garret stumbled as it knocked into him. "What the hell?" He froze as he looked up. Dani followed his gaze just above the bot's head.

The bot was hanging like a puppet from several thin pieces of web.

Dani tensed. “Wait!” she yelled before anyone could leap forward. Her garometer grew louder. But she didn’t need to see where its levels were at. She could already guess. “Something’s here.”

They looked around, from one side of the bridge to the other. Garret went to the rail and pointed his gun down, while Ryatt had his aimed upward.

“Where? There nothing,” Myrell said.

“I don’t see anything,” said Lex.

Dani noticed Sheek had pulled out her knife. “Something moves.”

Dani didn’t like this. “Everyone, get over now and get inside.”

Garret helped Myrell, catching her as she jumped over. Phen went to jump next then stopped. She stared past Garret, eyes wide like she’d been put into a trance.

“Phen, what are you waiting for?” Lex snapped.

“It...smiles at me,” she said quietly. She lifted her hand slowly and pointed up. “It is...very big.”

Dani turned her gaze upward and her heart dropped.

There it stared down at them from above, clinging to the building. Several eyes with a mouth split four ways, fangs elongated. It looked like a mix between a spider and a mantis. Talons came around either side, with pincers, its skin a blue-gray shell.

It hissed at them.

“Garret,” Dani breathed.

Garret and Ryatt cautiously aimed their guns upward.

“Go,” Garret ordered. No one moved. He shoved Myrell toward the exit. “Go, now!”

The giant spider-mantis shrieked, its talon swooping down, hitting Tom, sending him flying across the bridge and over the rail. The soldiers fired, sending round after round while Dani and the others scrambled.

Dani went to jump. Before she could, the bridge shook violently, sending her back. The screams and shouts of her team rang out along with the gunfire as she rolled, catching part of the rail. Above her the thing moved, sending its arms down to knock the soldiers back. Ryatt’s gunfire hit the webbing holding the bridge together. The monster’s arm slammed down onto part of the bridge, making it drop. Sheek, Phen, and Lex, clinging to either side, fell with it.

Dani still clung to her part of the bridge which began to tilt downward as more webbing snapped, her feet beginning to dangle. She cried out as she tried to get her footing, not daring to look down at the dark abyss below.

The creature roared above her, while the dust and debris kicked up with the wind. Ryatt continued to fire on the beast, but it hardly seemed to affect it. One of the pincers came down and snatched him up like a doll. Ryatt fought, but his gun fell as he was shaken around. Before Dani could shield her eyes, the monster opened its wide jaws and bit down on him with an awful crunch.

Garret let out a roar of his own and continued his assault, this time letting out a plume of fire on the creature, lighting up the night. It shrieked in annoyance before releasing the other half of Ryatt’s body that hadn’t been eaten. His lower half slammed against her side of the bridge and slid off into the dark, making the bridge almost vertical.

“Garret!” she screamed as another arm came down and knocked him back. Then another arm came toward her. In that split second, she decided to let go. She slid down the bridge, but the monster caught her before she could fall. Dani screamed as it brought her closer, struggling in its grip. It squeezed her ribs so tight she thought they might crack.

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As its awful face got closer, its mouth opened, fangs like hooks ready to skew her. A black cloud went over her vision as she tilted her head back.

So close. They had been so close.

Before its mouth could close on her, the creature jerked back and let out a hissing screech. Then Dani felt herself falling.

The monster hadn't released her. Its arm had just been severed, and she was falling with it.

She hit the bridge, pain shooting up an ankle then her knees. The pincers sliced up her arm before letting go, her mouth filling with blood as she bit her lip. She let out a cry as she slid down the bridge and quickly tried to grab the rails.

The monster moved above her, but it seemed to be distracted by something else. Pain seared her senses as she gripped the rail one-handed and tried to claw her way up. The creature disappeared from her peripheral, but she was no longer worried about it and more worried about falling.

Her hand began to slip, and tears stung her eyes from the pain in her arm. She couldn't get her footing.

No, please not like this.

She lost her grip and slid down the bridge, a scream tearing up her throat. She waited to feel the rush of air. To be overcome by the darkness below, where her body would

shatter. The edge flew past her and her heart dropped.

As she fell, getting a glimpse underneath the bridge, something wrapped around her waist, holding her tight, and she was suddenly swinging instead of falling. Her body jolted, breath leaving her lungs, as she arched back.

She blinked, trying to adjust to the cloud of darkness and dust around her. She looked down and saw a red spiny tendril wrapped around her.

No. Not a tendril. A tail.

As it lifted her up, she tilted her head back and stared at the large, hulking shadow above her. She blinked again as the shadow came into view.

Blood rushed from her face, eyes widening, a whimper tearing from her lips. “You...” she breathed.

Her monstrous stalker smiled at her—or appeared to, with its mouth wide and black fangs protruding. Its eyes shined in her light, devious...triumphant.

Oh, sweet revenge. It was written all over their face. And she couldn't stop it.

She was too shocked to even move. Its long red arms were gripping under the bridge, while its blue ones reached for her.

She couldn't even recoil back, though her heart hammered in her throat. With easy movements, it closed the distance between them, its breath fogging up the glass of her helmet.

“kilsa eh sarish nara mina lillak,” it said, grinning. “isha ek vish ras.”

Before she could attempt to struggle out of its grip, it wrapped its blue arms around her, pinning her against it. As it carried her, it began to climb, moving swiftly along the broken bridge back the way they had come. She no longer heard or saw the spider-mantis, and she didn't see any of her crew. Through dust and darkness they moved, a tremor setting into her bones despite the monster's heat against her.

"Please, don't do this," she whispered.

But it didn't hear or didn't care. It only took her away into the dark.

CHAPTER NINE

Dani

She couldn't see well enough to guess where it was taking her. She only saw the edges of buildings and ruins as it raced between them or the feeling of it holding her tight against it as it climbed from one tower to the next. She forced herself to cling to it when she made the mistake of looking down. She didn't expect that it would take her to the very top in order to drop her. It could have seen her fall on the bridge, but it had caught her instead.

She refused to believe it saved her. Not when she didn't know what it planned to do to her. Many possibilities ran through her head, all of them not good. Mostly she just assumed it was taking her back to its lair to eat her. What other reason could it have for nabbing her? She had tried to kill it. She'd thought she had succeeded. But here it was, and the only logical thing now was to expect it wanted revenge.

She considered trying to fight out of its grip. But even when she did struggle, it held her in a steel grip. Even if she could find a way to get loose, it would likely catch her again. And if fire couldn't kill it then she was SOL. She didn't have a weapon, and she couldn't even bite it, tear its flesh. If she had a blade, she suspected it would

do little. As would a gun.

Still, she couldn't stop her mind racing with what more she could do. For now, there was nothing

It raced and leaped from one building to another, making her stomach drop. Eventually, it slowed its pace as they came to another bridge, this one enclosed by glass—or most of it was, except for a section in the middle that was broken. Her kidnapper carefully made its way across then dropped through the gap. It strode across the bridge, unhurried this time. She stared at the dark doorway growing bigger as they got closer, her tremor setting in again.

It slipped through a short tunnelway and out to the other side. By her suit lights, she could see a mural in front of them of the Marityne symbol. A four-armed man with a sun, a planet, a hammer, and a star in its hands. Above him were rays of light. She only had a second to study the picture until her kidnapper veered to the right and went up a short set of stairs.

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Beyond was a lobby, spacious and large, with a welcome desk and elevators on one end and a spiral stair behind it. As the monster moved past the desk, she caught sight of a sign that said WELLNESS CENTER.

She tensed, gaping at the sign.

They were in the medical sector.

The creature bounded up the stairs, two at a time, before moving down a hallway. The doors at the end were half broken in, but the creature slid through them without issue. She saw a sign that said Marityne Hospital and another that said ICU medibay. The creature moved onward until they turned for a set of glass doors and into what she could only guess was a surgery room. A large pod sat in the center and on another side was a metal slab with an ominous looking surgery-bot hovering above it.

Her kidnapper set her down on the metal table. She cowered from it as soon as it released her, jolting back and almost falling. It glared down at her, but she refused to look back at it, afraid she might faint. It watched her for a moment, then it hissed something, making her flinch.

To her surprise, it stalked away. She blinked and it was gone.

She searched the dark and didn't see it. Now was the time. She needed to go. Take this moment and run.

She slid off the table and moved for the exit then yelped, jumping back in surprise when it appeared again.

“Hesha, sivari,” it growled.

She whimpered, stumbling back into the table. It pointed its long talon and hissed at her again. It reached for her, and she blurted something between “no!” and “stop!” before it grabbed her waist and set her back on the table.

What the hell?

This time out of anger, she tried sliding off as it turned away again. But it whirled right back around and stopped her.

“Sivari, nisha ves.”

She stilled. Was it just her or did it seem exasperated?

It watched her again, its red eyes narrowing suspiciously before it swiftly disappeared yet again.

Dani gripped the table, craning her neck to see where it went. She was about to hop off and make a break for it when she noticed a wet warmth sticking to her suit. She looked down and pulled up her arm to see blood soaking her sleeve.

Damn.

She pressed her hand against her arm. She felt the pain in her ankle and knees, too, and the sting of the cut on her lip from biting it. She was starting to feel the soreness all over her body now that the adrenaline was beginning to wane.

Shakily, she slipped from the table and started for the doors. Somewhere there had to be a supply unit. Limping her way out, she turned down a hallway, looking back behind her to see if her red-eyed monster was there following.

The hall opened into a waiting area with a wide window looking out toward the city. Dani slowed as she gazed across the city center. She couldn't see her ship nor the bridge they had taken. Her mouth trembled thinking of her crew, remembering how she had seen several of them fall.

She should have had them turn back. It was all her fault.

Tears stung her eyes. But now wasn't the time. She blinked them away and crept around a set of lounge chairs toward another hallway. She turned off the lights on her helmet, leaving only one light on her arm for navigating, and moved as quickly as she could.

She found a supply closet at the end of the hall. With shaky hands, she rifled around and found a medikit on the top shelf. As she slid it off, several other boxes of supplies fell.

No way that monster didn't hear.

Cursing, she slipped out of the closet, looking back toward the lounge. As she turned to sneak the other direction, she almost collided with a massive body. She cried out, falling back and dropping her kit as the monster stood there as if waiting for her the whole time.

Instinctually, her hand went for her stunner, forgetting it hadn't worked the first two times. Then she froze. In its hand it carried...another medikit.

She frowned, staring at it. The monster moved, transferring the medikit to one blue hand before coming toward her. She tried to scramble away and was embarrassed at how little it mattered. The creature picked her up with ease, even as she swung her arm at it, kicking her feet. The more she fought, the sharper the pain was that shot up her arm and legs.

“Let me go!” she snapped.

Stalking back down the way they had come, it returned her to the surgery room, plopping her right back on the table.

She swiped at it, practically growling with her teeth bared, and felt her face heat up when she caught the odd amusement in its gaze. Of course, it wasn't afraid of her at all. Why should it be?

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It set the medikit next to her. “Serifna mish xe ra vish.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” she answered.

It tugged at her sleeve and she yanked her arm back. She hugged her arm, glaring at the demon. “I know I’m hurt.”

“Xa,” it clipped out. It opened the medikit with its blue hand and had it face her. She tensed as it knelt before her, another hand gripping the table leg.

She locked eyes with it for several seconds and realized it was waiting for her to fix her arm. But why the hell would it want that?

Maybe it was playing with her again. Screaming at it probably wouldn’t make it go away.

Swallowing, she released her arm. Feeling out of breath, she slipped off her helmet and inhaled deeply, grateful the air was stable here too. Setting it aside, she tried to roll up her sleeve, but the pain was too much, and her fingers couldn’t get a good grip with all the blood. Cursing, she took a pair of scissors in the medikit and started to slowly cut up the sleeve at the point of the tear, gritting her teeth.

The demon mumbled something, and she paused.

“What? This isn’t fast enough for you?” she snapped. “Sorry to disappoint, but you’ll have to wait a while before you get to eat me.”

It tilted its head at her and she halted to study it. The more she got a better look at it, the more she saw the vrisha that she had seen from pictures. Her memory was still fuzzy about them, but she remembered learning they were much like otherkin. They were said to be more intelligent. So, seeing it now as just a creature was wrong, especially when it could clearly talk and made human gestures like pointing.

It wore pants—or at least the rags of what once had been dark, somewhat baggy fabric, now mostly burnt—to cover itself, but nothing else. Judging by its build, it looked very male, but that could be wrong.

She returned to cutting her sleeve. Didn't matter. They could be toying with her still. She had no choice but to be wary of them.

When she was finally able to cut the sleeve around her arm, she let the bloody mess drop and examined the cut. It looked deep, going up her arm, curving at her elbow and around the back of her bicep. She needed to clean it first then she would—

The demon took hold of her wrist and licked up the side of the cut, black tongues lapping up her blood.

A shriek tore up her throat. Out of instinct, she yanked back her hand while pushing its face away.

The demon bared its teeth at her. “Lillak, isha reese nifa meshana martiss,” they hissed. They grabbed her arm again and cleaned the blood, their slick tongues trailing across her skin, giving her goosebumps. Her face heated and she made a sound of disgust, trying to pull her hand away.

“What are you, a damn vampire? Stop! You'll infect it!”

They clicked their tongues. “Vish.”

“I don’t understand. I need to clean. Understand? Clean!” She shook her arm.

They pointed their talon at the cut. “Clean!”

A chill ran down her spine. “Don’t...don’t do that, it’s creepy.” They sounded like her again. How they could mimic her so well was way too freaky.

They seemed to be thinking. Then they repeated themselves. “Clean!”

The voice was lower this time. Sounding a lot like Garret. It still unnerved her.

She studied them. “Are you trying to say you’re cleaning it? Because I don’t believe you.”

They huffed. “Clean.” They tapped on the medikit, gesturing to the things inside. “Villari.”

She glanced at the kit then back at them. “Heal.”

“Xa, heal,” they said. They grazed their taloned thumb across her arm, making her shiver. “Heeeaaalll,” they purred and stuck their tongues out, lapping up the fresh blood.

She tugged her hand away, pulse fluttering, her face warming again. “I got it. But I think I’ll do it my way, thank you very much.”

They exposed their fangs, creating a strange grin. “Ista rish xir leeshna.”

“Great.” Still, no idea what they said but she assumed they understood, no more licking. She took an antiseptic rag from the medikit and wiped the rest of the blood from her arm. Then she found a meldpen and, pressing it firmly to her, slowly glued

the skin back together. After, she wrapped the arm in gauze.

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The vrisha watched her, waiting patiently, their tail flicking every so often. She tried not to glance back at them but found it difficult. Her heart raced just seeing how massive they were—a huge predator in every sense. All her instincts were still on edge, telling her to run, and it took everything in her to remain outwardly calm.

She felt sweat drip down her back and between her breasts as she dared to lock eyes with the vrisha. She bent down and unlatched her boots then rolled up her pant-legs, checking her knees next to see if she'd scraped them.

In the light, they looked a little red and banged up, but no blood. They would definitely bruise later. Her ankle unfortunately looked a little swollen, which explained why it hurt when she walked.

She readjusted her pants and put her boots back on. As she went to straighten, the vrisha reached out. Dani froze as their hand drew up to her face. When their sharp fingers brushed against her lip, she flinched.

“What are you...?” She straightened away from their hand, touching her lip, feeling it was also a tad swollen. Her fingers pressed against the cut, making her wince. Ah, she'd bit it pretty bad.

She used some healing gel from the kit and applied it gently. Then she shut the box with a click before glancing nervously back at the vrisha.

The vrisha rose and took the medikit. She had to crane her neck as they towered over her. With trembling hands, she put her helmet back on then went to slide off the table.

She was surprised when the vrisha gave her space, allowing her to take a few careful steps. Still, she could feel its eyes burning into her, studying her every move.

No way she was going to be outrunning them.

“I need to get back to the ship...” she mumbled despite knowing they didn’t understand. She didn’t turn to them. “I should go...” No way it was just letting her leave. Maybe they wanted to see how badly injured she was first, to gauge how easily they could mess with her.

Before she could decide what she could possibly do to get away, a sharp pain shot up her leg, and she hissed, stumbling.

They were there in an instant, their hands on her ribs as if to steady her. She went rigid as she felt their heat at her back and in their hands, talons curling along her suit.

“Visaa mere ni mar xe das,” they hissed behind her. Dani gasped as they lifted her off her feet.

“W-wait!” she cried.

They growled something else before wrapping their arms around her. In an instant they were off.

Dani could hardly struggle or keep up with every turn they made down the passageways, forced again to cling to the vrisha.

Through more passages they flew, and she wondered where they were taking her because it was clear they had a destination in mind. They took a narrow stairway downward before kicking open a door to the outside.

Crossing the city, they weaved their way around buildings until they came to a ground-level bridge.

Dani craned her neck but couldn't see the bottom as they crossed over what had to be a very deep but very narrow chasm, no doubt made when Marityne had started mining. She looked up in time to see a broken-down sign that said Marityne Boulevard.

This was the entertainment sector. Always the smallest sector of these company cities, but it was policy to have some sort of amusement for workers so they didn't lose their minds. Most of the time it was nothing more than gaming centers and bars.

Why the hell would they bring her here?

The vrisha snuck around a building only a few stories high and into an alleyway around the back before stopping beside a thick metal door. They worked at a set of wires connected to the doorlock until the door slid opened, revealing nothing but a pitch-black darkness beyond.

The vrisha slipped inside without hesitation just as panic rose in her. She squirmed in the alien's grip as she tried to see anything in the dark, only noticing a few metal crates. She could hardly hear their steps, just the slight scraping of their tail against the metal.

They reached another door, and as it slid open, she noticed a dim yellow light just down a passage beyond. The vrisha moved toward this light. The passage opened up and there she found—

Her eyes widened. Was she seeing this right?

The vrisha set her down in the middle of a room and disappeared. A moment later, all

the lights around her came to life.

It was a large open room filled with...things. Lots and lots of things. From junk to scrap to signs along the walls and wires with little twinkly lights high above. There was a row of gaming machines and slots, some that were working, with their flashy lights and ringing bells. In front of her was a workstation made from a thick metal slate on top of a pool table. Tools were laid on the surface including one that looked to be a welder's flare.

With the lights dangled everything from small ships and planet models to shoes and colorful scraps of clothing and...were those bones? Yes, she was certain they were. There was even a skull of some creature she couldn't identify. And so much more. Weapons as small as her stunner and as big as a missile launcher lined one shelf, along with laptops, ISpads, clocks, even a little bobble-head doll.

There were also statues. Great hulking metal pieces made from anything from stolen limb parts to bones to other scrap, some half-made, laying on their sides, some upright and placed in various spots, but all strange and abstract save for one at the back that looked eerily similar to Marityne's four-armed statues.

This was a gaming center turned into some weird collector's museum. It was like a hoarder had taken over and turned it into their art studio.

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Dani realized she was gaping with her mouth open and promptly closed it. The vrisha reappeared beside her, making her jump.

“Essa mi havari, lillak.”

“Um...”

It gestured to the room. “kasss.”

“I don’t know what you—AH!” She jumped again as the vrisha’s tail slithered across her back, poking her. They clearly wanted her to follow. She stood her ground, giving them a suspicious glare. “Why?”

The vrisha gestured toward the room again, hissing something else. She glanced around. Did they seriously want to show off their lair to her?

She could see the anticipation and excitement in their spooky red and blue eyes. They did. They seriously wanted to. Only a few hours ago, she had tried to burn them alive, and they were acting like they were having a friend over for dinner.

Or was she the dinner?

She crossed her arms, warmth spreading up her neck, remembering when they had licked her, then the time before that when they had pinned her. “I shouldn’t be here...how do I know you aren’t trying to lure me into a cage or something?”

They tilted their head, clearly not understanding her either.

She thought it over. “You.” She pointed at them. “Are going to eat”—she pretended to gnaw on her arm then pointed at herself—“me?”

They blinked at her with a second pair of eyelids, making her shudder.

She shook her head. This was crazy, but maybe they really had no plan to kill her after all. They just wanted to catch her and add her to their collection of things.

The vrisha offered the medikit to her, and she took it hesitantly. They then disappeared again before she could open her mouth. She needed to figure out how to convince them to let her go, but this was nothing like the hostage situations she’d seen in films or stories from the web with someone tied up in a bunker or locked in a closet. She didn’t even know how to communicate with them let alone persuade them to spare her.

She studied the room again. No cages to put her in from what she could see. Just a bunch of strange art. Making the vrisha feel even less like some odd creature.

Still, they had stalked her and scared her, so still a creep.

They also saved your life, Dani,said a little voice.

She looked down at the medikit she now held close to her like a shield. It was one thing to believe they had wanted to take her life for themselves but a whole other thing when they took her to a hospital and let her heal herself. And she had no answer as to why.

Peering around, she stopped her gaze along the wall just above the table. Her brows furrowed as she limped over to it and put the medikit down.

There were drawings on the wall. They looked like they were done by a child. Little

stick figures with what looked like two parents, a child, and a cat. On a few others were drawings of trees and a mountain, a blue sky, and a sun.

She frowned, trying to make sense of them when she noticed a shadow moving beside her. The vrisha was standing there. In their hands was a canteen and a mealbar.

She stared at the food before flicking her gaze up to the vrisha.

“Seesh,” they said, offering the food to her.

She hesitated. “I, um...” she wasn’t sure how to respond. Several paranoid thoughts raced through her head, but she forced herself to ignore them. She felt drained, shaky. Cautiously, she took off her helmet and set it aside. She took both, and uncapping the canteen first, she took a sip.

It was water. And surprisingly filtered. She took several generous gulps before wiping her mouth and letting out a sigh of relief. She ripped the bar open next and took a large bite. The vrisha watched her as she chewed and swallowed.

“Seesh?” she said, pointing to the bar. “Food?”

“Seesh,” they repeated. “Food.”

She took another bite. It didn’t taste like much, but it was something.

“Xa, lillak, sis ne essa.” They tugged on her suit, wanting her to follow them.

She glared at them. “Nothing funny, got it?”

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They clicked their tongues. “Vinash resa xi ish nikari ri—”

“I’m asking for a truce. I’ll follow you and in return I go back to the ship.”

They hissed. “Nisetship.”

She did a double-take. “Excuse me?”

“Niset. Ship,” they clipped out.

Her eyes narrowed. So, they understood a few words. “Does that mean no?”

They grunted. Before she could argue, they moved around her, gesturing again for her to follow. This time she did, careful as she walked on her ankle. She followed them to another set of doors into the gaming center lobby. The vrisha threw open the door and pointed up toward the sky. Dani peered outside and saw the dust storm that was rolling in. A big rumbling cloud of debris that could hold anything from dirt to glass with high winds that could knock you right off your feet.

Damn.

The vrisha shut the door and locked it. “Esh na shinia essa diras hassa.”

Something told her that translated to: you stay here till it passes.

“How long?” she asked, pointing to the door then making a wavy gesture. “When will it pass?”

“Hassa.” They repeated her wave.

“Yes, but when?”

They led her back into the room of stuff and headed to the table. On the metal surface, she noticed several hundred small notches carved into it. The vrisha tapped on one, paused, then tapped on three.

“What? One to three hours?”

The vrisha appeared to be thinking over her words. She set the canteen down and point to a notch. “One,” she said. Then she tapped on three. “Three.”

“Xa. One. Three.”

“Hours.”

They moved over to a map on the wall, hanging with several others. One was of the planet with the sun in the corner. They tapped on the sun then traced their talon around the planet. Doing so three times.

The blood drained from her face. “D-days!?”

“Daysss,” they hissed.

She almost sat on the ground. Instead, she leaned against the table. “No. That can’t be right.” She was told the storms only lasted a few hours. But then they had also been told the chances of dealing with a big storm would be slim.

As were the chances of many things, and yet everything was going wrong on this planet.

Dani covered her face with her hands. If they had just made it past that damn bridge, they would have gotten to the labs and back to the ship before it hit. Thinking of her crew made her throat tighten again, tears stinging her eyes. They didn't deserve that. She should have protected them better; she could have turned them around at the first sign of a threat. But she had been so determined when they'd been so close to finishing, refusing to believe it could have gotten worse after the vrisha.

Now they were probably dead, and it felt like her fault. Her crew...her friends. What had she done?

A little sob caught in her throat, her body trembling. She couldn't think. Couldn't stop herself. She'd failed. She'd failed them and herself.

She felt movement beside her and something brushing against her head. She looked up and saw the vrisha petting her hair. She stared at them in confused wonder. What was up with them anyway?

"I don't need your pity, you know." She knew they didn't get any of that. They grunted all the same and guided her hand that held the canteen, raising it to her mouth. For some reason that made her want to laugh. She uncapped it and took another drink, and it helped a little. As she rested the canteen at her side, the vrisha reached out to her again. Its talons brushed against her face, catching one of her tears.

"Es mish ri nivara, lillak," they whispered. Then they licked the tear off their talon. They stalked away, leaving her leaning there in stunned silence. She heard them rummaging around across the other side of the room, then a moment later they stood before her with something in their hands.

Dani looked down at what they held and this time didn't contain her laughter. It started quiet until her body was shaking from it. She took the stuffed animal—a shabby looking white cat with four arms and little antenna—and held it to her, trying

to contain her laughter. What was even happening?

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The vrisha disappeared again and brought back what looked like a lantern with funny patterns in its glass. They wound up the switch on one side then set it down on a crate nearby. The lantern came to life, turning in its metal casing, and the patterns made flowery shapes along the wall dance. A little chime began to play with it.

Dani watched it and let her laughter die away. Even in an ugly company city world, kids could be found, even if only a few hundred. And the vrisha had collected the toys now that they were gone.

She glanced up at the vrisha and felt...oddly guilty. "How long have you been here?"

They tugged at the ear of the cat. "Kalis minari raas."

If she was going to be stuck in here with them, it was going to be a long couple of days. She glanced back at the door. Maybe she could escape at some point, but traveling through the dust storm was incredibly risky especially now that her suit wasn't intact and her helmet had a hairline crack in it. Her helmet did have a way to communicate back to the ship—or would have if the power wasn't down. If Morse was working on it, she could try in an hour or two. For now...

She studied the vrisha, still not knowing what to make of them. Did they want revenge or not? She couldn't blame them if they did, but it made her wary all the same.

She set the stuffed animal down and got off the table. Without taking her eyes off them, she circled around them, and as she did, the vrisha turned to face her.

Let's try this again. She put out her hand. "Truce?"

The vrisha's gaze flicked down to her hand.

"No hurting, okay?"

Their nostril's flared.

"No biting. No eating."

"No...eat," they said.

"Or biting." She raised her hand to her lips and pretended to bite down then shook her head. "No."

They seemed to understand but were thinking on it. "Minaris tisa?"

"What?"

They slinked back to the table and tapped on one of the notches. "One?"

She grimaced at them. "No. Not once!"

They huffed as if that were vexing and inconvenient.

She shook her head at the audacity. "And no more scaring."

"Sc—scarring?"

"Like this." She made her hands into claws and bared her teeth, lunging and growling at him.

The vrisha flinched back, appearing appalled. “Ess niset hissa vrisha arishari,” they hissed.

Something “no vrisha.” She suspected they were saying that’s not how they act. “Well, that’s what it looked like”—she pointed to her eye— “to me.”

They snorted, mumbling something else.

“No pinning either. No being weird. Just be nice.”

“N-niiicee?”

“Yes. Like how you were before.” She took the mealbar from her pocket, showing it to them, then pointed to the stuffed cat. The vrisha followed her gaze. “Nice.”

“Nice,” they said in Garret’s voice, making her wince.

“Yes.”

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They turned back to her and barred their long black fangs. “Yeesssss.”

She was never going to get used to the mimicking, but somehow it helped them understand, so she tried to let it go.

She held out her hand again. “And if you be nice, I won’t try to kill you again. Got it?”

They reached out and gripped her wrist, turning it one way then the other. “Like this,” she said, readjusting her hand so it settled firmly in theirs. Their hand was so big it encased hers like a warm mitt. The talons unnerved her a little, afraid they would slice her skin clean open, but she didn’t want to offend them, so she kept her face blank even as her heart skipped and a chill ran down her spine.

They circled their thumb over her skin, and that only made her shiver even more, goosebumps forming over the skin. She pulled away and they thankfully released her.

She cleared her throat, rubbing her arm to make the goosebumps go away. “Good,” she said. “Let’s start over.”

CHAPTER TEN

Dani

The vrisha was definitely a hoarder.

There was much more she had missed just from her spot by the door. And the vrisha

was ecstatic to show her everything she had yet to see. Trinkets, toys, a skull or two, insect shells and wings, some strange tentacle thing all twisted up in a jar. Sometimes he just pointed at things and said words, other times he placed things in her hands to examine for herself. Things they were clearly proud of. She didn't complain, just watched and listened, sometimes responding with yes or no as they were able to determine at least that in each other's language. The vrisha would show her something, she would name it in her language, and then they would respond in theirs. They went around the room pointing at and naming things. A lot of the stuff was junk but not everything. They had a few cryo-batteries, a couple of large gems, and a strange orb that showed a map of an unknown galaxy.

"You found all this here?" she said, waving to everything and then pointing to a map of the city.

"Xa."

She was beginning to suspect the vrisha had been here a long time. She wondered when they had crashed here and if it had been before the planet had been decommissioned. If that was the case, then she wondered why they hadn't snuck on a ship and left with everyone else or why they hadn't tried to fix their ship. She hadn't seen a single sign of a ship, no parts at all.

Even if she could find a way to ask, she doubted they would tell her. Instead, she kept silent as they showed her one of the slot machines. They pulled the lever, and it landed on several stars in a row, making the machine light up.

"Sifa xir tisara." They gestured to the lever.

She pursed her lips, then drifted over to the machine and took hold of the lever, pulling it down. Stars and planets popped on the screen and the machine lit up once more.

“Cute,” she said.

The vrisha pointed to the slot. “Kissa.”

“Er, no, this is a slot machine. Cute means pretty or appealing.” She pointed to the colorful twinkling lights which they had already established a word for. “Lights are cute.”

The vrisha pointed and repeated her words. “Lights. Cute.”

“Yes.”

The vrisha looked around then pointed at a dead husk of a large insect. “Cute.”

She giggled. “No. Not that.” She searched around then pointed to a cat figurine sitting on top of a metal shelf, with big eyes wearing a little scarf. “Cute.”

The vrisha blinked then pointed at a shiny ring with little gems sitting below the cat. “Cute.”

“Yes. And pretty.”

“Pretttyyy.”

“That’s right.”

“Pretty.” They pointed to a bedazzled watch next to the ring.

“Yes.”

He looked at her and traced a claw across her shoulder. “Pretty,” they purred.

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She tried not to flush and failed hard. “You catch on fast, huh?” she mumbled. She faced them better then tapped at her chest. “Dani.”

Their hand went to the center of her chest, two of their claws digging into her suit.

“Dani,” they said. They then touched their own chest and said a word that sounded like “Krix hiss.”

“Krix hiss?” she said.

“Krix...issss.”

“Krixis.”

They grunted. They pointed behind her. She followed their hand and saw a sign that said Crysis Labs but there was a slash across the C and the first S, like someone or something had taken a knife to it. So, the words looked like Kryxis.

“Ah, I see.”

Kryxis stalked over to a Marityne poster with the words “Growing together” on the bottom and gestured to a woman engineer in the center. “Dani,” they said.

“Yes, woman. That’s what I am. And you...?” She pointed to the statue of the four-armed man.

“Xa.Xalvrisha.”

So, they were male. Good to have that clarified at least. Now she really felt bad about seeing them...seeinghimas just some kind of creature. She really should have paid more attention in class when they went over his kind.

A sudden crackle broke the silence. Dani checked her garometer and saw it detected a new energy level within the room. A very low-level energy.

“You’ve got something living in here,” she remarked. She hobbled across the room following the detection. Not a bug, toolow for even that. She slipped past shelving units and stacked crates until the crackling grew louder. She came upon the body of one of Marityne’s cybernetic metal skeletons. At its feet was a small cylinder glass container.

Dani picked it up and cried out in delight. “You’ve got plant-life!” Like a giddy child, she turned the container in her hands, realizing it was some kind of growth tank, with a little light at the top and droplets of water on the glass. The plant was dark green with red stripes down its leaves. She whirled around and found Kryxis right behind her. He took the tank from her to examine it himself.

“Itarak,” he said, tapping on the glass.

“Yes, plant. Where did you find it?”

He tapped on the plant again. “Plant. Cute?”

Dani couldn’t help smirking. “This one? Yes, it’s cute.”

“Dani like plant?”

“Dani like plant very much, yes,” she said. “Did you find it growing somewhere? Or was it in the growth tank when you found it?”

Instead of answering her, he offered a hand to her. “Cisa, xi mak xes.”

Dani glanced down at his hand. Should she trust him now or not?

He hadn’t done anything too suspicious yet. So far, he was playing nice, so maybe she was willing to give him a chance...

Still, she hesitated, unable to forget the time he had grabbed her inside the ship with that same hand, picking her up off her feet. He was acting so different now she really did wonder if security had iced a different vrisha after all and he was a twin.

But no, it had to be him.

Cautiously, she set her hand in his. “Nice,” she said, exhaling slowly.

“Niicccccc,” he hissed. His hand encircled her wrist. “Cisa, lillak.” Gripping her firmly, he led her away from the skeleton and toward another side of the room. There he slid away a large metal slab to reveal a hidden doorway.

Before she could ask where it went, he was picking her up again and carrying her down the dark passageway. She tensed in his grip, about to protest that she didn’t need to be carried and could walk fine—but remembered that wasn’t true, and he was practically flying down the passage. They passed by several doors until he stopped at one and opened it to reveal a staircase. He took her down until they slipped out another door and into a wide tunnelway. There were little lights along the floor to guide their way, which meant a generator must be running somewhere, which would also explain why Kryxis had power in the building above.

Nothing stirred here thankfully, no bugs or anything, probably because Kryxis scared them off just with his presence alone.

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Not far down the tunnel, they climbed up another set of stairs to ground level. Anxiety was beginning to pull at her again. Where was he taking her?

They entered a large chamber with several doorways. Her heart leaped in her throat as she saw a giant version of the metal man in the center. There were also full metal skeletons on display of different species. Human, grex, lygin...and a few others she didn't recognize. Kryxis slipped past them all without a glance, taking her down a hallway toward a set of double doors.

Her garometer went off. There was something living beyond those doors.

Whatever it was, she really hoped it wasn't something that was going to make her regret this whole situation.

She shuddered as she got a vision of cages. Shit, what if this was a zoo? What if he was going to add her to some sick collection after all?

As they got closer, she began to struggle. "Kryxis, wait..."

He swung the doors open and took her inside. Before she could get out of his hold, he let her go, setting her on her feet and leaving her in a dark and oddly steamy room.

She blinked, trying to see. "Where the hell are—"

The lights slowly turned on, like night turning to day.

Her eyes widened, a little gasp slipping through her teeth.

By the elder gods.

She stood there gaping at the giant plants around her. Plants of all shapes and colors. Some growing all the way up to the ceiling, others twisting and weaving around the walls. High above the dome's ceiling, the light made it look like daytime.

It was a conservatory. A thriving one. She even saw those little spider bots crawling around, only these were smaller and they were spraying the plants with water.

She blinked, and Kryxis was there beside her. He brought the growth tank up to her face. "Itarak."

Dani took the tank from him, letting out a surprised little laugh. "You've...been taking care of all this?"

He gestured to the spiderbots.

Ah, okay. So they were doing most of the work. Just like those in the shipping sector, they had been left to their task despite everyone being gone.

Dani walked over to a towering plant with fanning orange leaves. "Some of these are rare," she commented. "Agarius Val." She looked around and noticed they had labels beside each plant. "Margo Leech!" She pointed. "And—is that Tigrus Bluum?" She rushed over to examine the deep blue and black flowers with little pink thorns. "It is," she gasped. "That's insane!"

"Insane," Kryxis repeated. She glanced over at him and saw the confusion in his eyes. She realized she was grinning from ear to ear and straightened.

"Um." Jeez, how did she explain that? "You know, shocking, like..." She put her hands to her face and opened her mouth and eyes wide in a shocked expression.

He grunted. “Firas.” His eyes widened like hers, and he bared his teeth in what she could only assume was a vrisha’s shocked expression.

She laughed. “Yes, something like that.”

He let out a strange sound in response, and it took her a moment to realize it was laughter as well. She wasn’t sure if it was genuine or if he was just mimicking her again, but she didn’t mind.

“This is amazing. The company would have a field day if they got their hands on some of these.” She brushed her hand against the leaves of a carakus plant. “Marityne must have been studying some of these too.” She walked along, taking in all the colors. Something squished under her boot, making her glance down. There were patches of fungi along the ground just like the ones she’d seen before. She crouched to examine them closer. Yes, they were those odd blue ones. The more she looked, in fact, the more she could see them growing everywhere. Along the sides of plants mostly, and even on the walls.

“Strange...”

She rose and a neat idea popped into her head. “Kryxis, do you have any more of these?” She tapped on the glass of the growth tank. “More?” She put up several fingers to try to indicate more than one.

“Xa.”

She fixed him a devious smirk. “Good. I lost one of my samples to your antics last time. Now, you’re going to help me.”

She was back in the gaming center. And this time she had a couple samples taken from the conservatory including the fungi. Not as many as she would have liked. She

would have taken a sample of every single plant in there if she could, but there were only so many tanks Kryxis could find and so many she could carry. She'd lost her pack at the bridge, but Kryxis had her set there too, providing a bag big enough for the samples and for some of the cryo-batteries he'd collected. He had no use for them, and she'd lost all of hers.

If it wasn't for the storm, she'd be returning to the ship and getting Saul and Tristen out to look for her crew. Her stomach twisted, making her queasy thinking about what they might find. She didn't want to imagine it. But like hell she was going to leave her crew's bodies here.

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A few times, she thought she was going to break down, seeing them fall into the dark again and again in her mind. But she kept her focus on getting the samples and preparing to leave once the storm was through. She had to keep it together until she found them.

She sat alone now in the hoarder's den, listening to the wind and every so often the sound of something banging against the building, some debris from the storm. Kryxis had gone to get it as he put it. She wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but he made her understand he would be close by and be back shortly.

While he was gone, she used the gel from the medikit on her knees to soothe them. After, she found a healing compressor for her ankle, wrapping it firmly. By the time the storm was through, she should be able to walk better. At least she hoped.

"Come on...Come on," she whispered. Sitting on a set of crates with her bad leg resting across, she messed with the communicator on her helmet. She was uncertain how likely it was yet that the ship's power would be restored, but she had to try getting a hold of someone regardless. So far, there was nothing but static. She messed with the settings again, trying to put the signal out farther than it could usually handle. Someone had to have survived. Or Saul would have wondered why they weren't back by now and would have tried to reestablish communication. Unfortunately for her, the storm made it even more difficult.

Trying the different channels, she got more of the same, static upon static. She scanned again for another channel, one that went farther out.

There was nothing again at first, until she heard a soft hiss followed by a low

groaning sound. Heart fluttering, she adjusted the settings to refine the signal.

“He—are you—in...”

Dani tensed. It was so soft, barely audible, but she was certain she heard those words. She sharpened the signal once more.

“Hello—anyone—here.”

She hissed through her teeth. That sounded like...

Tapping on the communicator, she spoke as clearly as she could. “Hello! Can you hear me?”

Silence, then. “Hello—any—here.”

She repeated her words over, but each time, they never answered, just said the same thing followed by static.

Damn. The signal wasn’t strong enough. Still, she tried for several minutes, but eventually she heard nothing at all. They were gone.

She set the helmet beside her, rubbing at her temples. She couldn’t get a hold of them. But she was certain she recognized Myrell’s voice.

She remembered that she and Garret had made it to the other side of the bridge before the spider mantis had attacked. She wasn’t one hundred percent sure of Garret’s fate, but she knew now Myrell was definitely alive.

And she had to be in the research sector, close to the labs, since that was where they were headed.

She might be stuck there. And who knew what other horrors might be inside.

Setting her hands in her lap, she clenched them into fists. She had to do something.

There was a soft scraping sound coming from beyond one of the doors, like something was lumbering close by. Dani slid off the crate, hand at her stunner, staring at the door.

She jumped as the door was kicked open, finding Kryxis, who dragged something behind them. He halted where she stood and dropped the lower half of some furry creature that looked like a small bear with tusks and a long blue tail at her feet.

She wasn't sure how to react. Yet, Kryxis seemed to be waiting for some kind of reaction from her. "What is..."

"Seesh," he stated. "Xi pretoris var rikas, Dani."

It took her a moment to understand. "You...hunted this for me?"

"Xa." He crouched over the beast, and with little to no hesitation, stabbed it in the gut with his tail and ripped it open. Gripping its throat, he tore the skin clean off with one pull, throwing the bloody fur to one side.

Dani smacked her hand over her mouth, trying not to gag. "Oh, my god."

Bones crunching, he ripped off a thigh leg and offered it to her. "Seesh."

This time, she did gag. "Oh, no thank you." She turned her head away.

He looked disappointed. Dare she say, even dejected.

“Dani, makari sheesh.” Dani must eat, he was saying.

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“Not that. I can’t eat that, no way. First of all, you have to cook it.”

He glared at her, clearly not understanding.

“Cook. Here, look.” She took a small torchlight from one of her suit pockets and clicked it on to show him the fire. She then put the fire under the meat he was holding, the bright orange flames licking against the flesh.

A single fang slipped from his lip. “Ah,burak.”

“Yes, cook.”

He snuck away. She heard things clattering around until he returned with a large metal bowl and a bottle of some clear liquid. He poured the liquid into the bowl and gestured for her torchlight which she gave to him. Using the flames from the torch he lit the inside of the bowl, and it caught instantly, creating a bowl of fire. He set it down then started to tear pieces of meat from bone, pinching it with his talons as he turned it in the fire.

Several minutes later, the meat was a golden-brown and didn’t smell nearly as bad as she had expected. He offered it to her, and she took it reluctantly.

He watched her as she held it, waiting. Well, it couldn’t hurt to try...could it?

She took a careful bite...and found the meat to be surprisingly tender. But the taste was...

She grimaced as she forced herself to swallow.

Kryxis bared his teeth in that funny grin. He took the rest of the thigh and held it over the fire.

“Niza riash, veema xi sheesh.” He tore it with his fangs, bone crunching as he ate everything, shaking his head like he was still trying to shake it dead. She stood there in both horror and fascination.

She forced herself to eat one last bite out of politeness but refused any more. Kryxis ate a thigh and a half before setting the rest aside. He came back and petted her head. “Xia ish esha, lillak.”

She took hold of his wrist and gently took his hand away. “You’re very thoughtful, aren’t you? When you’re being nice.”

“Ka xia, Dani, Xa.”

Dani fixed him a little smile. She thought over her next words. “Will you do something for me again?”

He tilted his head.

“Will you...help me again?”

“Help,” he repeated.

“You know, like with my arm.” She touched her arm. “Or the tanks.” She pointed to them. “Helped.”

“Xa, adiza.”

“Adiza...again?” She put up her finger. “One more time?”

His eyes shifted from her finger then back to her. He bowed his head. “Xa, lillak, xi eisha leesh ish.”

She slipped by him and pointed up to the sign that said Crysis Labs. “I need you to take me to the labs. I need to help one of my crew in the research sector.” She lumbered over to a map of the city by the table and tapped on the research sector. “Take me here?”

Kryxis scratched at the side of his jaw as if thinking. “Esha nizetra.”

That sounded like a no. She dropped her arm. “No?”

He shook his head and looked around him. He grabbed the sharp end of his tail and waved it at her. “Nizetra.”

She stared at it. “Dangerous?” she guessed.

He grunted, dropping his tail. “Dangerissss.”

She frowned, biting the inside of her cheek. Of course it was. But what place wasn’t at this point?

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Dani approached him, stopping only a foot away. Glancing at his arms, she noticed the blue pair were smaller than his red, with only four large fingers. She took one of them, holding it in hers.

Kryxis tensed suddenly, and she wondered if the blue hands were more sensitive than the others. She ignored his reaction and forced him to look at her. "Please, Kryxis."

He studied her, hopefully recognizing the desperate look on her face. He reached out with a red hand and brushed a lock of her hair away. "Izet eisha."

She shivered a little at his touch. "Is that a yes?"

His lip twitched, and he exhaled as if with a sigh. "Xa, Dani. Help."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kryxis

He did not like the idea of taking her to the labs. They were occupied by others. Not just the great one with her webs, but others who would dare to harm her. And he would not react well to anything trying to take her.

A part of him wanted to say no. To keep her safe in his den. It had not been very long, and she was ready to leave so soon.

He understood her urgency to an extent. She was anxious to find her companions. Something he didn't have.

Still, he had hoped his den would have enticed her enough to want to rest for a while. He was proud of it. Of the things he had collected. She appeared curious, and he found he wanted to impress her by showing his possessions. He had seen other creatures here gather things to show potential mates. Create nests to entice them, to show they could provide. He had more than any creature here, everything and anything to provide for her.

And yet, she only seemed slightly intrigued. Even when he thought he had her with the plant library, seeing her face light up, he was certain she would want to stay.

But then she requested a bag with more items and started to prepare them as if to leave.

Out of desperation, he went hunting. It seemed instinctual that a mate would want to make sure he could hunt. And he was a master at that game. The furry beasts with tusks were known to be especially hard to catch as they kept themselves in burrows. But he was determined and so snuffed one out before presenting it. They tasted the best out of anything he'd tried by far. Surely that would be enough.

It wasn't.

He started to suspect that her kind were not as easily impressed by what he had to offer. He also understood that she was very wary of him, which factored into her approval.

Clearly, hunting and chasing her in the beginning did not thrill her into finding him a worthy male. Despite that, she had fought him, and that had certainly done it for him.

What little he knew about companionship was not enough. But she liked when he was "nice" as she called it. The food and gifts had helped as did the plants. He could tell she was warming to him.

Perhaps he was being impatient. He had held himself back in touching her as much as he could, which was hard. But he didn't want to scare her or disgust her more, and he wasn't entirely sure he was failing at that.

She didn't run from him, at least, and wanted more of his help. That was something.

He just wished it wasn't to go to the labs.

Not that he thought he couldn't protect her. That was no issue. But something about that place, he didn't like. Something that made his brain fuzzy with the beginnings of a headache. And he didn't like the idea of her near it. It was dangerous in a way he couldn't explain.

Still, he wanted her approval, and her pleading eyes had warmed his black hearts. If they didn't linger inside for a long time, maybe there wouldn't be an issue.

That didn't mean he was going to take her right away. She was still injured, and she looked drained of life. She was tired, he knew, from what she'd gone through.

He tried his best not to sneak up on her while she was going through her pack again for the second time. When she noticed him however, she still flinched. She tried to hide it, but it still stung. He ignored the ache and reached around her, taking the bag.

"No," he said in his tongue. "We can't leave yet."

Her mouth turned upside down and he understood that meant she was either confused or not happy. "No wat?" She replied in her tongue.

"No leaving." He pointed to the doors.

She glanced at the doors then back at him, giving him a little grimace. "Yu wonnt

tayke me?”

Her language was simple enough most times that he was learning quickly. Repeating at her appeared to help.

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“No leaving yet. Wait,” he tried to explain. He went over to the desk and tapped on one of the marks he had made. “Arisa.” Soon.

“Areesa,” she repeated in his language.

“Yes.”

Her face twisted. Her mouth moved, and she waved her hand in an aggressive gesture toward the doors. She wanted to go and get her companion now.

He shook his head which he’d learned was a gesture for no. “Sleवास.” Rest, he ordered. He closed his eyes and rested his head on his hand to try to make her understand.

“Rest?” She sounded offended by the very idea.

He grunted.

She spoke quickly at him, and he put up a hand. “We will go soon. But it is...dangeriiss.” He said the strange word in her tongue. “You are injured.” He pointed at her leg. “And tired.” He rested his face in his hand again. “Rest a little.”

She crossed her arms, a fire sparking in her gaze like she was ready to fight. Oh, he wouldn’t mind, but she would succumb to this request.

“I will take you. I will help you get your companion back, but you will rest first if only for a small time.” He tapped on the mark again.

She appeared to be thinking over his words. She mumbled something and pointed to the ceiling. He gathered she realized they couldn't leave anyway because of the storm. He bowed his head to affirm that, and she sighed. "I rest. But only fer an ow-er."

"Good." Though he suspected an 'ow-er' meant very little time.

"Then find a wey in. The tunneels?" She pointed to the doorway leading to the plant library. "Yu no tunneels?" She pointed below her feet.

The path underground. "Dangeriss," he iterated.

"Beecaws infesstid?"

"In-fest...?"

She went over to the husk of the insect creature. "Manee of theese?"

Ah. "Yes. Possibly. Or others."

She mumbled something about time and a plan then asked a question. "Dew yu have whepons?"

That word seemed familiar. "Whepons?"

She touched the device at her hip. The thing that had attempted to shock him several times but was never able to stop him.

He snorted. "I'mwheponenough." He tapped at his chest.

Her furry brows rose. "O?"

“Yes.”

“I still wuld lyke sahmtung.”

She still wanted a weapon to defend herself just in case. She didn’t expect him to be able to protect her. Another sting.

Without a word, he went to a cabinet and pulled out a small weapon he had found on a dead corpse many cycles ago. Hopefully it still worked. He put it on the table, and when she went to grab for it, he stopped her.

“Rest first. Then I will give.”

She huffed. “Allrite, allrite. Rest.” She started to bend down as if to lay right there at his feet and he growled, stopping her.

“Not the ground. Much better place nearby.”

“Somware else?”

“Yes.”

“Ware?”

Without answering, he took the box of healing items in one blue hand then picked her up like the times before, watching her face grow red and her body tense up. She didn't feel comfortable being in his grasp, but she didn't protest which was a start. He carried her through the hidden passage and turned for the first door on the right. Kicking it open, he took a stairway going straight up before breaking out into a single circular room. It wasn't nearly as impressive as the room below full of his things, which could be seen through a dark window to one side. It was more open here with less clutter. There were machines attached to screens along two walls with a half-circle console at the back.

Dani made some kind of sound like the one she made in the plant room. A cry of delight. He set her down and she rushed over to one of the machines with its screen. “Sekuritee monitoors,” she said. “Du they werk?” She pressed a few buttons and the machine sprang to life, one screen turning on.

She wanted to see outside. He moved beside her and pressed a few keys on the console to bring up more images. He'd figured out the system some time ago, realizing it used mechanical eyes to watch over various parts of the city. He used it sparingly. One, because he knew the city by heart and two, because it was a much more thrilling challenge not to know what was lurking nearby. He preferred to use his other senses to track things than watch them on the screens.

“Reesurch sekter!” Dani cried when he showed the various districts. He tapped on the keys and brought up the labs.

Right away he saw one passage infested with insects. In another a looming shadow walked past, and he could only guess whether it was one of the rogue bots that was keeping the area secure or something else that liked to call that place home.

To him, it would be a delightful game to destroy the bots or hunt whatever creature lurked down there and make it wish it had never set eyes on him. But he had to think of her. His feisty little companion. She would be vulnerable there.

Dani made another sound of surprise and pointed at the screen.

Two of her crewmen were inside a room not unlike the one he and Dani were in now, only it had a central monitor and several other odd machines. A room he didn't recognize. One was checking their weapon while sitting near a barricaded door, the other was drinking from a canteen. They appeared to be in good condition and didn't look frantic. If anything, they seemed to be waiting. He was willing to bet they knew about the storm and what they may encounter outside.

Dani whispered something and he caught her wiping her eyes. Did all of her kind have watery eyes when they were stressed? Poor thing.

“Thay arr o-kay,” she said. “But shood go soon. Yes?”

He went over to the room's center. Crouching down, he flipped a switch on the ground, and the floor opened, revealing a shallow pit below. The pit was empty save for a blanket piled up in one corner.

Kryxis set the healing kit down and jumped inside to rearrange the blanket so that it lay covering most of the ground. “Come, Dani.”

Dani looked over as he gestured to the pit. She made a funny face. Then she made that giggling sound that he understood to be laughter.

“No,” she said in her sweet little voice. “No wey.”

He sighed. Why must she refuse him? One moment she seemed to trust and then the next...

“Safe in here,” he hissed.

She didn’t look too convinced. “With yu?”

He tapped his tail impatiently. “Yessss, with me,” he said in her tongue.

She crossed her arms and looked worried again. Then mumbled something he almost didn’t catch but knew he heard the word “eat” and “me” in there followed by a question.

Now he was annoyed. “I swore I wouldn’t.”

Her brows rose. He wasn’t sure what to make of it. She tapped at her head then said something followed by “Yu change miined?”

She thought he would go back on his word. So suspicious of him.

“I will not. I will be nice.”

Her eyes flicked down to the pit. She shuffled closer and peered down. “Thiss ware yu sleep?” She laid her face on her hand. “Yu rest here?”

“Yes,” he answered. “It is nice. See?”

Her mouth perked up to one side. “Wood be weird.”

He stared at her. “Weeerd?”

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She rolled a shoulder in an odd gesture. She said many things very quickly, but he gathered enough to understand that she thought it odd to rest next to the same person who she had just fought with not long ago. They were “strangers” as she put it. And practically “advaseeries.” And she did not lie with those who were labeled as such.

He wasn’t sure how to respond. But he knew enough already that she was still partially afraid of him.

Fighting his instincts to be close while wanting her to trust, he climbed out of the pit, trying to hide his disappointment. “I will...not lie by you then.” He didn’t dare look at her. “I will...come check on you later.” He went for the door.

“Wait, Kryxis.”

He turned to see her standing by the pit. “Thaynk yu,” she said.

She said those words to him before, after helping her take some of the plants. They were words of gratitude.

He bowed his head and left her.

He rifled through the shelves and the boxes, searching his collection for useful materials. Items that might help make things easier for taking care of pests. They would have to take the tunnels, and to get through them quickly, they needed something more than just his tail and talons.

He collected scrap metal and wiring and a few cannisters of flammable chemicals,

setting them down on his workstation and getting to work. He fired up his flare and began to meld pieces of metal together. As he set to his task, the storm raged on above him.

He hadn't lied. He had seen storms take days to pass. But, in truth, it could just as easily pass by daybreak. Even so, he didn't think their ship would be ready by then. He'd played with broken down ships, some no more than husks, others with power but no engines or rockets to see him take off. He'd learned a thing or two about power from what still ran within the city and knew it would take some time to fix that ship. Not a lot, but still...

Maybe she would warm up to him then.

Once the scrap metal formed a ball, he poured a small amount of the chemicals inside a hole, stuck the wire inside, then used a special sealant to cover it up. He worked on several more pieces until he had a handful of firebombs. When he felt that was enough, he set his tools aside and placed the bombs into a pouch.

He went looking for armor next.

It had occurred to him more than once that he should go alone and bring the pair back. But they all seemed to scare so easily. And if they got injured in their fright, Dani wouldn't like that.

As he set the gear in a pile, he tried to think of more that he could do. In reality, he was just stalling. Looking around, he caught his reflection in a shiny metal sheet that sat against one wall.

He never thought much about how he looked. He could tell by the way other creatures reacted that he looked scary without even having to try. Everything was afraid of him. And he'd always relished that fact. He'd thrilled in Dani's fear. Now

hebadly wanted her to like him. He'd never cared about being liked before.

He started to scrutinize his appearance in the slate. He was all sharp edges and wicked aggression. He couldn't do anything about his eyes. And he needed his teeth. He didn't have fur or hair, but he could file down his horns to look...cuteas Dani would put it. Only he didn't know exactly how to make them look like that except maybe less intimidating.

He glanced down at his arms. Dani only had two. A lot of things did. Having four was really convenient but he didn'tneedthem and could tell how much they unnerved her. Maybe if he got rid of his blue ones...

He felt an ache in his chest. No, that didn't feel right. And even so, he doubted it would help. He was so different from her that changing parts of him wouldn't matter. He was what he was.

But maybe there was another way. He noticed his scales were looking less than nice. Though he tried to keep himself clean, they'd gotten a bit dull-looking. He'd seen other creatures preen themselves to look as good as possible for potential mates...to look asprettyas possible.

He was not pretty. He knew that.

But it couldn't hurt to try.

He turned away from the slate and pulled open one of the cabinets where he'd gotten the armor from. He had an idea. Maybe he didn't feel right taking parts of him off. But he could always add something.

He closed the cabinet. First, to check on Dani. For all he knew, she'd decided to stay up and watch the monitors, and he would need to convince her to lie down again.

He climbed up to the second room, cracking the door to make sure he didn't scare her. "Dani, it's me." He peered inside, but she wasn't sitting at the monitors. Her suit was draped over a chair and the healing box was open. He snuck inside and went over to the center.

Down in the shallow pit, he saw her curled up, clutching his blanket in her fists. She wore very little under the suit, a thin shirt and bottoms that barely covered her. He stood frozen, peering down at her, and his hearts began to beat a little faster. He caught her scent again and felt his mouth watering.

How badly he wanted to sink down by her. A powerful, primal urge took over, and he desperately wanted to rub against her, to have her scent on him, everywhere. But also to have his scent on her. A warning to others that he had some claim to her, and they would die if they touched her.

He closed his eyes, forcing himself not to mark her. Not yet, not until she accepted him.

A soft whimper came from the pit. He peered back down and saw she was trembling, her muscles tensing, brow furrowed. Little cries rose from her throat. Beads of sweat dampened her hair.

Concern was what drew him down to her, brushing the damp hair away from her face. Poor thing, she was having a nightmare. He too knew of those, having them for many cycles, though they had begun to lessen as time went on.

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Laying down, he curled himself around her. She was smaller than him, so it was easy to cover all of her. He trailed a hand across her arm, wanting to comfort but afraid to wake her.

Her chest rose and fell, her heart beating in a fast rhythmic pump, like his own. Shallow breaths turned to quiet whimpers then into cries. Her legs jerked every so often like she was trying to move.

“It’s all right, Dani. You are safe,” he said quietly. “Safe.”

“S-st...d-don...” she spoke in her sleep.

He petted her silky hair. This place must have taken its toll on her at last.

“St...Stop,” she said. “H-hurt.”

He understood enough. Stop...no....hurt...pain. Something harmed her in her dreams. He thought about waking her. What good was rest when plagued by bad dreams? Still, he tried to comfort her, seeing if they might pass.

“C-Cry...” she whispered.

“No one will hurt you, Dani.”

“Kry...Kryxis.” Her legs jerked again.

He stilled. She was dreaming of him? Perhaps she’d heard him. Maybe she saw him

now and he'd come to save her in her dream?

"Kryxis," she whimpered. Her body shuddered. "St-stop."

He tensed, hearts sinking to his stomach. Did he hear her right?

"P-please, Kryx...don't. Hurt...hurt..." she cried, her face burying closer to the blanket.

He lay there listening, too shocked at first to move. He was about to shake her awake but stopped himself, afraid he would only make things worse if she saw him over her. Instead, he covered her in his arms and let her ride out the nightmare of him. His eyes narrowed, staring at nothing. But in his mind's eye, he saw her face lighting up in the plant room.

He would see that again. This time for him.

Somehow, he would.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dani

She woke with a start, eyes shooting open as if someone had startled her awake.

For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Couldn't remember. The lights were dim above her, and there was something rough rubbing against her. But she was warm.

Blinking a few times, she lifted her head...and saw the blanket was over her. Peering around she saw that she was alone.

Carefully, she sat up. She remembered now. She was in that pit Kryxis had made from the server compartment, emptied to make a bed. Shrugging the blanket off, she rose. The room was also empty.

She frowned. Kryxis hadn't come to wake her. Had he forgotten? Or had he allowed her to sleep longer?

She climbed out of the pit and sat back in a seat, taking the compressor off her ankle to see if it had improved. She rolled her ankle one way than another and found it a bit stiff, but the pain was considerably better. She put the compressor back on for good measure then began to dress.

Tying up her boots, she straightened and checked the monitor. Myrell and Garret were still inside the room, Myrell laying down and Garret typing at one of the computers. The door was still barricaded.

Checking her watch, she saw it had been more than an hour. Kryxis had let her sleep longer than she asked. She would have been annoyed but in reality, she felt much better now, much more alert and ready to go.

She checked the other cameras out of curiosity. The research sector was definitely infested. On her own, it would be impossible. But with Kryxis...they could get inside and make it out unscathed. She was certain.

She left the computer station and headed for the stairs. Down in the dark passage, she crept back into Kryxis' museum of things.

"Kryxis?" she called out. She searched around, noticing his workstation filled with little bits of metal and tools, but he was nowhere to be seen.

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He wouldn't have left her, she was sure. Maybe he went back to the conservatory. Or he was close by, hunting again.

She turned back for the hidden passage then halted, a small gasp slipping through her teeth.

Kyrxis was standing only a few feet away. And he looked...very different

She tried not to gape at him and failed.

He had covered himself. At least to an extent. He no longer wore the burnt pants but a sleek black pair which was fixed with rough knee and thigh armor padding. Around his waist was a thick blue and gray sash. A belt was tied over it with a small sack dangling from his hip. He wore armored gear on his arms and shoulders, some white and some black around the same size. He'd also covered his mouth in some sort of black face guard with little slits to breathe from.

The get-up was impressive to say the least. And was that...jewelry he wore?

Yes, he also wore gold and silver rings around his waist, tied by a red ribbon. He'd wrapped some around his horns too, which shined in the light like onyx as if they had been cleaned and oiled. Same with his scaly skin, no longer a rusty shade but a deep, crimson red.

He looked like a powerful warrior from another world, about to go into battle.

"Um...wow, h-hi." The words spilled out of her mouth. "You look..." She didn't

know what to say. But suddenly he was intimidating in a much different way. And it was hard to meet his eyes again. She cleared her throat. "You look good." She found she meant it. He did.

He stared at her before gliding past, moving over to the table and taking one of his tools, attaching it to his belt. He then picked up the gun he had found for her earlier and offered it to her.

She closed the distance between them, taking the gun. "Thank you." She transferred her stunner to a different pocket and put the gun in the holster at her belt. He offered her helmet next, and she took it gladly, slipping it on.

Once she had it secured, she drew on her pack last. When she was sure she had everything, Kryxis reached out to her with his blue arms, which had been behind his back the whole time. "Time. To. Go," he said slowly in her language.

It was clear he expected to carry her again. Though her leg felt better already, she knew she wouldn't be able to run like normal or keep up with him. But, unlike the last couple times, he wasn't grabbing her and just taking off. He was waiting for her to choose.

Despite her heart fluttering at the thought of his deep blue hands enclosing around her again, she stepped closer and locked her gaze with his. "All right. Let's go."

His hands encircled her waist, pulling her closer. She inhaled sharply, catching his coffee-like scent. He drew an arm under her legs and picked her up, cradling her close to him.

She shifted in his grasp to get a comfortable position, trying to calm the tension in her muscles. She'd been carried by him before and yet she was not used to it. But she felt secure, his steel-like grip around her firm. She wasn't so afraid, only more alert. And

maybe a little hot around the collar.

It was just being so close; he was practically a walking furnace. And she was surprised by his appearance. He looked lethal, stoic, and...

His eyes caught hers, and she glanced away, embarrassed, realizing she was staring again. She could feel the power of him around her, making her feel small and light in his arms. Her pulse was beginning to race as her mind drifted somewhere it shouldn't. She shook the thoughts away.

"I'm ready," she said.

Kryxis turned for the hidden passage. Down they went into the tunnel system. Instead of turning right toward the conservatory, Kryxis went left. At a steady gait, he took several other paths, never slowing or stopping.

Only when they came upon a steel door at the end of one tunnel did he halt. On the door, it said KEEP OUT, DANGER. There was a set of chains dangling from the lock, broken already by someone or something else.

Kryxis' grip on her tightened as he drew closer and slid back the lock. He pushed open the doors, revealing a pitch-black tunnelway beyond. There was a slight draft bringing an earthy and metallic smell with it. Her garometer started to crackle. The lights on her suit only extended so far but she didn't see anything...yet.

Kryxis, however, didn't enter the tunnel. Instead, he reached into the pouch at his side and took out a single shiny ball. Then he reached around his other side and grabbed a flaretool and flicked it on, creating a small but intense flame from the tip. He lit a wire attached to the ball with the flare, and as it blew out sparks, he threw it into the dark.

She watched the spark fly as the ball fell to the ground. It rolled a little ways then burst into flame, creating an intense orange flash that consumed the whole tunnelway in a wave of fire, the heat close enough that she felt it in an instant.

She shut her eyes, turning her face away out of instinct. A moment later, she forced herself to look back as she heard screeching from beyond. There on the walls, she saw them. Thousands of insects. They screamed as the fire overtook them, dropping to the ground and curling into their bodies.

Kryxis didn't hesitate. He rushed inside and swept past the masses of bugs now husks on the ground, some still fluttering around them in an attempt to survive.

He flew through the dark. Even with her lights, she became lost to the tunnel system. He used two more firebombs before they reached another set of doors that said RESEARCH SECTOR above. The insects were bigger here, but Kryxis' bombs took them out and made the rest flee.

Eventually he took a set of stairs up. When he broke through the last door, she knew they were finally in the right building.

There were bots hanging around. But before they could sound an alarm or attack them, Kryxis swung his tail around and sliced their heads clean off with the tip of his tail. He bounded past them and into a central hub where she asked him to stop.

"There's a map." She pointed to the wall. He brought her to it. She remembered what level the bridge was on. That's where Myrell and Garret had to be.

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Before she pointed to it to indicate that's where he should go, her gaze flicked down to the level below the bridge. The labs.

That's where she could find the datachip. One of the last artifacts on her list. They could hit there first on their way up, and she could grab it quickly.

She heard a guttural moaning sound from somewhere close by and flinched. Time to go.

"Here, Kryxis." She pointed, to the level below the bridge. This time Kryxis did hesitate. She looked up at him and saw him staring at the words on the map. "Kryxis?"

She might have imagined it, but she could have sworn she felt his hands shake beneath her. Slowly he moved again, turning for the main stairway.

He took the stairs three at a time, moving with that lithe quickness that reminded her so much of the predator she had thought him to be. When he got to the sixth floor where the labs were located, he slowed again, pausing as if uncertain whether he wanted to move forward. She could feel the tension in him with each step.

He took a passage that circled around a large inner chamber. Rows of windows would have allowed her to see inside if it wasn't so dark. Kryxis came upon the main entrance leading into the labs and stopped.

"It's through there, Kryxis," Dani said, when he wouldn't move farther. He held her closer than ever, like he was hugging her, not wanting to let her go. She tilted her

head up to him, ready to ask why he wouldn't go in.

He stared at the doors, his pupils as small as pinpoints. He was like a statue, so still save for his chest rising and falling.

She'd yet to see such a look on him. He looked...afraid.

"Hey..." Dani patted his chest. "Just a quick stop."

He didn't move. She peered back at the doors. Was there something lurking inside that even he was afraid of?

She tried to get his attention again, and he flinched, a soft hiss escaping him. He took a few steps back, shutting his eyes and shaking his head as if he were in pain.

"Kryxis, what's wrong?"

"Niset...niset..." he hissed.

He was moving farther away from the doors. And she couldn't stop him. Instead, she struggled in his grip, trying to get him to drop her.

"Kryxis, it's all right. You can let me down."

He didn't at first, holding her tight.

Worried he might actually bolt, she took his face in her hands. "Kryxis look at me," she said gently. "Hey."

He opened his eyes and locked them with hers.

“Tell me what’s wrong?”

His expression softened as he gazed at her, but he struggled with his words.

“Niset...labs...niset...go.”

“You can’t go in?”

He bowed his head.

“It’s dangerous?”

He didn’t answer. As if he wasn’t sure but knew that he couldn’t go on.

“Does something hide inside?”

He tilted his face upward as if to sniff the air then shook his head.

“Let me down, Kryxis, please.”

Reluctantly, he did. As she dropped to her feet, she readjusted her pack.

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“I have to go in and grab something,” she told him.

Kryxis looked pained again, shaking his head. “No...Dani.”

She reached out and touched his shoulder. “I will be fast. Okay? You’ll stay here and guard the door, won’t you?”

His hands clenched into fists, as if he was fighting internally, either wanting to make her stay or to go in with her. “Xia harish xa vaas.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’”?

He growled, his tail weaving behind him. “Xa.” He took her hand, holding it in his. “Visa na rish varr nesh.” He sighed then said in her tongue, “Be here.... come back...soon.”

She squeezed his hand. “I will. Promise.”

He let her go. She went for the door and pressed a switch beside it. It slid open and she slipped inside.

There were a series of offices and supply rooms at first, nothing threatening yet. Not even bots roamed, though she did find a couple of damaged ones as she walked deeper in. What was strange to her was how messy everything was. Tables were on their sides, computers lay broken, screens shattered. There were several cracks in the walls and great big holes in the ceiling where wires dangled down. Debris crunched under her feet as she went.

When she passed through one large office space, it was like a storm had blown through, everything broken or out of place. There was also evidence of something bad having taken place. Black stains on the walls and carpets. She also noticed some of that blue fungus growing along the walls.

To the back was the central lab where she was told she'd find the datachip. The door was already open but stuck halfway. Carefully, she snuck through, making her way down a short passage. There was a metallic smell in the air like in the tunnels, but she didn't see a source. Her garometer started to crackle, but the energy was on the low end. She stepped out of the passage and into a wide chamber, trying to understand what she was seeing. She clicked the light on her wrist to make it brighter then aimed it farther into the room.

The first thing she noticed was the fungi, growing on the walls but also growing out of giant tanks. She got closer, shining her light on them. Most were broken, with the mushrooms sprouting past jagged edges of glass. A few tanks, however, remained intact. She froze beside one of them and shined her light into it, illuminating what lay within.

It was a giant fungus. It almost looked monstrous with its sprouts spreading over the glass of the tank.

She passed the tanks and went farther in. A row of cells sat along one wall. Inside one was the skeleton of another creature, fungi overtaking its back and face. She stepped over to another. Inside looked like the remains of a large grex, like Sheek, only this one had one huge blue arm growing out of its back.

Dani stared at it, and her pulse began to race. What the hell were they doing here?

The rest of the cells were open and empty. Her mouth went dry, and her stomach twisted as she went by them, heading for the testing lab beyond.

Inside the room was a large computer console wrapped around an operation pod, its glass lid open. Inside, tiny fungi had spread.

This room...felt very wrong, and she had a mighty need to get out as quickly as possible. She went over to the main computer and flipped open a box next to it. The datachip was there, a slender black device connected to a port.

She reached for it, then paused.

Something happened here. Something very bad. It wasn't hard to see the destruction all around her. Marityne employees hadn't just shut this place down and left quietly. They had fled. Because she doubted they would have left such an important piece behind.

She glanced over at the computer.

Don't, Dani. Just take it and leave. You don't need to know. Because if you do...

She thought of Kryxis waiting for her. The most terrifying male she'd ever met, who had shown no fear. But he was afraid of this place...

She leaned over and turned the computer on.

The system came to life, lights and screen flickering on. A few programs popped on the screen including an access pass to the datachip. She opened it and several hundred files appeared.

She scrolled through them and saw they all were titled by TEST SUBJECT followed by a number.

There was no need for her to go through them. She could already put two and two

together by what she'd seen beyond the room. But there was one thing she had to know. Going to the search function, she typed in VRISHA.

Several dozen files appeared. One read test operation 110. The last dated file.

When she clicked on it, lights around the room aimed downward. Once the file loaded, the ghosts of Marityne scientists appeared, their faces covered by ventilation masks and goggles. One walked past her, while others sat at their computers.

It was a holographic recording. They were merely images from the past. Dani stood watching as several scientists appeared at the pod.

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“Subject is stabilized,” one man said. “All vitals working. No clear side-effects.”

“Percent of DNA splicing sequence is at ninety-two percent,” said a voice overhead.

“That’s the closest we’ve gotten. Let’s get him out.”

They opened the pod, and wisps of a chemical cloud billowed out. When the cloud dispersed, Dani saw who was lying within.

Kryxis was there, unconscious, with his red and blue arms at his sides.

She watched the scientists poke and prod him, making statements. The images cut out for a second then reappeared, this time with Kryxis on a table beside the pod, his red arms and legs chained down while they messed with his blue arms, testing their strength and flexibility.

He looked drugged, his eyes half-lidded while staring up at the light. The scientists jabbed pointed rods into his arms and watched him jerk in response, and she knew she couldn’t watch another second.

She found another file, not on Kryxis but one called Bruiser Fungus Journey 001 - Dr. Vartisan and opened it.

It was a set of voice recordings. A log meant for one of the heads of Marityne, Ryle Marityne CO. She listened to some of it quickly, her blood going colder the more she heard.

“We’d found the bruiser fungus in the caves while mining,” said a low male voice. “I’d been working with it for a long time and learned it had incredible growth and re-growth effects. So, we went to work on using the DNA of the fungus on various subjects. We saw a lot of exciting and promising effects. The company heads here on X110 gave us full funding to start testing. We had plenty of human subjects and some otherkin, but we needed more variety, so scouts were hired. What they found was more than we could have ever hoped. Various species including a vrisha fledgling they had bought from outer-system traders.”

The recording stopped there, and she went to the next.

“Some have died, unable to withstand the splicing. Others had harsh side effects. Those that survived have promising growths but are unstable. Hard to control. More testing needed.”

She went to the third, the twisting in her stomach worsening.

“The fungi have spread. It’s hard to control. But there was some success. A few subjects have completely functional parts. Limbs that work just like the ones they were born with. Some have also grown extra pairs of eyes and mouths. It works...it works.”

One last recording and she almost didn’t want to hear, but she forced herself to click it.

“Their growths have made them perfect.” The voice sounded distant, strange. “But our most successful subjects are dangerous. Monstrous. I fear for the safety of the others. If they were to ever get out, they would destroy this city. We must cull them before that happens.”

She sank into a chair, feeling cold, almost numb.

With a trembling hand, she closed down the computer then took out the datachip from its port and placed it in her pocket.

It was company policy to not ask questions. She and her team were supposed to collect then move on to the next world. This time she couldn't do that. She was going to speak to the heads about this. This was beyond illegal. This was horrible.

She rose and glared one last time at the pod.

Even if it wasn't her fault, guilt slithered into her heart. And she felt more pity than she'd ever felt for the one who now waited for her at the door. The one she had called a monster.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dani

Kryxis was there when she returned, pacing in front of the door. He must have sensed her because he turned her way when she approached.

"Sivaras nocta vishar, Dani?"

She patted the pocket where she put the datachip. "I got what I came for..."

His eyes flicked up to the doors and she could still see the tension in him. "Go now."

She thought about what to say, how to tell him how sorry she felt. She opened her mouth then closed it, trying to find the words.

It had to have been awful. And she wondered how much he remembered or if it was something he didn't want to speak of. She couldn't blame him either way, and she

wasn't sure if it was the right place or time.

“Kryxis, I...”

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Something crashed close by, making Dani flinch. Before she could look to see what it was, Kryxis scooped her up.

“Go. Dangerisss.”

“Yeah...let’s get out of here.” Time to ask him questions later.

Kryxis raced back toward the stairs, moving quicker than before, forcing her to hold on to him. He climbed the stairs two at a time, and when they got to the next floor, he paused only briefly to smell the air. Veering to the left, he flew down the darkened hall, bounding over another downed bot, until he slowed coming to the door of a tech lab.

“They’re in here?” Dani asked.

“Xa.” He let her down beside the door.

She went to knock, then paused, glancing back at Kryxis guiltily. “The others are going to be on edge, and Garret might have some bullets left. You should hide.”

“Hide?”

“Yes, hide.” She covered the glass of her helmet in her hands then pointed to a room opposite. “In a room close by. Please. Just until I talk to them, okay? So they understand you mean no harm.”

His gaze snapped over to the room opposite. He mumbled something then backed

away. “Be...close.”

“I know you will.”

As he disappeared into the room, Dani turned back to the door. She knocked heavily against it. “Myrell? Garret? It’s me,” she called.

It was silent, and for a second she feared something might have happened. Then she heard shuffling at the door.

“Dani?” Garret’s muffled voice called back.

“Yes! I’ve come to get you out. Open up.”

There was more shuffling, then she heard Myrell’s voice. “Wait. How do we know it’s you?”

Dani smirked. “There was only one who could mimic like that. But I set him on fire, remember?”

She heard them talking but couldn’t make out the words. “All right...” Garret said, “Back away from the door.”

She did as asked and heard something being moved aside before the door slid open.

Garret appeared with his gun aimed, with Myrell right behind him. Dani lifted her hands, then slipped off her helmet. As soon as he saw her fully, he dropped his gun. “Holy shit, it really is you.”

Before she could open her mouth, he was pulling her into him, hugging her so tight he almost lifted her off her feet. She dared to glance at the room opposite and saw a

pair of eyes shining in the dark. She waved her hand behind her, hoping Kryxis understood it meant to stand down.

Garret released her. “I can’t believe it. On the bridge, I thought...”

Dani pursed her lips. “I got...lucky I guess.”

Myrell came around and pulled her into a hug next. “Crazy lady, what are you doing out here all alone? And how the hell did you find us?”

“I saw you on one of the security feeds,” she explained.

“Damn, we were trying to get into the system ourselves but with no luck. Thought we’d be stuck here for a long time if we couldn’t get communication up.”

“Yeah, I heard you through the helmet just barely. That’s when I knew I had to come find you.”

Garret studied her. “How did you get here? This place is crawling with all sorts of dangerous things. And not just bugs.”

Dani shifted. “I, um...I had some help.”

They gave her a curious look.

“From who?” Myrell asked.

Dani rubbed her hands on her suit nervously. “Look...don’t freak out.” She turned her gaze to Garret. “Especially you.”

His brow furrowed. “Okay.”

She squared her shoulders. “I was...saved by someone at the bridge. Someone I didn’t expect. They aren’t going to hurt you. I swear.” She turned to the room. “Kryxis, come out,” she called.

She stared into the looming dark and saw the glint of his eyes first. Then he cautiously stepped into their light.

Myrell gasped.

Garret backed away, his gun rising. “What the fuck—”

“Wait!” Dani whirled around, putting up her hands. “Don’t! It’s okay. He’s not going to harm you now.”

“By the elder gods, Dani, is that—” Myrell’s eye widened. “Is that the thing you tried to kill in the shipping sector?”

“His name is Kryxis. And he’s vrisha. He’s...been here a long time.”

Garret hadn’t moved, his gun still aimed at Kryxis.

“Look.” Dani went over to Kryxis and patted his arm. “See? He’s all right.” Kryxis’ head was lowered, his tail weaving behind him. She wished he didn’t look like he was about to pounce on them when she was trying to defend him.

The pair glared at Kryxis. “You’re certain it’s not just...you know...toying with you?” Myrell asked.

“He’s not.”

Garret didn’t look convinced. Myrell’s expression, however, softened a little. She tugged Garret’s arm. “Lower the gun. She’s telling the truth.”

He hesitated. “Seriously, Dani?”

“Seriously.”

There was tension thick in the air between them. Then Garret slowly lowered his gun. “I don’t like this.”

“I know it’s hard to believe. And right now, it’s kind of hard to explain. But you need to trust me. Let’s just get back to the ship first.”

Garret’s finger still itched on the trigger. Myrell crept closer.

“Well. If the fire couldn’t kill him, I doubt we’d get very far now...even on Garret’s low stock of bullets.”

“Myrell—” he growled.

She put her hand out toward Kryxis. “So, we are at a truce?”

Kryxis straightened. He glanced at Dani, and she nodded. Turning back to Myrell, he took her hand in one of his blue ones, shaking it before releasing.

Myrelle chuckled nervously. “All right. Let’s get the hell out of here.” She looked to Garret. “You good?”

Garret and Kryxis were glaring each other down, neither trusting the other. Then Garret blew out a breath, shaking his head. “Fine,” he said after a moment. “But he goes first.”

Kryxis grunted as if he understood, and that was no issue to him. Without hesitation, he picked her up. As he did, Garret’s gun rose.

“Why is he—”

“I got injured on the bridge,” Dani explained to him quickly.

“Did he—”

“No.”

“Oh, give it a rest, soldier.” Myrell pushed his gun down. “No time to argue. Let’s just go.”

Kryxis moved first, taking it slow this time so the others could keep up. They started back the way they came, down a flight of stairs. There was no chance of taking the bridge now which meant either trying to find a way out at ground level or taking the tunnels again. She trusted Kryxis knew the best route either way.

Once they got halfway down, however, she noticed sticky webbing on the walls and could hear things skittering. Garret had his gun aimed upward but they could see nothing in the darkness. The air was thick with that metallic scent. Dani found herself clinging to Kryxis, eyes searching wildly for any sign of movement.

When they broke out onto the first level, Kryxis veered to the right then halted as something hissed close by. Kryxis bared his teeth and growled.

Garret swung his light around, and several large creatures were coming at them from down one hall.

They looked like smaller versions of the spider-mantis only they were covered in bruiser fungus. It was growing all over their backs and shoulders. Even covering some of their faces.

One shrieked at them and lunged.

Garret shot at them, letting off several rounds, white light flashing in the dark. Kryxis swung his tail out like a whip and sliced one across the chest.

“There’s too many!” Myrell shouted.

Dani gasped, clutching to Kryxis as he jerked back and ripped through a second then kicked another with his mighty leg, sending it flying. When more drew closer, he leaned forward and roared at them.

The spider-mantises slowed, a few flinching away. It appeared to work at first. Until she heard skittering and saw more crawling up the sides of the wall and ceiling.

Kryxis growled. He set her down then pushed her back toward the stairs.

Dani took out the shooter Kryxis had given her and shot at one closing in. She tugged on Myrell to follow. “To the stairs!”

Garret continued to fire on the bugs as he met them at the stairwell. Myrell swept inside first as Garret moved in next.

“Dani, let’s go!” he shouted.

Dani hesitated by the door. Kryxis was keeping the bugs back.

“Kryxis, come on!” she called.

He snarled at the mob closing in on him. Then he turned back for the stairs.

He picked her up again and shut the door behind them. They rushed down the stairwell, below ground level.

There was a loud bang above them, followed by the shattering of glass and groan of metal. Then came the loud hissing of the mob. They'd broken through the door and were clambering down toward them.

"Fuck, run!" Garret shouted. He grabbed Myrell, practically picking her up off her feet.

They flew down the stairs and shot out into a tunnelway. There was nothing to barricade the door, and the bugs were close behind, so they ran. When they'd barely made it halfway down the tunnel, the door burst open, and the bugs rushed in. Garret whirled around and shot toward them, but it hardly slowed them down.

"We can't lose them!" Myrell cried.

Kryxis slowed then halted, setting Dani down again. Before she could ask what he was doing, he put two firebombs in her hands.

"Go," he growled.

"What—"

He pushed her toward the way they were running. Then he pulled Garret back.

"Go," he hissed.

Dani reached for him but was tugged back by Garret.

“Dani, let’s go!” he snapped.

She tried to struggle out of Garret’s grip as he dragged her and Myrell down the tunnel. “Wait, Kryxis!”

Kryxis looked back and their eyes locked. She didn’t have time to read what she saw there in his gaze before he turned away to face the horde which were nearly upon him.

Garret was forced to pick her up as they sprinted down the tunnelway. For a moment, Kryxis faded into the dark as their light no longer reached him. Then the air pressure dropped.

A flash of orange heat burst into the tunnel. She flinched and shut her eyes to the intensity of the firebomb, feeling the heat against her face.

Garret and Myrell didn’t stop. They rushed through the dark as bits of debris and dust fell on them, and they heard a mighty roar above a mass of shrieking, angry cries.

It felt like they ran forever, but Dani could feel Garret slowing. She looked around and saw one of the wide metal doors ahead, signaling they’d reached the end of the research sector.

Garret set her down and went for the door. He shot off the lock before wrenching the door open. Dani turned to look back for Kryxis but was pulled away, Garret leading her and Myrell through to the other side.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dani

Dani caught herself staring at nothing. It was the third time she found herself lost in her thoughts, and she had to blink back to reality. She took a deep breath then zipped up her pack, making sure everything was secure. Nothing had been lost thankfully in the tunnels despite the chaos. She'd double checked every pocket several times to make sure. Slipping the pack on, she gripped the straps, trying to keep her hands from trembling.

They hadn't stopped since they'd left the tunnel. Since that moment she had last seen Kryxis.

Beside her, Garret was checking his gear while Myrell was looking over her ISpad.

"It's almost over," she said.

The storm outside was beginning to settle. Much sooner than expected. At least according to Myrell's weather gauge.

They had hunkered down in a small storage unit just outside the sector, finding their way back up to surface level many hours ago. After getting to safety, the adrenaline had worn off quickly, and Dani felt exhausted all over again, her muscles aching from being so tense, her ankle throbbing too.

They'd gotten lucky escaping the tunnels as they did. She only had to use one of the firebombs, taking Garret's lighter to ignite the wire before sending the metal ball flying to the end of an infested tunnel. Once they got up to the surface and found the unit, they stayed put, knowing they couldn't brave the storm and the tunnels would still be too dangerous, none of which led to the ship anyway.

It had been a long few hours after that. Most of it consisted of them sitting listening to the storm outside and eating what little they had left in the way of mealbars and water. Not long after, Garret prodded her about how she got stuck with the vrisha, and she told them very little. Only that Kryxis had saved her life at the bridge and had taken her to a place of safety.

“So, he was able to communicate after all?” Myrell had asked, sitting opposite. A yellow light detached from her suit was the only thing illuminating their faces in the dark.

Dani nodded. “Sort of, anyway,” she said. “He spoke in his tongue, but he understood some of my words too. He learned fast.”

“It’s a good thing I guess,” Garret commented, sitting against an empty crate with his gun in his lap. “Still, don’t know what his plan was.”

Dani glared at him. “His plan?”

“You know...if he was looking to...”

“If you say harm, I told you already, he wasn’t.”

“He’d tried to before, Dani. Don’t know his motives for suddenly helping is all I’m saying. I heard vrisha were cunning, much more than humans. He could have...wanted something from you.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. But he was practically feral. You said yourself he’d been messing with you.”

“He just saved our lives!”

“Dani’s right,” Myrell said. “Why go through all that for us? He just took one for the team back there and he wasn’t part of the team.”

Dani’s heart sank. “He’s all right. He made it out...”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:07 am

“After a blast like that?” Garret said.

“He took the fire Dani used on him pretty well,” Myrell argued.

“Maybe. But there were a lot of those bugs. If he didn’t get them all, they might have swarmed him.”

The pit in her stomach grew. Instinctively she reached for the pocket with the datachip and felt it inside. “He got out,” she said softly.

She’d gone to another end of the room after that and curled up against the wall, telling them she wanted to take a nap. She could hear them whispering every so often, but she closed them off.

It was hard to sleep, but she’d tried. Her thoughts kept rewinding over and over to the look Kryxis had given her right before he faced the horde.

He had to have gotten out.

Eventually sleep did come, and she was plagued by bad dreams of being hunted by something in the dark. She ran and ran but couldn’t get away. The only relief she had was when she was shaken awake and found Myrelle looking down at her.

“Storm is letting up.”

She’d gathered her things, trying to get her focus back on returning to the ship. She made up her mind while doing so that she would take the datachip directly to the

heads herself and expose Marityne for the shitty company that they were.

Myrell took a drink from her canteen before sliding her helmet back on. “All right, storm’s died down enough. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Garret unlatched his helmet from his belt, putting it on before leading the way.

Outside, the wind was still strong, but the dust had mostly disappeared. Above, light was beginning to break over the buildings, showing a greenish-blue sky. Morning had finally come.

Myrell put an arm around Dani to help her walk a little faster. They treaded carefully between buildings, Garret keeping an eye out for any movement. Everything was silent at first, until a small black orb came flying by. A security drone.

It watched them for a moment then followed. Passing another set of buildings, they heard the sounds of people shouting. The four-armed statue appeared as they came upon the courtyard, and Dani nearly froze as she saw their ship just a few yards away. Right beside it was another ship of the same size.

There were several new armed security moving across the landing dock. One immediately approached them. She recognized it was Saul.

“I worried you were all goners,” he said as he took off his helmet. He saw her being supported by Myrell and snapped to one of the men, “Get a medikit.”

“It’s fine,” Dani said. “I’ve got it wrapped.”

“You called for backup?” Garret asked.

“Yes. When you and the team didn’t return after a time, I knew something had gone

wrong. Me and Tristan agreed and made the call. It didn't get out right away since the ship was still down, and we had to use an emergency system that had shaky interference because of the storm. But once the message was out, the heads sent the response team down as soon as they could."

"The ship still down?" Myrell asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. The storm slowed things a bit. But Morse is still working on it now with a couple others from the response team."

"How long ago did you send out the drones?" Dani asked.

"Not long. With the storm, we could only get them out less than an hour ago."

"Have them start checking the Research Sector. I want them searching for bodies." Her voice was thankfully steady as she said it, despite how shaken she felt.

"Will do." Saul glanced at Garret. "And Ryatt?"

Garret shook his head.

"I'll call it in." He looked back at Dani. "I'm sorry about your team. Did it happen all at once?"

"On the bridge." Myrell spoke first. "We were attacked. There are dangerous things all over this godforsaken place. Should have had a larger security team from the start."

"We'll start a search. For now, you should take shelter in the ship."

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:08 am

Dani sat beside her locker, staring at the sign.

NEXACOR. REBUILDING WORLDS.

Everything had been a disaster. The little relief she felt being back on the ship with everything in tow was overshadowed by the crushing weight of what she had lost.

Now that she was “safe,” that heavy grief hit her all over again. She had to blink back tears seeing Morse in his funny green goggles coming to greet them. Before he could mumble out a word, she was pulling him in and hugging him tight, a little sob escaping her after the words. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She told him what happened and saw the defeated look in his eyes. They discussed whether it was worth it for him to continue working on the ship now that another had come, but he said he didn’t mind. He’d rather be working than sitting around thinking about what had happened to their team.

Dani had offered to help, wanting something to take her mind off everything too, but he declined, saying he had more than enough help already.

“Give yourself some rest, Dani,” Myrell said, patting her shoulder. “I’ll start making a report, so we can have it ready as soon as we get back to the main ship. At least we can say we grabbed almost everything.”

Almost.

Dani handed over the cryo-batteries in her pack to Myrell who then disappeared into

the supply room. Now, she sat in the locker room, listening to the sounds of thumping in the engine room and men talking outside. She stared down at her hands, clenching them tight, noticing they were still trembling. When she shut her eyes, she saw the flash of fire.

Taking a deep breath, she slid her pack closer to her feet. She reached in and took out one of the growth tanks. The plants had gotten a little shaken inside, but they were still intact.

You fucked up, Dani. But maybe they'll give you the blue suit in exchange for the plants.

A bitter laugh broke from her as she gripped the tank tighter. She set it down next to her and took out the others. She turned the last in her hands. The Tigrus Bluum.

"Why...why did you do it?" she whispered, pressing the glass of the tank to her forehead. "Why..."

She remembered his piercing gaze on her in the dark. How he had looked at her...He'd wanted to protect her. He had wanted to...

Her throat tightened and she swallowed hard. Damn you, Kryxis.

Angry that she was just sitting there, wallowing, she put the plants back and set the pack aside. No, she had to do something. Even if all she could do was limp around and demand to see what the drones had found.

As she rose, she heard a shout from outside. She listened, and fear gripped her once again.

Was something attacking again?

She almost stumbled out the door from her stiff ankle. She drew the gun from her belt, ready for a damn fight.

Veering around the front of the ship, she saw the soldiers rushing to the courtyard, heading toward—

She let out an unexpected cry and dropped her gun.

Lex broke into the courtyard first, with messy black hair and face dirty with dust, clutching Phen who had her arm in a sling. Behind them Tom followed, his head patched on one side. Sheek came last, blade in hand.

Her team had returned.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dani

She wasn't one to usually believe in miracles. But that was beginning to change.

For a moment, she wondered if she was actually dreaming or had somehow been transported to an alternate universe where they'd never set foot on that bridge. Both felt more possible than seeing them before her alive.

She didn't ask them how at first, having been too shocked even for that. Instead, she'd closed the distance between them, letting them pull her into a group hug.

Words were exchanged, tears were shed, then laughter when Tom said he'd be making a complaint to management.

"Oh, I'm going to be asking for an extra raise after this," Lex said. "And also

complaining.”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:08 am

Myrell and Morse came out not long after, and everyone hollered when they joined their circle.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again!” Myrell snapped.

They huddled together for a long moment, relief spreading around the group. But it was clear a few were injured.

“Let’s get you looked at back on the ship,” Dani said. She turned to Saul and Garret who were talking with the other soldiers. “Can you keep guard of the perimeter?”

Garret winked at her. “Aye, aye boss.” He and Saul directed the men to scan the area while her team moved on back to their ship.

Everything was a blur after that. She’d gone from one room to the next, grabbing a medikit and helping to assist the others. She’d grabbed more food and water, checking on them constantly.

When they finally settled down and sat together in the control room, they told her what happened.

“I was falling in the dark when I got snagged on something,” Lex started. “Took me a moment to get my bearings and realize it was some of that sticky webbing. It was all over the bridge and I was stuck. I heard the monster above and was scared to make a sound but eventually it disappeared. Then I heard Phen. I was able to wrench my hand free from the web to get my pocketknife, and I just started cutting. By the time I’d gotten myself loose, Sheek was already climbing toward me with her blade.”

“Stuck like flies,” Sheek added.

“She helped me then Phen,” Lex continued. “We slowly climbed down and discovered the sinkhole at the bottom was actually an exposed part of the tunnel system. We waited for Sheek to grab Tom. By then the storm was starting, and we had to take cover inside the tunnels. Sheek eventually found us, and we hunkered down for a while, then slowly made our way back to the supply sector.”

“Poor Tom hit his head, and my arm got caught falling.” Phen wiggled her injured arm.

“Knocked my helmet clean off,” Tom said.

Dani blew out a breath. “I’m just glad you’re all okay.”

“Us too,” said Lex.

“We don’t have to do any more, right?” said Phen. “Even though we lost some of the artifacts?”

Lex pointed to their pack. “I didn’t lose mine and neither did Tom. It might not be as much but it’s something. Which means we still got through the list. And fuck the heads if they say otherwise.”

“So, we can finally go?” asked Phen.

“I’d say that’s a hundred percent, yes,” answered Myrell.

“Do you think they’ll let us take the other ship back since this one is still down?” asked Lex.

“I’ll talk to Saul,” Dani said.

“Good.” They tried to stifle a yawn and failed. “But I could use a shower. Since I can’t get one of those on this hunk of scrap metal, I’d say another nap.”

“Me too,” said Phen.

Lex planted their head on Phen’s shoulder. “What do you say, captain?”

Dani smirked. “I’ll grab some blankets.”

The team remained inside the ship, Lex and Phen sleeping off the last several hours, while Myrell and Sheek watched over them, playing cards and waiting for when they could finally leave. Tom offered to secure the last of their collected artifacts and record them, while Morse continued to work in the engine room.

When she’d checked on them for what felt like the tenth time, Dani went out to talk to Saul and found him near the edge of the landing dock, standing by one soldier scanning the area with a drone. She thought of Ryatt, who was the only one to not make it back, and felt sorry.

“I’ve spoken to the response team,” Saul said. “They’ve been tracking the area and seen quite a lot of movement. Seems we’ve caught the attention of whatever lives here.”

“Have you ever seen a decommissioned world with so much life?” she asked.

Saul shook his head. “Hardly. This is definitely unusual.”

She almost told him about the experiments Marityne was conducting but quickly decided against it. Better for the heads to know first.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:08 am

Glancing at the soldier next to Saul, she asked, “Have you seen a vrisha by chance?”

Saul frowned. “A vrisha?”

She glared back at him. “You know. Because you identified it when I told you what I saw after we returned with the cryo-batteries. You knew, didn’t you? That’s why you switched out your guns. Because ice hurts them, not fire.”

Saul shifted. “I wasn’t a hundred percent sure. I thought that maybe, in case it was...”

She shook her head. “Vrisha are protected under the alliance.”

“I’m aware. But it was a danger to you and your team. I did what I thought best.”

“And the creature you did kill?”

“I thought I’d been wrong about my assumption since I didn’t see a vrisha and neither did the others. Clearly, I was wrong.”

Crossing her arms, she turned back to the soldier. “Have you seen one or not?”

The man shot his black eyes up to hers and shook his head.

That sinking feeling returned. “Let me know if you do.” She turned back to Saul. “When are we expected to leave?”

“We’re discussing the best options. The ship might get its power back real soon. But

if not, we'll shuttle the team into the other one. We'll help transfer everything over if that's the case."

"Let me know."

Making her way back for the ship, she noticed a large shadow covering the landing dock. She froze and looked up, seeing big blue clouds rolling in above. They looked like they might bring rain. This place was dreary. She didn't know how Kryxis had dealt with it for so long.

Her gaze drifted from the dock over to the shadows of the buildings. He had to be out there. But the more time went by, the more she wondered if he really did make it out.

She was seriously worrying about him. Crazy to think not long ago she had tried to kill him. Now, she wanted to sneak off and start calling his name.

The clouds broke above and, for one clear second, the area brightened. A glint caught her eye, and she looked over, noticing a bench some yards away.

Was that...?

She inhaled sharply. Glancing at the soldiers, she moved across the dock to the bench.

Sitting alone on the seat was a growth tank. She picked it up and saw a blue plant with red stripes. Dracona Corlius, also known as Devil Claw.

She held it against her pounding heart, searching around the buildings and along the tram system nearby, studying every shadow, hoping to see any sign of movement.

"Kryxis!" she hissed. "Come out!"

No answer.

“Kryxis!”

She waited. But there was no sign of him. She checked her garometer but saw no energy level higher than seven.

Damn.

A smirk tugged at her lips anyway.

At least he was alive.

She stood by the bench a little longer, then turned back for the ship. He had to come around eventually, and she would catch him when he did.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kryxis

He watched her from his place far above. Watched her pick up the glass tank then press it against her. She called his name, wanting him to come to her.

He wanted to. The urge to leap down and obey was strong.

But he couldn't. Not yet.

The armored ones were everywhere now, and he was wary of being attacked, still recovering from the attack with the insects. There were marks on his skin where those that survived the fire had bitten and scratched him, and they still itched.

But he wanted her to know, needed her to know, he was near. Early on, he almost considered the risk of being shot by their weapons just to take her and bring her back to the den. It felt emptier there now without her.

But he knew taking her away from the others might upset her, so instead he brought her another gift. Her eyes lit up again for a second, and that made him feel warmer than the sunlight against his skin.

She liked his little gifts. And she had called for him in the tunnels. He remembered that before the fire overtook him.

Twice in a matter of hours, he'd been consumed by fire because of her. And he'd do it again.

What was something like that called?

He'd never cared this much for anyone or anything ever. Yet, he felt so far away from her, so out of reach. He had to have impressed her in the tunnels, right? He had shined himself up and put on clothes. Clothes which had gotten burned in the fire, losing the shiny things he had worn.

It wasn't a problem. He had others. But he was still uncertain about what she'd thought of him then. The only indication was her face turning red, and she had a hard time speaking. Like she was nervous again. Which was disappointing.

But she had smiled. And he'd learned that was a good thing.

Even so, dread slipped into his hearts. With the second ship, he understood they were going to leave soon. She was going to leave soon.

And for the first time that he could remember, fear gripped him.

He didn't want to be alone, to go back and stare at his lifeless den. He'd trade in his whole collection if meant making a new one with her.

He watched Dani disappear back into the ship before he slowly slipped away. Time was running out, and he needed to act before it was too late.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dani

The day was waning, light fading already. It had started to rain, leaving her stuck inside the ship. She sat in the control room, leaning over a screen, typing in several commands. Morse and the other men had finally restored the power less than an hour

ago, much sooner than anticipated. Now she was working to get the system rebooted. Once they were sure everything ran smoothly, they would start preparing for departure.

Not having to transfer everything over to the other ship was a relief at least. The response team agreed to stay until they were ready. And good thing they did because with the rain came new problems. The tunnels were beginning to flood, and so the things lurking within were starting to pop up to the surface. More than a few times, she heard shots fired, and when she glanced up to the window, she saw the men moving in pairs around the circumference of the ships. Her garometer came to life a few times and she'd get new readings. Her heart would flutter every time she heard the crackling, then sink whenever she checked and saw it was lower than fifteen.

She knew he was out there somewhere in the rain, watching. He had to be.

Her eyes drifted away from the screen and up to the window, looking out across the broken buildings. Anxiety pulled at her seeing the men aiming their guns and searching the perimeter. Kryxis had been good at not getting caught. But she was starting to suspect he was hiding because of the many armed men now staked outside. Too many even for him to risk wanting to be caught in a firefight.

She tapped her fingers on the console and sighed. She couldn't leave this place without seeing him again. She couldn't...

She stopped tapping and clenched her hand into a fist. After everything she knew, what she knew about him, the idea of Kryxis returning to the tunnels, returning to his den alone—it didn't sit right with her.

She needed to talk to him, even if she wasn't sure what she would say at first. She also needed to have a meeting with the crew. She'd be surprised if Myrell hadn't told them some things about what happened with her and the vrisha. But they didn't know

everything.

The system was restarting for the last time. Soon they would be powering up the engines. She left the console and headed back downstairs.

As she got down to the locker room, she ran into Myrell coming through the door to the outside.

“Rain doesn’t look to be letting up, but it’s not getting worse at least,” she said after slipping off her helmet and shaking her graying hair out of her face. “Also, found this out by a bench.” She took something out of her pocket and handed it to her.

It was the cat figurine from Kryxis’ collection. Her name was etched on the pink scarf. On the back it said, *kass*. The *vrisha* word for come.

“Mean anything to you?” Myrell said with a smirk.

Dani quickly pocketed it. “Who have you told?”

She arched a brow. “About what?”

“Don’t play coy. About Kryxis.”

Myrell chuckled. “No one yet. I figured the crew was stressed enough as it is, and it should be you to tell them that your mean-looking friend was still alive and helped us out. Should I grab them?”

Dani glanced at the door behind her. “Soon. I’m going out first.”

Myrell put a hand on her shoulder. “Be careful, yeah?”

“I will.” She zipped up her suit and decided against the helmet as she went to the entrance and stepped out into the rain.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw some of the soldiers standing guard near the front of the ship with their backs turned. She moved across the landing pad and crept past the bench, her hand gripping her holster. Checking around, she moved under the bridge of the tram and slipped out the other end, finding a wide path between the buildings. She slowed when she saw the edge of a pointed tail slip down and alleyway.

“Kryxis!”

She turned down the alley and saw his shadow. She rushed forward to catch up to him.

As she broke out of the alley, she stopped, finding a drainage canal before her. It was beginning to fill with gray water which was slowing running along to a tunnel somewhere down to her left. Slowly she went up to the rail and looked around.

“Kryxis?”

Something poked her shoulder. She turned but nothing was there. Then she whirled around the other way and nearly jumped out of her skin. “Ah!”

Kryxis was there. He grinned at her mischievously.

“Don’t do that!” She pushed his chest playfully. “No scaring, remember?”

He laughed and she couldn’t help joining him. As he moved closer, close enough she could feel his heat, her laughter died. She saw the scratches all over him and let out a hiss of breath.

“They got to you.” Her fingers brushed against one bad scratch across his chest, feeling the indent of the mark along his smooth yet hard skin. “Does it hurt?”

She looked up and felt heat creep up her face from his stare. He took her hand in one of his, holding it to his chest, his skin warming hers. Against her hand she felt it, the beating of his hearts.

She blinked back droplets of rain, her throat tightening. “We’re supposed to leave soon. We have to take the supplies back.”

His hand squeezed hers. “Fasar,Dani.”

“Fasar?” she repeated.

He tapped her hand against his chest. And in some way then she knew.

Stay.

She let out a shaking breath. That was a crazy idea. Absurd. No way. To stay on this bleak, broken world, having to survive every day against these poor creatures even with him would be too much.

But she couldn't say no.

She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it when he let go of her hand and backed away. One of his blue hands slipped from behind his back where he had been hiding it, revealing what he was holding.

It was a tiny plant made from scrap metal hanging by a silver chain. The petals were made of a blue tinted metal with little pieces of copper twisted together like thorns. In the center was a large red gem, glittering in the light.

He offered it to her.

Carefully she took it, letting it rest in her palm. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:08 am

He reached out and brushed a finger along the gem. “Kissa.”

She grinned. “Cute.”

His hand moved to her chin and lifted it, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“Fasar,” he demanded again.

She frowned. “I...” She was about to say that she couldn’t. But then a thought shot into her brain, making her clasp the metal plant in her hand.

There was a garden here, still full of life. There were living things here. The fungi could grow which meant other things could too. It could be re-grown, re-terraformed.

Rebuilt.

The words hit her like a smack in the face. That was the whole point of Nexacor. She could talk to the heads, request to establish a base here.

It could work. She could help him. She could stay.

“Kryxis, I—”

A shot rang out, and in that split second, she felt something whoosh passed her ear, and blood splattered against her face, bluish-black blood.

Kryxis let out a roar and something knocked against her chest, sending her flying

onto her back. As she tried to move and wipe the blood away, she heard shouts and more shots firing.

No.

“Stop!” she cried, scrambling back to her feet. She turned and saw the man on the building with his long gun aimed down at her. “Don’t fire!” She waved her hands trying to block his aim. He lifted his gun, and she turned back toward Kryxis, but he was gone. Only a trail of blue-black blood remained.

A squad came rushing down the alleyway to surround her, but all she could do was stare at the blood.

“What have you done?”

She refused to let them lead her back. Instead, she marched right up to Saul and Tristan and got in their face.

“Why wasn’t I informed you had men stationed on the rooftops!” she shouted.

“They were there to keep watch over the ships from above,” Saul said calmly.

“Well, your man wasn’t watching the ships, he was watching me, and he—”

“He was protecting you because you decided to break from the safety of the group and put yourself in danger. I ordered them to watch over the team, so he was merely doing his job.”

Dani bit her lip as it trembled. “If he had watched closer, he would have seen I wasn’t in danger!”

“I’m sorry if you think—”

“Oh, don’t fucking say another word!”

“If you don’t calm down, Ms. Alvarez, we will be forced to put you on the ship with a guard to watch you until we leave.”

She practically growled at him before turning away, a roaring in her ears as her heart hammered. They shot him. Those bastards.

She marched back to the ship, passing by Tom and Lex as she did.

“Dani, what’s going on?” Tom asked.

“I-I have to go back out,” she said, entering the ship and heading for the supply room.

“What? You can’t. We are going to leave soon.”

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She rifled through the shelves for a medikit. “We’re not leaving until I say.” She grabbed one off the shelves and started to head back outside when Myrell got in her way.

“You need to tell them, Dani,” she said.

“Not now—”

“Yes. Now.”

Dani stood her ground. But so did Myrell. The others gathered around her.

“What happened out there, Dani?” Lex asked.

She glared back at Myrell who merely nodded. She glanced around at the others and could see the concern on their faces. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath.

“The vrisha is still alive.”

“You mean the thing that had cooked the ship’s power and scared the shit out of us?” Lex said.

“Yes.”

She watched their expressions turn to shock.

Trying to keep her composure, she told them what had happened after the bridge.

And how she was able to get Myrell and Garret back to the safety of the ship with the help of Kryxis.

“I just went to meet him,” she explained, “and he got shot. So, I need to help him. He deserves our help now, you understand?”

They glanced at each other.

“She’s telling the truth,” Myrell said. “He helped us.”

“Interesting that he would turn around like this,” said Tom. “I’ve heard vrisha aren’t usually very friendly.”

“Kryxis is different,” Dani assured.

“Wonder what made him change,” said Lex.

Myrell gave Dani a look which she refused to acknowledge. “It’s hard to say. But he’s alone and hurt. I need to do something.”

“How will you find him?” Lex asked. “You shouldn’t go alone. It’s still dangerous out there.”

Before she could answer, the door to the ship opened and Garret entered. He looked oddly tense, fixing her with a concerned glance. “I heard what happened. Are you—”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

His gaze turned down to the medikit in one hand and the plant necklace Kryxis had made her in the other.

“You can’t leave this ship,” Garret said.

“Like hell I can’t.”

“I’m sorry. But it’s an order from Saul. He told us we are leaving within the hour and that...” He got quiet.

“What is it?”

For a second, there was an almost guilty look in his eyes. “Saul called up to the heads and it’s been confirmed. Once we leave, this city is to be destroyed and the planet marked as uninhabitable.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dani

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Words couldn't describe the terrible thoughts running through her head.

This was all beyond fucked up. How could Nadine and the other heads decide the fate of X110 so quickly without even waiting to have her give a report so they could make a clear decision? It was insane.

This world could be saved. They could rebuild. Dammit, that was the whole point of what they were doing!

And yet, they deemed it a loss. They wanted it gone. Did they know already what Marityne had been doing? Or did they see the threats and decide it was just too dangerous?

What was worse, Kryxis was still out there, now wounded, and he had no idea. Once they were gone, a demolition team would come to take their place. They'd set the bombs that would wipe the city off the map and there would be nothing left.

No. No, she couldn't let that happen.

But even now, the demolition team was getting ready. Even if she could get a meeting with the heads as soon as she got back to the mother ship, she might not be able to stop them in time.

Still, she had to try something.

She secured her helmet after wiping Kryxis' blood off her face, then grabbed a few things from her locker, including a canteen of water. "Myrell, I need you to make a

call to Nadine. Try to get them to stop the demolition team.”

“I’ll do my best,” Myrell said.

“I’ll go with her and try to reason with them too,” said Tom. “I agree this place should be studied first. There’s a lot more here of value than they know.”

Lex stepped up as she closed her locker. “We’ll keep an eye on security and try to stall them as best we can.”

“I could turn the ship power off,” Morse suggested. “So, we can’t leave. Make them think something else went wrong.”

“I will break something!” Phen added.

“Hopefully it won’t come to that,” Dani said.

Sheek came around to her other side. “Let me come with you. You can’t go out there alone. And I have some fight in me yet.”

She thought to say no at first but considered that Sheek was right. “Okay,” she said.

“Here.” Myrell gave her the ISpad with the map. “Don’t get lost.”

“I won’t. I know where he is.” Or at least she was fairly certain.

Myrell put a hand on her shoulder. “Come back,” she said.

“I will.”

“Good luck, Dani,” the others called as she picked up the medkit at her feet and

followed Sheek out of the locker room and to the engine room. From there they went out through a hatch behind the ship, where the soldiers didn't see.

Even with the compression wrap and pain meds, she still couldn't run very well, so they were forced to take it slow. She jogged at times, straining her muscles, while Sheek kept close beside her even when she could have done laps around her already. They weaved through the buildings and below bridges, stopping every so often to check the map.

The entertainment sector was just a little ways past housing and then the medical district. They found their way to the drain canal and followed it onward. The water had risen even more, flowing faster into the sewer tunnels.

As she jogged and sometimes hobbled, she worried that they wouldn't make it in time. She hadn't seen how badly wounded Kryxis was, but it had been bad enough to make him flee.

When they started to pass through the medical sector, Sheek called out, putting out an arm to stop her. Then she pointed over to one wall underneath a small bridge.

There was blue-black blood smeared across, along with a handprint.

"Keep going," Dani said, her voice shaking slightly. She pushed herself a little faster, ignoring the ache in her ankle.

When they finally made it to the bridge of the entertainment sector, they slowed. It had been dark when Kryxis brought her, but she was certain she could remember which building.

Swiftly, they crossed the bridge. They had been lucky enough not to encounter anything else yet, though a few times her garometer had gone off. When she'd

checked, the levels were all over the place, some even as high as twelve.

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She hoped it was reading wrong. She refused to stop regardless. They cut down one road and she examined each building. She saw a sign for a gaming center and turned down the alley. When they got to the door, she saw it was cracked open, blood smeared on the edge.

Sheek moved for the door, but Dani stopped her. “No. Keep watch. I need to go in alone.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Dani stepped for the door and tried to wrench it open but was unsuccessful. Sheek came around next to her and helped to pull it open enough so Dani could slip through.

“I’ll be right outside,” Sheek said.

Dani nodded. Slipping inside, she clicked on one of her lights to see down the dark passage. Cautiously, she headed toward the one door she could see at the end that was halfway open, with a dim yellow light streaming across the floor.

When she stepped inside Kryxis’ den, there was only the light of the lamp to see by. Everything else was in shadow.

“Kryxis?” she called. She moved her light across his workstation and saw a pile of metal. Beside it the old medikit from the wellness center sat open, gauze falling out of it. On the ground was his flaretool, a little flame still flickering from the end.

“Kryxis, it’s me.”

Something clattered to the floor to her left and she whirled around. She saw a trail of blood and followed it with her light. Curled up below the statue of the four-armed man was Kryxis, clutching his shoulder.

She rushed over, kneeling beside him. “I’m here.”

He stared at her as if he was in shock. He blinked at her with his second eyelids. “Dani,” he whispered. “Kisa xe var vesh. You...came back.”

She smiled at him. “Yeah, I did.”

He shifted, fangs poking out from his upper lip. “Dani.Esh, lillak.”

She set the medikit down. “Let me see.”

He slid his hand away where he was holding the wound, and she saw he had already started to seal it with a meldpen. The bullet had cut right through his shoulder. Another had caught him across the ribs which he had yet to get to.

“Vish xi villari na kass nes ra xu fasar.”

She met his eyes, understanding this time. He had planned to clean and heal, then come back and try to reason with her again. Try to make her stay.

She shook her head. “No trying again.” He gave her a painful look, as if she had just punched him in the gut. “Because we have to go now.”

He stared at her confused. “Go?”

She took the medpen from his other hand then opened her kit and took out a rag, wiping away the blood. “Yes, go. Something very bad is going to happen and I don’t know if I can stop it. So, we have to go.” She dropped the rag and started working on sealing his wound. “Because you’re in danger.”

“Danger...”

“Yes, now hold still.”

He did as she asked. She worked as quickly but as carefully as she could, first sealing the front then his back where the bullet had passed through. When it was finished, she worked on his ribs. She went to place a healing gel on them next, but Kryxis refused, preferring to use his supposed healing saliva instead.

She checked her watch. Soon Saul and his team would be ordering them to leave, and her team would have to try and stall them. Helping Kryxis up even if he didn’t need it, she led him back to the workstation.

“We need to go. Take with you what you want to keep,” she said.

He tilted his head like he didn’t understand. She went over to his shelves and tapped on them. “Take with you to keep.”

“Take...to keep,” he said slowly.

“Yes. Because...gone. All will be gone.” She made a swipe with her hands, hoping he understood. “I’m sorry.” And she really was. This was his only home, and now he was losing everything.

“Take to keep,” he repeated. But he didn’t even look around. All he did was stare at her.

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She gave him a confused look back until he closed the distance between them and picked her up. “Take...”

“Wait, your wounds—”

He held her close and nuzzled against her neck. “Esta vas nas ishka, lillak,” he whispered against her.

She stilled at first. Then she began to realize.

Pressing her head to his, she hugged him back. “We have to go,” she breathed against him.

She felt his claws almost cut into her suit as he clung to her. “We go.”

Swiftly, he moved for the door, not once looking back.

They made better time with Kryxis carrying her, racing through the medical sector and on past the rows of housing units. The closer they got, the more cautious they grew, keeping a better eye out for soldiers on the rooftops.

She knew she wasn’t going to be able to show up and expect Saul and the others to let Kryxis on board. Nexacor prohibited stowaways. Thankfully, Kryxis was good at not being seen when he didn’t wish to be.

Hiding behind one wall on the edge of the landing dock, she noticed a few men were still outside, including Saul, talking with Lex who was speaking and pointing over to

a set of buildings. The ships were running, engines humming to life, but Lex must have found a way to stall them for time.

Dani had Kryxis put her down as they moved around the wall. When Saul and his men had their backs turned, they made a break for the back of the ship. Sheek opened the hatch into the engine room and together they snuck inside.

“You’ll have to stay in here,” Dani said. She went to follow Sheek up to the top but noticed Kryxis still behind her. She turned around and put up her hands. “Stay. Wait for me. Okay?”

He took a step back. “Stay.”

“That’s right. And no messing with the power this time, got it?” She pointed to the power supply. “No.”

He bared his teeth in a wicked grin.

“No.”

He laughed. “Riza niset arkaris, sifa lillak.” He reached out and caught a lock of her hair, curling it behind her ear before letting his talon brush against her cheek. “I wait for you.”

She shivered at his touch, then took his hand. “You might want to hold on to something.”

“Xa,” he said as she released him. He curled his fingers on each hand, showing he’d have no problem with that at all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dani

She hadn't felt this tense lifting off since maybe her first day as a collector. Her hands were sweating just gripping the seat. The ship rumbled, making her feet vibrate, lights flickering as the ship prepared to take off.

Her team was quiet, a few catching her eye before glancing around to the back where Saul, Tristan, and Garret sat. She turned her gaze over to them also, noticing neither of them talking or laughing like they had when they first arrived. Saul glared her way, while Garret wouldn't meet her eyes.

She looked back over to the window. The rain was still coming down, but she could still see the patterns of the buildings. Soon they would all be gone, turned to rubble.

Myrell and Tom had tried to reason with Nadine and the other heads. But the council had made their decision, and it was final. She'd saved Kryxis from an awful fate at least, but the rest would perish. Even if the creatures had been turned into awful experiments by Marityne, they were still living things that called X110 home. Maybe some would flee from the city or make it down to the labyrinth of mines below before it was all wiped away.

The city would be gone, but the world would still be standing. It could go on. She might not be able to save what was, but she could still talk to the council about the possibility of rebuilding in the future. For now, she had to watch as the ship slowly began to rise as plumes of white smoke from the rockets blocked her view.

The ship left the landing dock and rose above the buildings, only to turn clockwise and begin to steadily ascend into the blue-gray clouds above. The ship roared and picked up speed, pushing her body back into the seat. She shut her eyes and thought of Kryxis below, hoping he'd secured himself.

The window darkened as they broke through the atmosphere and out into the dark of space. By now the response team's ship had to be right behind them. She hadn't considered yet how exactly she was going to sneak Kryxis into the main ship. She just had to hope his stealth skills would be as good in a spaceship as they were in the city.

As the stars started to pop up, she saw the main ship ahead, growing bigger as they sped toward it. Her heart pounded in her ears as she thought about the crazy thing she'd done.

As their ship approached, a voice rang overhead. "Clear to dock."

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The ship slowed, gliding closer, then latching itself to one of the bay doors. Once their ship was locked in place and the port depressurized, the ship powered down.

They unlatched from their seats. When Saul and the others weren't looking, Dani leaned over to Myrell next to her.

“Tell everyone to go on and get started on the supplies. We'll be right there,” she whispered.

Myrell directed the team out, except for Morse who Dani kept with her. She caught Garret's gaze as she slipped by him but refused to say a word. As the rest of her team headed for the supply room to start transferring everything off the ship, she and Morse turned for the engine room.

“Where are you going?” Garret said.

Dani looked back and saw Garret following behind them. “Morse left some tools in the engine room. I'm going to help retrieve them.”

He studied her closely, but she refused to break. “I'm sorry about what happened. With the vrisha,” he said.

She stared up at him, uncertain what he expected her to say.

Saul called to him from somewhere nearby, but he didn't move. “Can I call you later?”

She badly wanted to say no. But better to be on security's good side for the time being. "Maybe," was the best answer she could give.

Before he could argue whether "maybe" actually meant "no," Saul called to him again. "You know where to find me. Call up to security any time if you need anything."

As he disappeared, she tugged at Morse's sleeve and turned back for the engine room.

Inside it was dark save for a low red light. "Kryxis?" she called. They didn't see him at first, and anxiety took hold of her.

Oh, gods, did he get hurt after all? Did the hatch open and he got blown out into space?

She went to call for him again when Morse let out a shout in surprise, looking up at the ceiling.

Kryxis was there in one corner, holding onto a thick set of metal wires. He grinned at her then dropped down. Morse instinctively backed away, but she didn't move as Kryxis lurched over to her.

He towered next to her, the muscles in his arms flexing. Her stomach flipped just at the sight. She didn't think she'd ever get used to his size.

"Ride wasn't too bumpy, was it?" she asked while moving her hand up and down like a ship on a wave.

"Niset, isseret," he said.

He certainly didn't look scared. In fact, there was a spark in his gaze as if he'd

actually enjoyed it.

His gaze turned to Morse, who appeared rigid, the fur on the back of his neck standing on end.

“It’s okay, Morse,” Dani said, softly. “He won’t hurt you.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he mumbled. “He’d just better not break anything else.”

Kryxis stepped toward him, and Morse let out a soft growl in warning. Kryxis hardly reacted, pointing over to the ship’s power supply. “Lichar mi nak vi las ituras min nara iss.” When Morse shook his head, not understanding, Kryxis chose his next words carefully.

“My...bad.”

Dani couldn’t suppress her smile. “I think he’s trying to say he’s sorry.”

Morse grumbled next to her. “Great.”

“And he won’t do it again, right?” She glared at him.

Kryxis wouldn’t meet her gaze, and she sighed.

“Follow us,” she ordered. “And no messing around. If you get caught, it’s not just us who’ll get in trouble.”

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She went on ahead first to make sure security had left the ship, then she had Kryxis slip into the supply room which was mostly empty now that her team had gone, transferring the artifacts to the main ship's storage.

Only one large metal crate was left. Dani slid the lid back and peered into the empty space.

“You might have to curl up pretty tight, but it's all we've got,” she told him.

Kryxis didn't hesitate. He hopped into the crate and sank down, adjusting himself so that she could shut the lid over him.

Quickly, she attached the carrier drones, lifting the crate up then slowly moving it out of the ship and onto the service tunnel toward the storage bay.

The bay was a huge sector of the ship's lower decks, filled with artifacts and all other supplies for the vessel. It was also well guarded by both security and their cameras. But there were vaults for personal storage or special artifacts. She and Morse brought the crate around to vault 007 and quickly led the crate inside, setting it down in the center.

“I'll come back for you,” Dani whispered through one of the slits along the crate. “I'll figure something out.”

Quickly, they shut Kryxis inside the vault. As it locked in place, she heard someone calling her name. She looked around and saw Nadine heading toward her.

“Go help the others,” she told Morse. As he slipped away, she went and closed the distance between her and Nadine, a tall woman with silky black curls and a sharp gaze. On her black suit, she wore the silver pin of Nexacor.

“I was looking for you,” she said as Dani approached. Her gaze drifted past Dani’s shoulder to vault 007. “Got something else?”

“Oh, just a few things Tom picked up. Machine parts mostly. You know he couldn’t help it.”

Nadine crossed her arms and shook her head. “That man. I’ll let it slide. Since he and the others...had a very upsetting experience. You all did. I’m sorry this mission was so challenging. If we had known more...but we were only given so much information from Marityne.”

“I would say there’s a lot they didn’t tell us,” Dani said almost bitterly.

“We’ll get a meeting set up. This should not have gone this way. I’m just glad everyone got out.”

“Almost everyone.” This time she did sound bitter.

“I heard about Ryatt. It is unfortunate. But he knew what this job entailed.”

He sure did. They all did. “Thankfully it wasn’t all in vain,” Dani said.

“True. Your team did well despite the circumstances. I checked the logs. You got almost everything.”

Almost everything? She was about to question her on that when she remembered. The datachip. She still had it in her pocket. And she had yet to add it to the records.

Nadine studied her, waiting for some reply. Yes, despite the circumstances, her team was still expected to finish the job, no matter how many lives were lost.

Dani clenched her hand in a fist at her side to keep herself from patting her pocket. “Is there any way you can call off the demolition team?”

Nadine gave her a disappointed look. “They’ve already been deployed. The heads have made their decision.”

“The city doesn’t have to be destroyed.”

“It’s been confirmed to be too dangerous, Dani. It’s too far gone from infestation. Saul said—”

“He doesn’t know everything,” Dani blurted.

Nadine arched a brow. “What do you know?”

She bit her lip, annoyed she couldn’t hold her anger. “I know Marityne isn’t so innocent.”

“If you discovered something, you have to give a report.”

“I would like to talk to the heads about it at the meeting.”

Nadine crossed her arms. “I don’t want you to get in trouble, Dani. Did you find the datachip or not?”

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Dani looked away, watching the others moving supplies around the storage bay. She glanced back at Nadine. “Will Nexacor stop from destroying the city?”

“No.”

“Then I can’t say I found a chip.” She moved past Nadine to go help with the rest of the supplies. Nadine called back to her.

“Your position could be on the line, Dani. Please, reconsider.”

She shouldn’t be surprised. “Call the meeting with the other heads,” Dani said. “And we’ll see.”

Getting everything placed in the storage bay went as smoothly as expected. One last check of the ship, and the mechanics went in to do their tests. Once everything was accounted for, she freed the team from any more work, allowing them to return to the upper decks and start filing their reports with management.

“You did the right thing, Dani,” Myrell said when most of them had gone. “Saving Kryxis, despite his antics. There’s no reason he should have been on X110. If what Tom said was right, vrisha are a protected race. If it had gotten out that Nexacor destroyed the city knowing he was there, it could be very bad.”

“And he’s still in danger,” Dani added. “He’s not safe here. If the heads find out...”

“Talk to Tom. He clearly knows more about them. He might be able to help get in touch with those running the alliance.”

Dani went in search of Tom who, to no one's surprise, was the last to leave, still inspecting parts, filing them into his personal log.

"Gotta say, we did real good despite losing a bunch of parts on the bridge," Tom said when he noticed her. "Management will be getting a novel complaint back from me at this rate."

"As they should," Dani said. "Also, I wanted to ask you. It's about Kryxis."

"He got out of the ship okay?"

"Yes. But...he can't stay hidden forever. I'm going to be talking to the heads about what I found on X110. But also, I need to contact the alliance and let them know we've found him. Can you help me?"

Tom's eyes lit up. "There are definitely ways to get a hold of them. I will search around and get on that right away."

She thanked him, leaving him to finish his work. She was desperate to get back upstairs and take a long-needed shower, but she wanted to check on Kryxis. Sneaking back over to vault 007, she unlocked it and went inside.

"Kryxis, I've got good news," she started as the vault shut behind her. "We are going to—"

She froze.

The crate was open, the lid bent to one corner.

Oh, no.

She shot over and peered inside. The crate lay empty.

She cursed and whirled around, searching every corner of the room. He was nowhere to be found.

How the hell did he...?

Then she noticed the large vent above. The grate from it was popped off and lying on the ground.

“Kryxis!” she hissed at the vent.

No response.

Dammit!

He was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dani

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:08 am

She was going to kill him for real this time.

Her thoughts were a whirlwind as she stirred the rice in her pot and set the lid atop. She'd been in a state of exhausted panic for nearly an hour now.

She'd tried calling him through the vent a few more times before she'd given up, locking up the vault and heading toward the upper decks. She'd wandered a few levels, checking her garometer while peering at vents as she went. Unfortunately, the energy levels never went past seven, and she worried she'd start looking too suspicious searching around, so she forced herself back to her unit. She found a message from Nadine when she pulled up her computer, telling her and the rest of the crew that they would schedule a meeting as soon as possible to address the events on X110 but had yet to give a time. Soon the city would be rubble, and they would be leaving X110's orbit to move on to whatever destination was decided next, and Kryxis would be stuck here for good, until they could figure out how to help him.

But the longer he was stalking about, the more chances he might be seen, and the harder getting him out without trouble would be.

Where the hell could he have gone? And how could he be so damn careless?

She tried to understand, remembering that he was nearly feral and trying to make him stay put in a crate wasn't ideal. But she wished he could have at least waited a little longer.

Spending hours trying to find him was pointless. He could be anywhere, and the ship was the size of a small city.

He wasn't going to mess around and scare people again. He would come find her.

And yet, she couldn't shake the anxiety as a less confident part of her told her otherwise.

He's a vrisha, one of the most powerful races in the known systems. He has so much more to explore. Why would he waste his time hanging out with you?

Her heart sank at the thought. Crazy that she actually felt sad at the idea when less than a day ago, she wanted to get away from him.

Maybe it had been kind of fun when he had been...exploring her.

She wanted to laugh at that, until she realized she was serious. Being back in her unit, safe and sound, should have made her feel better. Instead, she felt an odd sense of loneliness, the space feeling emptier than ever, even with her cat Chowder purring at her feet.

Trying to keep her mind off the fact that there was a giant, terrifying alien sneaking around the ship and that she was missing him, she unlatched her belt, setting it on a chair. Taking out the tools and other accessories in her pockets, including the datachip which she set next to her computer, she yanked off her suit, kicking it over to the dirty clothes pile.

Stepping into the bathroom next, she started the shower. The water was a blessing, and she nearly let out a moan when it hit her aching back. Scrubbing the dust and grime off her was the best feeling she'd had in hours. When she'd washed it all down the drain, she remained standing in the shower, her mind drifting back again to Kryxis. The warmth surrounding her was kind of like...him.

She shut her eyes and hugged herself. She wasn't a fool. Those times with Kryxis,

those little moments when he touched her—he'd wanted more than a friend. She saw how he looked at her, the unmistakable hunger there in his searing red gaze.

She'd tried to ignore it. But in reality, she knew. All those times her pulse raced, or face flushed, or stomach was in knots, she'd called it fear. But that wasn't all true.

She'd felt something she shouldn't. And that feeling was slipping through the cracks of the imaginary wall she'd put up.

A vision of him in his battle attire swept over her. He'd been trying to impress her before they had gone into the tunnels. And he had. All of him. He had been terrifying and...

Stunning.

She licked the water from her lips. This wasn't just her wanting intimacy for the sake of it. She'd gotten that easily with several men before. Hell, she could call up Garret right now if she wanted something superficial and shallow.

But she didn't. She wanted...

Hissing through her teeth, she shut off the water and got out, smacking on the heater.

Damn him. He was frustrating, and horrifying, and crazy, and reckless, and...and...

She thought she heard something outside. Shutting the heat off, she listened and realized it was a knock at her door. Grabbing her robe, she shot out of the bathroom and flew to her unit door, letting it slide open.

“Hey.”

She tried hard not to look disappointed. “Garret...”

“Just wanted to make sure you were okay.” He smiled at her as he leaned against her door. “I picked this up for you.” He offered her a bag of candy and she took it reluctantly.

“Um, thanks.”

“No problem.” He stood there for a moment, and she worried he was expecting her to ask if he’d like to come in.

“Well, I’m tired so...”

“Right.” He unlatched from her door. “There is going to be a public viewing of the demolition on commons deck. If you wanted to see...”

“I’m good,” she said softly.

He nodded. “If you change your mind, I’ll be around. Otherwise, you can probably see some of it from your window.”

“Right.”

He looked like he wanted to say more but decided against it. “See you around.” He left, and she shut her door, letting out a slow breath. As she set the bag on the counter, she wondered if Kryxis would see the destruction of his home, and she felt a pang of guilt. Maybe she should go just in case he was there.

The commons deck was crowded. No surprise that people found it entertaining to watch buildings being turned into dust and fire storms the size of mountains consume everything in sight. One side of the deck was nothing but a thick pane of glass for everyone to watch from below. Monitors along the wall showed close ups. Dani wasn’t looking at the window or the monitors. Her eyes were drawn over to the vents, hoping she’d see a pair of red eyes looking back. She didn’t have the lights from her suit this time to look inside now that she wore only a simple gray shirt and black pants. All she could do was walk past, whispering for Kryxis and hoping he responded.

“Hey, Captain!” someone called to her as she peered inside another vent. She straightened and looked over to see Lex and Phen coming her way.

“Didn’t think we would see you here,” Lex said.

“I didn’t think I would come at first,” Dani said, brushing a lock of hair away from her face. “But I thought...maybe I should.”

“I think most of us just want to put X110 behind us and not think about it. So far, Phen was the only one who showed interest.”

“I want to see the big fire,” Phen stated. “And the burning.”

“And she dragged me along,” Lex added, glancing at her nervously. They leaned in closer. How’s our big red bully doing, by the way?” they whispered. “Holding up?”

Dani fidgeted. Telling them he was missing felt like a bad idea. She didn’t want to cause a panic in anyone else or for them to regret bringing him on board.

“He’s...fine.” That might not be a lie. He could be fine somewhere, right? “I’ve talked to Tom, and we are going to try to contact someone.”

“Oh, the alliance?” Phen asked.

“Hopefully.”

“Yeah, let’s hope someone takes him soon,” Lex said. “I don’t want to think about the chaos he’ll cause if he gets loose and bored. Management will go code red for the first time in years.”

The lights around them suddenly flickered then went out, along with the monitors,

causing jeers and groans from the crowd as they looked around in confusion.

“What’s going on?” Dani asked, as the emergency lights turned on, washing the room in a soft yellow light.

“Looks like another blackout,” Lex answered as they tugged on Phen’s sleeve to stop her from staring into the emergency lights.

“Another?”

“Yeah, didn’t you get the email? They’ve been happening throughout the ship. Engineers have been working on it for the past hour.”

She had a sinking feeling in her gut. “Have you heard about anything else? Anything strange?”

Lex seemed to think it over. “Now that you mention it...we saw a group of engineers while passing one of their stations. One looked ashen, you know, like something really spooked him bad. And he was yelling that he refused to go down to the lower decks with the others. He was frantic, all panicky.”

Dani tried not to make a face, even as her blood heated. Dammit, Kryxis. She really was going to skin his hide for this.

Lex gave her a curious look. “You don’t think that it was...”

“I’ll check it out,” Dani remarked. “Just watch for anything else, okay?”

Lex nodded. “Sure thing.”

The lights flickered back on and there was a collective cheer from everyone. Dani

went rigid as she glanced over and saw Garret nearby, talking with fellow security guards. “You guys go on. I’ll be around.”

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Lex steered Phen toward the window. Dani stayed behind, wringing her hands as she observed the room. Garret and his team moved away as more people turned toward the windows. On the monitors was a countdown. Only ten minutes remained.

She looked down at her garometer.

Nothing.

Kryxis wasn't here.

A group of blue suits from the science sector had found a place by the window, talking and laughing. She watched them, feeling oddly numb.

Nadine and the other heads might reject her promotion if she didn't give the datachip up. But once the city was gone...the datachip would be all that was left as evidence.

If she gave it up, she couldn't know for sure they would do the right thing.

And she realized she wanted that for Kryxis. He deserved justice. Even if it meant sacrificing her hard work.

She just wished he would come out and speak to her.

Moving away from the wall, she turned back for the elevators. She couldn't do it. She didn't want to see, didn't want to think about Kryxis's home turning to dust or think about the conservatory and all those beautiful plants withering to nothing in the fire. Even those poor creatures that had been tested against their will. They would be

forgotten.

A tear slipped down her cheek as the elevator door slid closed. She brushed it away and took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves.

As the elevator stopped on her level, she hesitated to step out. Her floor was dark, save for yellow lights along the floor. Emergency lights. The power had gone out here too.

Great.

Expecting it would come back soon, she went for her door several units down then paused, sniffing the air.

Was that...?

She lifted her head up to the vent just above her door and caught the scent again. The scent of coffee.

She peered down at her garometer, and her heart flipped.

“Kryxis!” she called up at the vent.

No response.

Confused, she looked back at her door. Quickly, she plugged in her code on the keypad then remembered the power was out so she would have to open it manually. She opened a box next to the keypad and pulled a latch down. The door popped to one side, allowing her to wrench it open with one hand.

The unit was dark just like she expected. She stepped inside then slid the door back

behind her and stood on the threshold for moment, her heart pounding.

She called to him again. “Are you here?”

Something moved in the dark. Something big. Her breath caught in her lungs at the sight, making her stumble back into the door. Before she could utter another word or even let out a cry, the lights came back on.

Kryxis stood before her with a head engineer’s control pad in his hand. He grinned at her. “Hi, Dani.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dani

She fumed just at the sight of him. “You...how dare you.” Her voice shook. “How dare you show up here and act like you haven’t been doing anything wrong!”

Storming past him, she went into her bedroom and peered under a cabinet space, seeing poor Chowder there hiding in one of his usual spots. He hissed at her when she reached for him. “And you’ve scared my cat.” She straightened and whirled around, ignoring the jolt in her heart seeing him standing right beside her. He tilted his head at her like he was confused.

“Dani,” he said, sounding concerned.

“You left,” she snapped. “I told you it was dangerous. I took you in, and you left the vault to stalk around the ship, messing with the lights and scaring people—”

“Niset,” Kryxis cut in.

“Yes, you did. Don’t deny it!” She slipped past him again and headed into her kitchen. “You haven’t been on the ship a few hours and you’re already messing around. You have no idea how much you endanger yourself or my team if you get caught.”

“Wassnt,” he said behind her.

She turned to face him again. “What?”

He shook his head. “Wassant seeeen.” He tapped on his chest and covered his face. “Hid.”

“But you were seen.”

“Niset, asira, Dani.”

She frowned. How could he say he wasn’t seen? Lex wouldn’t lie. Or did Kryxis just not realize?

Frustrated, she sank down in the seat next to her kitchen table. “You left and scared me. You have no idea the risk, and you are stuck here because your home is—” She quieted and shot her gaze toward the window on the other side of her kitchen. She could see X110 outside. Kryxis followed her gaze, and in that moment, there was a blinding flash of light, then the aftershock rippling across the city. A few seconds later, a giant plume of smoke rose into the atmosphere like a giant angry cloud.

She went still, her body turning cold. “Kryxis...”

Kryxis approached the window and watched. She waited to see his reaction, to see the fury in his gaze or maybe the devastation. But there was nothing.

“I’m sorry.”

He stood rigid for a long moment, until his gaze finally turned to hers. “Isstara rak, xi kar vinak, lillak.”

She shook her head, not understanding.

“Here...now,” he said.

Her mouth twisted. “Everything is gone. Your home, your things. I tried to stop them, but I couldn’t. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t.”

He grunted. “Home...here now.”

She blinked at him in surprise. “That’s right.” Her heart fluttered as she said it. “So...stay here, okay?”

His pupils enlarged and he bowed his head. “Xa.”

Her stomach did a little flip, uncertain if he was agreeing to stay here with her or just within the ship. A part of her wanted to know, but before she could ask, he slipped from the window over to the door and picked up what appeared to be a satchel. He brought it over to her and set it by her on the table.

She could see it was a mechanic’s satchel. “Where did you get this?”

Instead of answering, he prodded her to open it. Giving him a suspicious glance, she carefully unzipped the top.

It was a bunch of...stuff. Mostly shiny things, and therefore, very expensive things. Watches, electronics, silver pins from jackets, even jewelry, including a ring. There were budding plant samples from the labs and a small picture of a beautiful garden from the civilian planet, Casador. So many little things stuffed into the satchel.

“Oh, Kryxis.” She covered her face, letting out an exhausted laugh. She dropped her hands to meet his gaze. “Is this all meant to be for me?”

“Pretty things for pretty Dani,” he said.

She fixed him with a sad smile. “That’s...very thoughtful of you. But I can’t accept stolen items.”

He grimaced, or at least what she thought was a grimace. “Ssstol...?”

“Yes, stole. Take.” She shook the satchel. “Not yours.”

He snorted. “Esak mi sina res—”

“No, it’s wrong. These belong to others. It’s not like on X110 where everything was yours. And same with the ISpad. I assume that’s how you’ve been controlling the lights. We have to give them back, understand?”

He hissed, scratching the side of his neck.

“Please. For me?”

His look of disappointment didn’t go unnoticed. “Xa,” he said, exasperated.

“Thank you.” She zipped the satchel back up and slid it away. “How did you find me, anyway?”

Kryxis leaned in and took a lock of her hair. “Scent. Followed.” Heat rose up her neck as he let the lock of hair slip through his fingers before he went to crouch beside her. “Saw you.”

Her eyes drew down to the rest of him. His wounds seemed to be doing okay, despite all the creeping around in vents he’d done. She reached out and gently pressed her fingers against his chest, beside one wound. “Didn’t tear anything at least,” she commented, brushing her fingers along some of his broken scales. “Probably should still clean them better though...” Her fingers drifted lower. When Kryxis didn’t move, she lifted her gaze to his face and found him staring at her, deep red eyes searching hers.

Without taking her eyes off his, she reached up and touched his face, brushing away a smudge of dirt with her thumb.

Kryxis’s pupils expanded, his nostrils flaring. He took hold of her wrist firmly in one red hand and pressed his face into her palm, rubbing his mouth against her. His eyes darkened as his black fangs slipped from his upper lip, grazing her just enough not to

bite down. His tongues flicked out and brushed along her wrist, slow like he was tasting her.

Dani didn't pull away, even as her hand trembled against him. She watched him, at first fascinated, as a low heat spread across her body.

"I don't think I have the strength to say no to you," she whispered.

Kryxis growled softly, almost like a purr. "Don't fight, lillak."

"You called me that before. Lillak. It's an endearment or something?"

"Endear...?"

"Like pretty?"

Kryxis smiled. "Xa," he hissed against her palm.

She pulled her hand gently away, and he let it go, studying her carefully.

Dani rose from her seat. "I want you to follow me."

Kryxis slowly straightened. "Anywhere," he answered.

Catching her breath, she turned for her bedroom, knowing full well he was right behind her. Slipping into the bathroom, she went over to the shower and slid the glass back, turning it on. The water came down from above like rain. She glanced back at Kryxis and eyed his dirty black pants. "Take those off."

Kryxis obeyed, shrugging them away. Bare before her, she saw nothing between his legs save for two v-shaped slits. She felt no reason to be disappointed. Knowing how

different alien anatomy could be, she could only suspect what he was hiding. Heart pounding, she stripped off her shirt and pants to stand naked with him, wearing only the necklace he had made her. His sharp gaze took her in, making her shiver. She'd been seen by many other men but not like how Kryxis saw her now.

She stepped into the shower, not taking her eyes off him. "Come, join."

Kryxis once more obeyed. He stood beside her under the cascade of warm water without saying a word. Reaching behind her, Dani pressed a button on the wall that would mix the water with a special wash, to help clean him of the dirt and grime.

Before she could decide what to ask of him next, he was already closing the distance between them. She jumped when his tail trailed across her thigh and along her back, making her laugh nervously. She craned her neck up to him as his blue hands drifted to her hips, pulling her in, while one of his red hands brushed along her neck and collarbone. Tilting her face back, he traced his talons across her cheek and jaw. A sharp thumb grazed her bottom lip before slipping between her teeth.

She bit down playfully, and he hissed, baring his teeth as if the sight pained him. "Lillak."

Dani smiled as his thumb slid away. This time she reached for him, letting her hand drift across his muscular thigh and over to...

She gasped and glanced down, her eyes widening.

What he had been hiding between his legs was now exposed. Not one, buttwohard cocks, one red and slick, the other a deep blue with shallow ridges.

Dani cursed out loud then covered her mouth. Kryxis didn't seem disturbed by her reaction. Instead, he brushed the damp hair from her face like a lover, while his blue

hands rubbed her thighs.

“It’s okay, Dani,” he purred.

He was trying to console her. She licked her lips, noticing her mouth was dry. Nowthatwas something new. And for the first time in years, she suddenly felt very self-conscious.

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“You’ve...never been with anyone like this, have you?” she asked.

He tilted his head at her.

“Like this? Using...those”—she gestured to his cocks—“with another?”

“Niset,” he said. “Only Dani.”

If she didn’t have water dripping over her, she was certain she would be sweating.

“Okay,” she said partly to herself.

“Only with Dani,” he repeated, growling. “Xia Vassala.”

She wasn’t sure what that meant, but he said it so passionately it had to be something important. “Only me,” she said. “And you.”

She thought she caught him shiver. His blue hands slid off her waist as his red hand circled the back of her neck and gripped it firmly.

“Take,” he ordered.

She wasn’t sure if he meant he would take her or her him. But it didn’t matter. Cautiously, she let her hand drift back to his center and brush against his cocks. She played with the red one first as it was above the blue one and watched his reaction. Carefully she stroked him, feeling how incredibly hard and powerful he was in her grip. Her own body pulsed, imagining what it would feel like inside her.

His eyes narrowed on her, and for a second, she worried it was somehow painful for him. But then he bucked, and his cock pulsed in her hand. Strips of his bluish-white come found their mark along her chest and stomach. His blue cock pulsed slightly as well, more of his load dripping down the shaft.

Kryxis let out a low bark and jerked out of her hand. He looked down at the mess he had made on her. Before it was all washed away, he leaned over and lapped up some of his own release, his tongues sliding across her breasts.

Dani was speechless, uncertain if she should be impressed or grossed out, but her body lit up at the sight either way. His tongues grazed across her nipple and her legs nearly buckled, a moan slipping past her lips.

“Xaka,” Kryxis growled. He pulled her in, pressing her against his body, and she could feel his cocks pulsing against her stomach.

“Holy shit,” she gasped. Her body was on fire now, her center throbbing. She pulled away from him and took one of his blue hands, directing it down between her thighs. “Right here,” she said. His blue hands, unlike his red, didn’t have talons on them. They didn’t seem to have nails at all, which made them easier to work with. She let his large fingers find her opening and press against it. She inhaled sharply, tilting her head back as he slid one finger into her. “S-see?” she said with a shaky voice.

“Xa,” he breathed, his mouth dangerously close to hers, fangs exposed. “Feel you.”

“Yes, that’s right.” She moaned again as his finger slid in and out of her. She could feel how wet she was now. Her core clenched against him. Ah, but not yet. She wanted to explore more.

With a trembling hand, she slipped his finger out of her.

“More,” he demanded.

“I’m right there with you.” She turned off the water and pulled him out of the shower with her. She smacked on the heater and let them dry for a moment before leading him to the bedroom and over to a mirror next to her bed.

“Sit here on the edge,” she asked. When he did, she lowered herself onto his lap, letting his cocks rest against her backside. “Now take hold of my thighs and keep them apart.”

With his red hands, he gripped her thighs just below the knee and lifted them, spreading her. Now they could both see her in the mirror.

She showed him the sensitive parts of her so that he understood. Where he could be rough and where she preferred him not to be. Then she let him explore. Keeping her firmly in place, Kryxis brought his blue hands back to her center, first trailing his fingers along her, stroking and touching, seeing how she responded. Then he circled and dipped inside her all at once, watching her reaction in the mirror.

“That’s good, like that,” she huffed. “Now you...can...play.”

Kryxis growled softly in her ear. “Play.” She felt his tongues brush against her neck and along her ear, making her shudder. She swiveled her hips, arching her back as her head rested on his chest. His finger deepened, sliding in and out, while his other moved with gentle strokes, winding her up. Her muscles tensed, legs trembling as the heat coiled in her center. She watched his hands in the mirror, her mouth clamped shut to try and stifle another moan. She writhed and bucked in his hold, but he held her firm as he continued his excruciating pace. She almost had to beg him to go faster, until she came undone against him, her cry slipping past her lips as her body shuddered.

When it became too much, she jerked on top of him. He released her, wrapping an arm around her waist and bringing her down on her back onto the bed.

Panting, she wiped the damp hair from her eyes. As the waves of heat began to lessen, she realized Kryxis had curled himself against her, petting her.

“Dani...okay?”

She blinked a few times, then started to laugh. “Yes.”

“Hurt?”

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She choked down her laughter when she saw his look of concern. “No.”

He paused to study her as his hands stroked down her ribs and thighs.

“Eva sisna mishara?” He then tapped at his throat.

“I cried out because it felt so good,” she said, smirking.

“Good,” he purred. He lifted his blue hand to show his now wet fingers. “Felt you.”

“That’s right.”

He muttered something else in his tongue before his blue hand slipped between her legs again, and she felt how wet she was. She flinched as he stroked her again, her center throbbing. Before she told him she needed a minute to recover, he brought his hand away and examined his fingers.

“I want...to taste,” he said.

Heat rose in her face. Damn, he really made her feel like she was back in the academy as a young naive girl all over again. She licked her lips and nodded. “Okay.”

He brought his fingers to his mouth and tasted her. She caught his eyes darken as something like a groan or a growl caught in his throat. Words spilled from his mouth in a soft hiss, like a blessing.

His eyes met hers, the points of his fangs slipping from his mouth. “Eat?”

A nervous laugh broke from her. “No eat.”

The disappointment was clear in his gaze. “Dani,” he pleaded. He lowered his head and rubbed his face against her thigh. She felt his fangs graze her skin, making her shiver. “Siza.”

She’d kept her knees together, but as his mouth moved closer to her center, she found herself parting them. Heart still thumping wildly, she gripped the sheets of her bed.

“Don’t bite,” she said quickly. “Be nice.”

“Nicceee,” he said. He used his head to part her thighs then brought his mouth down, tongues gliding across her center painfully slow.

Dani smacked a hand across her mouth, stifling her loud moan.

Oh, gods!

She shuddered as his tongues moved up and down, separate from each other, tasting her. Like with his fingers, he learned quickly how to use them, sliding one into her, filling her, while the other swirled around her core, almost reminding her of tentacles the way they twisted and curled.

Her center ached, the heat of his tongues almost too much to bear. Her legs shook, back arching just like before. She didn’t think she’d be ready again so soon, but her body lit up just like before, quicker than before.

Unable to stop herself, her hands unlatched from the sheets and went for his horns, gripping them, holding him in place but also giving her leverage. She spread herself more for him and, in response, he went deeper, his mouth firmly against her, eating her out like he was starving.

Goosebumps spread along her skin as a chill ran down her spine.

“K-kryxis,” she gasped.

He didn’t let up, taking more and more from her with each stroke. It was too much, but he was latched to her and not looking to let go.

Before she could try to pull him off, another wave hit her, painful this time, making her almost bite her lip at the sudden rush of release. She cried out again, bucking her hips, writhing against him. She pulled his horns back, and he finally broke from her, licking his lips with satisfaction.

Dani blew out a slow shaky breath, cursing softly. She had no words. Sweat dripped down her back and her body throbbed everywhere. She also noticed the strong scent of coffee all around her, coming from him. She shut her eyes, giving her a moment to catch her breath.

Kryxis shifted next to her, placing his body partially on hers. “Good?”he said.

Dani smirked again. “You certainly learn fast,” she mumbled.

He grunted, agreeing. She felt his cocks pressing against her leg, still very hard. He rubbed against her needfully, and she could see the pain on his face. “Siza, Dani. More.”

She didn’t think she had another orgasm in her this soon, but it didn’t need to be about her anymore. Without a word, she slid out from under him and rolled over to one side of the bed, to the cabinet. She took out a small needlegun from the drawer filled with a pink vial and uncapped it. If they were doing this, she better take precautions. She stuck the needle in her thigh and filled her veins with the pink liquid, preventing anything bad from transferring, just in case.

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As she threw the empty gun to the ground, Kryxis tugged her back by the ankle and lifted himself on top of her. He bent her legs up with his blue hands, keeping her knees locked to her chest while one red hand took a hold of her wrists, pinning them above her head. He sank his hips down, putting his heavy weight on her before one of his cocks pressed against her opening, the smooth red one first by the feel of it. He pushed inside her, and she gritted her teeth as he slid deep.

“Fuck,” she groaned as he moved on her, starting slow, until he found his rhythm. His tail curled against the bed, ripping into her sheets as his thrusts quickened. She could feel his power, the feralness of his movements making her flush instantly. Then he slowed and slipped out of her, and pressed his blue cock to her next, slipping it in, the ridges rubbing along her, making her inhale sharply. His strokes deepened again, while his red cock hit against her core.

His thrusts shook the bed, and she worried someone might hear in the unit next door and they’d come knocking. But he had her pinned in place. Seeing the dark fire in his half-lidded eyes told her there was no stopping. He slowed again and switched back to the red and went harder.

He switched several times in and out, greedy to feel her, and her poor thighs were beginning to feel the brunt of his need, her body trembling underneath him.

When his blue sank deep for the last time, he let out a low growl, his body going rigid. She felt him throbbing, then felt a sticky warmth as his red pulsed against her stomach.

Teeth bared, a low snarl rose in his throat, one red hand moving to encircle her throat

possessively, claws pricking the back of her neck as he shuddered above her.

As he grew still, the bed stopped shaking, and only their breaths could be heard in the silence. Kryxis pulled out, releasing his hold on her while lowering his head to rest it against hers.

“Xia Vassala,” he whispered.

She locked her gaze with his. “Yes,” she said, not sure what he was really saying but feeling like that was the right answer.

The slits of his pupils shrank, his nostrils flaring. He nuzzled her neck, his body rubbing against hers.

“Okay, big guy.” She chuckled, patting his ribs. “But I need to clean myself off again.”

He rubbed a little more until she pushed at him gently and he forced himself off her, though it seemed to pain him. “Vassala,” he repeated. “Lillak.”

She nodded. “I know.” She smiled at him, and he gave her an oddly intense look back. Like he was seeing her for the first time.

Unthinking, she reached up and kissed one side of his mouth. He grew still as she pressed her mouth to his. When she drew back, he tilted his head to one side as if confused.

She laughed a little as she brushed her fingers across his jaw. “That’s called a kiss.”

“Kissss?”

She nodded. “Between lovers.” She pressed a hand on her heart then to his chest.

“Vassalar.”

That’s right. Lovers.”

He grunted, nuzzling the side of her head. This was her reality now. A vrisha as her lover. The odds of them finding each other and choosing to be together were so mathematically low they bordered impossible. And yet here they were. What a strange universe.

She lay with him for a moment before sliding off the bed. “Be right back,” she called over her shoulder as she returned to the bathroom. Cleaning herself up, she noticed blood trickling down her legs. At first, she worried it came from inside her, until she realized it was from little cuts against her thighs where Kryxis’ scales had cut her. That would take some getting used to.

As she dried off and slipped on her robe again, she stepped out to see Kryxis sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for her. She still couldn’t believe he was here in her room.

She was about to ask him if he wanted something to eat when a notification went off on her computer. Strolling into the kitchen, she opened the mail log and saw it was a message from Nadine. The heads had scheduled for her team to meet within the hour.

“I have to go out,” she told him as she went for her dresser and took out a clean pair of pants and shirt. “Only for a little bit.” She was about to order him to stay put but then remembered the items he had brought her. She turned to face him. “You can leave one more time.” She put up a finger. “To put back the items you stole. Then you come right back.” She pointed to the ground. “And don’t you dare let yourself be seen.”

Kryxis grinned at her. “Xi azia.”As you wish, he said. She was getting better at understanding some of his words at least.

“I want you back in here before I return. Got it?”

“Xa.”

“Good. And I mean it, Kryxis. No more messing around.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Kryxis

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He waited, crouching in the dark. Beyond the metal grate, he could see the supply room, dark until the lights flickered on. His eyes narrowed as footsteps entered the room and stopped. There was a small noise of surprise as a man came into view, picking up the shiny bracelet with a dial at its center off the table where Kryxis had left it. Dani called it a watch.

“I thought I lost you,” the man said, smiling as he fixed the watch to his wrist. He lumbered about the room, gathering items, until eventually he disappeared. Satisfied, Kryxis maneuvered his body in order to crawl his way back through the small tunnel, the bag at his side swinging.

Only a few more items to go. He tried not to feel too disappointed each time he put one back. Dani made him understand they belonged to others. Little possessions like the kind he used to collect down on his home world which they called X110.

He understood that Dani had felt sorry for him, that it was not her fault his home was destroyed. In truth, he felt oddly detached. Yes, the city was all he knew, but those fuzzy memories that sometimes pained him told him it was not his true home. He'd become complacent about the things he'd done before Dani came. He knew of nothing else but to hunt, to take, and to dominate.

He thought he had been a king. But he had been a king of lost things, of discarded things, of worthless and broken things. A king of no value. Once Dani arrived, and he saw her for who she really was, it became clear to him. He'd have burned it all himself if it meant having only her.

Did a part of him feel sorry for the others who shared his domain? Yes. But many of

them suffered in their existence. And many of them would have destroyed it all in the end just for control. The insects only wanted to infest and kill. There was no other drive in them. The others were mindlessly wandering the ruins of that forgotten place, with nothing but hunger and animal instinct to keep them going. He felt a dull ache for the beautiful plant room Dani loved, but it had been a miserable existence, a lonely one. He saw that now that he had what he didn't realize he needed.

A mate.

And she was perfect. His hearts swelled just thinking of her and of that one word he didn't believe he'd ever hear escaping her lips.

She had said yes. She had lain with him, and he saw that look in her that he had seen back in the plant room, that glow. It was beautiful.

As he came upon a cross section of the tunnels, he climbed his way down toward the lower levels. He wanted to shower her with more gifts, but since he couldn't take from the others, he would have to be satisfied with what he'd given her already. Seeing her wearing his creation on its silver chain filled him with pride enough for now. But he wanted to give one last gift to celebrate their joining. He had an idea already, something he valued more than some object, even one that he created.

But first he had to return what he stole. From what he understood, she would allow him to continue what they started in her den when he was finished. And he was hungry for more, heat and anticipation filling him at the thought. He wanted to know more of her in that way, feel her, touch and explore her to his heart's desire. He was not even distraught by the idea of having to keep to her den if it meant joining with her again and again.

It was sweet how she worried for him, afraid he would get caught and wanting him safe in her home. He had explored much of the ship already and didn't find anything

more exciting than her anyway. Of course, there was still that instinct in him to hunt, but he could very easily set that aside to mate instead.

Dropping down into a small room with a large fan revolving slowly to one side, he made his way down another tunnel. He could hear people talking nearby, their voices becoming clearer the closer he got.

“I’m telling you I saw something,” one said, fear in their tone. Kryxis slowed as he passed by another grate and peered through to see a group standing inside some sort of workshop. The one speaking was a human male, but there were others of another kind, one that looked like the same species as Dani’s crewman, the one called Sheek.

“Down in the lower decks?” another asked. Kryxis was beginning to understand their language better now from the many conversations he’d heard throughout the ship. He could also make out their tone. They were nervous.

“Down in the engine bay,” the man answered. He wore a red suit and carried a bag like the one Kryxis carried now. He had some kind of tool in his hand which he gripped tightly, pointing it at the others. “It was big.”

“Did you get a good look at it?”

“It was too dark. I just saw its shadow. But I know what I saw. It moved quick.”

“You sure you didn’t just take too much bluum or something?” another asked, and they all laughed.

The man frowned and shook his head. “I told management. They sent security to check. But I’m not going down there and none of you should either. Something is up. I think that team sent to X110 brought something back with them.”

Kryxis listened a little longer before he moved on, silently making his way to another section.

He'd been certain he hadn't been seen. But maybe he was wrong. He would have to do better. As fun as it might have been in the beginning, he wasn't looking to give Dani more trouble. He left again only so he could return the treasures like she asked. She said she was going to help him, to talk to the leaders of the ship. Hopefully she could convince them that he wasn't a threat.

He found the next spot he was looking for and peered through the slit in the grate to make sure the room was empty. Using his talons, he pushed open the grate and slipped out, setting the metal piece aside. The room was larger than the others with rows of slender metal compartments, all filled with random items, from clothing to weapons. There was another room attached with a long table and a console with monitors. Kryxis snuck inside and took the ring out from his bag, turning it in his fingers. It reminded him of the ones he had tied to his person to impress Dani. It was too bad he couldn't keep it. He set the ring down on the table and left.

As he made for the vent, he heard voices coming down one passage. Quickly, he crawled inside and moved the grate back just as a group of armed security came into the room.

"Nothing. Waste of time," said a furry-looking guard with similar features to the creature in Dani's room that she called a cat. They went over to one of the metal compartments and opened the door. "They probably just got spooked because of the outages."

"I don't know. Two engineers claim to have seen something now," said a burly human, sitting down on a bench as they shrugged off a shoulder pad. "Unless we got some carbon monoxide leak making people's brains go all screwy, I say we should maybe take another look around."

“There was nothing on the feeds,” argued the furry one.

“That we saw,” chimed in another as they unlatched a weapon from their belt.

“Outages took out some of the cameras too. What do you think, Garret?”

Kryxis glanced over and saw the male he had helped save in the labs. Garret took off a chest piece, setting it down on the bench. “We should scan the area again, this time with trackers. I also know someone with a garometer who might be able to help.”

“Is that someone a woman named Dani?” asked the burly one.

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Garret fixed them with a warning glance. “What do you think?”

“She ever get back to you?”

“No,” Garret said.

“Sorry, man. Not a bad woman to go after but maybe she’s all messed up after the mission.”

“Heard about her encounter with some monster down on X110,” said the furry one. “Heard she got caught with it before they shot it and grabbed her. Had to keep her on the ship because she went all ballistic on Saul, yelling that she wanted to go looking for it again.”

“Who told you that?” Garret asked.

“Simon.”

“That was supposed to be kept between the team,” Garret snapped.

“Yeah, you know they can’t keep their mouths shut. Especially not after something like that.”

Garret pulled off a shoulder pad and let it drop. “She just felt sorry for it. But the thing was causing problems for everyone. She just couldn’t see it was a threat.”

“She sounds a little crazy,” said the burly one. “I’d be careful dating that one.”

“At least your competition is gone, eh? Blown back to hell,” said another. They all laughed.

“It was for the best,” Garret muttered.

They continued talking but Kryxis stopped listening. Silently, he moved away to the next set of tunnels, trying very hard not to make a sound. A low growl rose in his chest, making him move faster. He understood enough of what they spoke of, and he remembered how protective that male had been to Dani. His scent had been near Dani’s unit, lingering.

The urge to turn back and kick the grate open and rip Garret’s throat out was strong. But that would expose him. He couldn’t be caught, no, he couldn’t. Yet, he couldn’t stop the instinctual need to protect what was his. It was a fire that seared through him, that drove him. He bared his teeth as the growl slipped out of his mouth. No one would touch Dani. He would make sure of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Dani

Unbelievable.

She stepped out of the meeting room and into the passage, jaw clenched tight to keep herself from shouting every curse she knew. Her crew followed her out, letting the door slide shut behind them.

“Well, that was...a meeting” Myrell said.

“More like an interrogation,” said Lex.

Dani glanced back at the door. “Let’s not talk about this here.”

“I know one place we can,” said Myrell. “My place.”

Silently, they made their way down to deck five and into Myrell’s unit, a slightly larger space than Dani’s. Pictures were taped on the walls and little lights hung from the ceiling. It was less well kept but it was welcoming. They huddled in her kitchen while she made them drinks, handing small cups of a light blue liquid to each of them. Dani took a sip and winced from the burning of the alcohol. The others followed suit, flinching or hissing in pain before setting their cups down.

“First thing,” Dani said. “Thank you for not saying anything about Kryxis. He’s doing fine. He’s safe.”

“Is he?” Lex said. “I’ve been hearing some rumors, Dani. Two engineers said they saw something, and security has been looking around the lower decks.”

“I...wasn’t honest with you and I’m sorry. Kryxis did get out.”

A few groaned in disbelief, cursing under their breath.

“It was him messing with the lights, wasn’t it?” Lex asked.

Dani pursed her lips. “Yes.”

“If he gets caught—”

“I know.”

They looked around at each other.

“He won’t get caught,” Dani said. “And if he somehow did, I would tell the heads I got him on board myself and none of you knew.”

“If they believe that,” Morse muttered.

“I’ll make them believe.”

“It’s not just that. What if you were wrong about him?” Lex said. “What if he gets up to his antics again like he did with us? I mean, he’s kind of feral, and I don’t think he fully understands we aren’t prey. What if he powers down this ship like he did ours on X110? We only have so much backup power. And you can imagine the panic.”

“Trust me, I’ve made him understand. He won’t mess with the ship or with anyone.”

Lex crossed their arms. “Like how you trusted him to stay put when he didn’t?”

“Lex does have a point. We know the risk we took bringing him onboard.” Myrell poured herself another cup and drank it down before adding, “Let’s just hope you’re right, Dani. I saw that better side of him. He’s still protected.”

“I did send out a message to the nearest alliance outpost,” Tom said. “But we may not

hear anything back for some time. Aslong as he stays unnoticed, the next port we make could be his best chance.”

“And as for the other matter?” Sheek spoke. “Are we to see no compensation for what happened to us? Instead, the heads treat us like criminals. Questioning what we saw, if we took anything we shouldn’t have.”

“It’s because of Marityne,” Dani answered. “The heads learned more about what Marityne did. Instead of outing them, they are trying to keep it quiet. They expected us to do our jobs and not ask questions, like good little workers.”

“They had to have paid Nexacor a ton to do that,” Lex said.

“Or there was some insider trading involved,” said Tom.

“Either way, we won’t see a dime unless we lawyer up,” Myrell stated, pouring another cup.

Or if Dani gave up the datachip. A part of her knew that’s what the heads really wanted. But it was also all the evidence left. She badly wished she had a way to copy the data, but employee computers didn’t have a way to transfer such hefty files. There wasn’t even a way to connect the chip to her computer.

The whole meeting, Nadine had glared at her, pleading with her silently to give it up. Give it up and get her promotion. Never speak of it again and get her bonus. Otherwise, her job was on the line.

Come the next port they stopped at, she could be kicked off. They’d strip her room and find the chip as well as...

She hugged herself as a sharp chill ran though her. She had to decide soon.

Too bad her mom was gone—she'd give her sound advice. Dad was one of the heads of the company, so she already knew his answer. She'd be disowned this time for good.

Her best bet was the alliance, but she had no idea if or when they would make contact. Otherwise, her only option was to give up the chip.

“Well, all this has made me tired,” Lex said. “I think I need a twelve-hour sleep cycle to get my energy back from all this.”

“I would like to sleep as well,” added Phen.

Myrell looked to Dani. “I think we could all use a little more rest.”

Dani could see the exhaustion in their expressions. “Let's call the meeting for now.”

“Come on, Phen. I'll walk you back to your room.” Lex grabbed Phen's hand, starting for the door. They stopped and looked back. “I won't say anything, for your sake, Dani. But if anything more happens with Kryxis...I can't stay silent for long.”

Dani watched them go, knowing she couldn't blame them. The others left until only she and Myrell remained.

“I know you mean well,” Myrell said, offering her another drink. “And if it matters, I do think you're doing the right thing.”

“Thanks.”

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“Where is Kryxis hiding now?”

“My place.”

Myrell gave her a look that made Dani flush and glance away. “It’s the only place I can keep an eye on him.”

“Is that all?”

“All what?”

“Oh, don’t. I’m no idiot. I’m aware Kryxis is more intelligent than some wild beast. He’s probably more intelligent than ninety percent of the people on this ship. I also noticed that necklace around your neck when we were taking off from X110. It wasn’t there when we first stepped on that rock. I can only guess who gave it to you.”

Dani took a moment before she answered. “It’s...complicated.”

Myrelle snorted. “You could say that. I’d even say a little crazy after everything he put you through.”

Dani frowned. “I know.”

Myrell tapped her cup against Dani’s. “Guess the heart wants what the heart wants. Just be ready if it all comes crashing down. I don’t mean it will but...”

But the chances were high. Even if it hurt to admit it. And Dani was surprised at how

much it did hurt.

She took one last drink and set the cup on the table. “I know.”

The lights flickered across her hallway just as the elevator opened. Heart fluttering, she clutched at the small package in her hand as she made her way over to her door and plugged in her code. Slipping inside and locking the door, she peered around the darkened apartment and froze when she saw Kryxis’ silhouette standing by the window next to her shelf of plants, including those from X110.

“Good, you’re back,” she greeted, stepping into the kitchen and placing her package on the counter. The engineer’s control pad was the only thing remaining on the table. That was no surprise. Kryxis still had to use it to not be seen by cameras. Eventually, she would have to sneak it back somewhere.

She went over to the sink and flipped on the switch for water to wash her hands. “I take it your mission went well. You hungry? I’ll make you something.”

She hadn’t heard him move and jumped when he nuzzled the top of her head, his tail brushing against her ankles. His red hands settled against the counter on either side of her, enclosing her, while his blue ones crept along her thighs.

“Rissinak,” he breathed against her, making her shiver.

She’d take that as ayes.

Tensing, she watched his hands slide up to her hips then along her stomach. They paused only briefly before dipping down to her center, fingers pushing against the fabric of her pants.

Ah, that sort of hunger.

Swallowing, she clung to the edge of the sink, feeling his intense heat behind her, until he pressed himself closer and rubbed against her. She could feel how hard he was as he pinned her to the counter.

She shut her eyes, wanting badly to roll her hips back into him. But she knew that would be his undoing and they wouldn't stop, and she needed a small moment to collect herself. Slowly, she twisted around to face him.

"Trust me, I want to keep going too," she whispered, making circles on his stomach with one finger. "I even got..." She glanced over at the small package next to her. "Something to help make things a little smoother in that regard."

Kryxis grunted, his blue hands now clutching her waist. "Need more, Dani."

"I know. I want it too." She steered him back. "But first you have to eat."

He grumbled, stepping away. He muttered in his tongue, something along the lines of, "I'll wait a little longer, but I need you," followed by Vassalla. My love.

Her stomach flipped just hearing those words. "Not long," she said. Her eyes flitted down to his bottom half, where she could clearly see how badly he wanted her. It would be difficult to do anything with him walking around like that. "Where are your pants?" she asked.

Kryxis pointed to a small alcove next to the door where her washer and dryer combo sat.

"You figured that out, huh?" Guess she shouldn't be surprised. He had plenty of time on X110 to learn how computers worked, so a washing machine would be simple. She went to the fridge and took out some leftover rice and a package of meat, then reached up to a cabinet and found a can of vegetables. Not the most decadent meal

but it had to be better than what he'd been eating for so long on X110. As she started to prepare the meal, Kryxis watched behind her shoulder. She opened the can of vegetables and showed it to him. Kryxis sniffed it then grimaced, turning away. Dani laughed.

“It's good for you, you know.”

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Kryxis snorted. “Niset, esta mikark fras ick.” He covered his nose, and she laughed again.

“Just because it smells bad doesn’t mean it’s not good. Although...” She checked the expiration date, but it was fine. She sniffed it herself and smelled nothing wrong. He was just being picky.

Kryxis went over to one of her shelves and searched around, moving aside food cans. He poked inside one cabinet and made a sound of surprise before pulling out a blue bag.

Dani stilled. “Uh, Kryxis...”

He opened the bag and sniffed. “This smells better.”

“Wait, that’s—”

He reached in and scooped up a handful of dry food and put it in his mouth, crunching on it.

“Kryxis, that’s cat food!”

He stared at her in confusion as he continued to chomp on the kibble. She covered her eyes in embarrassment, trying to stifle her laughter.

“Tastes fine,” he said.

She snatched the bag from him before he could reach in and take another fistful. “Cat food is not for you.”

As if he wasn’t listening, he went to another shelf and found the wet cat food, turning it in his hands before popping the can open.

“Don’t you dare.” She snatched that from him too and set it out of his reach.

A soft mew came from her bedroom. She looked over to see Chowder sticking his head out from her closet, meowing to her.

“Oh, Chowder, I’m so sorry.” She noticed his automatic feeder dish was full of dry food, but he had likely been too scared to come out and eat. And she’d yet to give him his wet food. She peeled off the metal lid and took the can over to him. Crouching down, she set it on the ground next to the closet. Hesitantly, Chowder came out and smelled the can before taking small bites. “That’s my good kitty,” Dani cooed, petting his head and back. A shadow moved over them, making Chowder jerk back and hiss. Kryxis stood by the doorway. Dani moved to push him back into the kitchen.

He pointed at her cat. “It gets meat, but I don’t?”

“You do get meat just notthatmeat. Now sit over there,” she snapped, pointing to the table.

Grumbling, Kryxis took a seat at the table, his tail flicking around like an annoyed cat. Ignoring him, she went back to preparing an actual meal. “Cooked, remember?” she said to him as she flipped the meat in the pan, and he hissed back at her, making her laugh.

Fifteen minutes later, she set the food out with a pitcher of water to share. She sat

next to him, sliding over a plate. Kryxis went to grab the meat with his hand, and she smacked it away then gave him a fork.

“Why?” Kryxis said, gripping the utensil.

“Because it’s good manners at the table.” She smiled. The dark look he gave her made her chuckle. He muttered something in his tongue then stabbed the meat. Without looking away he pulled the meat off the fork and took a large bite, ripping into the meat, shredding it with his fangs and spraying her with meat juice all at once.

“Ugh!” she cried, wiping her face. “You jerk!”

Kryxis laughed, and she threw a green bean at him, making him wince.

“Oh, it’s not that bad. Don’t be a baby. Here.” She spiked a couple of beans with her fork and reached over, attempting to put them in his mouth. He jerked away and hissed like Chowder, taking another large bite of meat and spraying her once more. She got on his lap and tried to wrestle one single vegetable into his mouth, but he wouldn’t have it. By the end, he had her arms pinned and the green beans were on the floor, and he was reaching for another slice of meat.

“All right, you win. For now.” She laughed, struggling in his grip. He loosened his hold but kept her in place on his lap.

“Dani, stay,” he said.

She shifted but didn’t try to break free. “Okay, fine.”

Looking satisfied, he tore off a piece of meat and offered it to her. “Eat,” he ordered.

Eyes locked, she leaned forward and clamped her mouth down on the meat between

his fingers, letting it slide onto her tongue. Kryxis's pupils widened, a flicker of fire passing over his gaze.

She smiled as she chewed, liking the way he looked at her and the way his hand brushed along her back. A comforting touch. Swallowing, she licked her lips, studying his face. There was a thin blue circle that went round the circumference of his iris, but the rest of his eye was red like low embers. It really was stunning. The blue eyes along his brow were like gems. She lifted a hand and brushed her fingers just above them, and they didn't blink, but she caught a silvery white in their depths, like little slits.

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He was monstrous. And he was beautiful. And beneath both was a man she would be happy to call her own.

That realization hit her so suddenly it was like a punch to the gut. He couldn't stay here. She knew that. They would never let him. He could be free at the next port, but then where would he go? He would be lost. Unless the alliance decided to help him, but there was no guarantee.

You could stay with him.

That little thought scared her for some reason. It was true that at the next port they could find a way to sneak off and leave Nexacor behind. But where would they go? She had a little saved up to maybe find a tradeship out somewhere. But the vrisha were scarce and many people were still very afraid of them. A vrisha like Kryxis was one of a kind and would scare everyone even more. She couldn't predict how others would act. She might not be able to protect him.

Nexacor was all she knew. All she ever wanted was to be worthy of the blue suit. But that dream felt far away now. Because, despite her fears and her dreams, the idea of being separated from him seemed unthinkable.

She took his face in both her hands. "I will keep you safe, you understand? I will do whatever I have to."

His gaze searched hers. "As will I," he vowed.

She smiled sadly. "I know."

Leaning in, she pressed her lips against his mouth, and he responded by wrapping his arms around her, pulling her into a firm embrace.

He pulled back and pressed his forehead to hers, his talons pricking through her shirt. “Xe asta limara intas virak, xia Vasalla,” he purred. He took her hand and pressed it to his hearts. She felt the heavy thumping against her palm, his skin warm to the touch. He directed her hand downward, feeling his hard stomach, then lower still, down between his thighs where she could feel the two heavy shafts.

“Need to eat more,” she said softly, yet unwilling to pull her hand away.

“Niset, hungry for you.”

She let her fingers brush along him and felt him harden under her hand, a low hiss escaping him. “Dani.”

She shifted, encircling her hands around his cocks, watching his reaction as she stroked and kneaded him. She was feeling that hunger too, beginning to claw at her, remembering how good he felt inside her. He tensed under her, his talons gripping her shirt, tearing it, but she didn’t mind, not at all. Leaning her head toward his throat, she flicked her tongue out and tasted him. “I really can’t say no to you, can I?” she whispered. Then she drew her mouth to him and bit down.

Kryxis groaned, cocks jerking in her hands. She felt her shirt tear in his fist. His other hand came up swiftly and took a fistful of her hair, breaking her hold and tilting her head up to him.

“Firas, Dani,” he hissed, eyes glowing like hellfire as he glared down at her. “I want you to take both...and cry out for me.”

Her breath caught at the intensity at his words, a flash of heat rippling down her body.

“Okay,” she said without hesitation.

He hauled her up with him and started to carry her to the bedroom.

“Wait!” she pointed to the package on the counter, and he allowed her to grab it. In a few strides, he took her into the bedroom and set her on the bed. Swiftly, she removed her now tattered shirt and let it drop to the floor. She started to take off her pants as Kryxis moved on top of her, while his blue hands helped tug her pants off. He brought his head down and rubbed his face between her breasts then down her stomach until he was crouched between her thighs and tasting her, making her arch her back as a moan tore up her throat.

As she spread her legs more for him, rolling her hips, she reached for the package and hurriedly ripped it open, taking out a little green vial and a needlegun. Hands shaking, she snapped the vial in place, a cry rising in her throat as his tongues curled and twisted along her. She pressed the needlegun to her thigh and shot the liquid into her system, hissing from the pinch of pain. Soon the drug would take effect, and she wouldn’t be so worried about how exactly she was going to take both of his cocks without it being too unbearable. She tossed the gun then gripped the covers, enjoying how he played with her while waiting for her body to be ready. She could already feel how wet she was as he pulled the heat from her, making her writhe and squirm under him.

“That’s good,” she breathed, bucking against him. A different sort of heat started to spread along her legs and in her center, her muscles relaxing, her body throbbing. A small orgasm hit her, making a chill run across her spine and she knew she was ready.

“Kryxis,” she moaned, tugging at his horn.

He understood well enough. He unlatched from her and pushed himself up, mounting on top of her. He bent her legs up just like the last time and, grabbing hold of his

cocks, pressed them together, pushing them into her center.

Even with the drug lessening some of the pain, she could still feel herself being stretched as he slid into her inch by so slow inch, making her heart pound, little cries slipping through her teeth. Yes, even with the lessening pain, she could feel how full he made her, so full she could even see the slightest rise in her lower belly.

She cursed at the sight. Kryxis bucked his hips a little to push the last of him in, sliding all the way till he couldn't anymore. Ashudder ran through her as he stilled, giving her a moment to adjust.

"It's all right, Dani," he said, one hand stroking her head. "All right."

She nodded even as she shivered. Taking a few slow breaths, she gripped the sides of his red arms, nails digging into his skin.

Kryxis moved slow at first, real slow, until it was certain he wouldn't tear her apart. His red shaft stroked against a sensitive spot while the ridges of his blue could be felt along her inner walls. She choked down a whimper as he thrust several times, his head tilting back, eyes no more than red slits, teeth slightly bared as he lost himself in his own pleasure. His tail curled upward as he nearly crouched above her to deepen his thrusts.

Dani eyes drifted down between them and she flushed at the sight. She was practically curled underneath his giant body as he took her, his thrusts growing more urgent, almost too much for her to stand.

She gritted her teeth at the coiling, rising heat between them, sweat breaking out between her breasts and the nape of her neck. As he hit that sensitive spot, she knew she was a goner.

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But it seemed Kryxis lost the battle first as his body jerked and he shuddered, letting out a low snarl as he released in her, both cocks pulsing as he thrust one last time. She heard a ripping sound as his claws sank into her mattress and his tail hit the side of one cabinet as he lost control. Dani let out a yelp of surprise as she felt him spilling in her. She tried to slide back, and he pulled out, letting the rest of him spill onto her.

Freeing her legs, Dani rolled onto her knees, and Kryxis gripped her waist, pulling her in. Without a word, he mounted her from behind, ready to press them both into her again.

“Ah, Kryxis, wait, too much,” she panted as he started to stretch her out again. She feared the possibility of her being torn already so she reached behind and took hold of him. “Here.” She directed his blue cock to her center while the red pressed against her ass. She’d been taken that way before, and the drug was still in full effect.

Kryxis seemed uncertain at first until she guided him, moving her hips, showing him it was all right to take her from behind. Once he realized this, he slid in deep, making her gasp. She arched her back while bumping against him. His blue arms gripped her hips from behind, keeping her pinned to him, while he used his red arms to support himself on either side of her, his stomach pressed to her back.

She felt vulnerable and so small under him, his body encompassing hers as he thrust into her hard enough to shake the bed. The fullness was different this time, making her throw her head back, goosebumps trailing over her skin as her body tightened. She sank to the bed, face pressed into the mattress, succumbing to Kryxis’ need. A low growl like thunder started in him as he placed a hand on her back, nails digging lightly into her flesh. His blue hands kept her legs apart while pulling her in.

The coiling heat broke in her, and she let out a cry, jerking against him, but he held her fast, his hand trailing along her back, comforting.

“Good, lillak. Predas...”

She cried into her mattress as he said that word over and over. Predas. She had a feeling it meant perfect.

He continued to move in her, slower now as she tightened around him, until he hissed and shuddered above her.

“Predas...Dani.”

When the waves finally settled and her body started to relax, Kryxis finally released her, sliding away, letting her sink back fully onto the bed.

She lay panting, flushed, and admittedly dazed. As she started to come down, she noticed his talons still trailing across her back then brushing away the hair from her face. His heavy weight shifted and he curled up beside her.

“My Dani...”

She let out a shaky breath, then turned over to face him. “Yeah?”

“Yesss.”

She laughed. “Yess.”

They laid together in silence for a long moment as his hands swept over her, across her back, her ribs, her legs. She closed her eyes and just felt him, taking in his warmth. The scent of coffee—his scent—lingered in the air, pleasant, making her

relax even more. She wanted to fall asleep, but she couldn't, not yet. Her eyes drifted back up to him as she traced her fingers down his chest.

“Do you remember before X110?” It was a question that had circled around in her head for some time, but she hadn't found the right moment to ask. “What happened before? Where you came from?”

Kryxis seemed to think it over. His eyes narrowed, looking almost pained as he tried to remember. “Niset...little,” he said at first. “There was...a ship. A...cage. I was a fledgling.”

She frowned, petting his side. “They took you. From your real home.”

“Maybe.”

“I'm sorry.”

Kryxis grunted. “It's a dream. Little memory.”

“It's awful what Marityne did. You never deserved that. I'm sorry I thought you were just a monster.” She felt bad saying it, but it was the honest truth.

“I acted like one. I liked your fear.” His talons brushed along her hip. “But I like this more.”

She smiled. “Good.”

There was a knock at her unit door, making her nearly jump. Heart in her throat, she pushed herself up.

Who could that be now?

Kryxis grew tense beside her, sitting up as well. He growled low, exposing his teeth. He started to get off the bed when she stopped him.

“No, you can’t be seen, remember?”

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He hardly seemed to hear her. His nostrils flared, a dark shadow passing over his gaze, as if a simmering anger had taken hold of him.

Dani went to stand and flinched. She looked down at herself and felt the heat rise on her face and neck. Oh, no.

Another knock came, more urgent this time. She quickly wiped herself off on one of the sheets now lying on the floor and went for her robe. As she wrapped it around herself, she went to turn for the kitchen when Kryxis stood up to follow her.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let them in, but you have to stay in here,” she ordered, putting out her hand.

Kryxis’s hands turned to fists at his sides, his tail weaving.

“Please, Kryxis.” She stepped back and turned toward the door. It might be one of her crewmen with news or one of the heads, though she wondered why they didn’t bother messaging or calling first.

Fixing herself, she turned down the lights and unlocked the door, letting it slide open part of the way.

“Hey, Dani.”

She tried not to look annoyed as she stared at the soldier before her. “Garret...is something wrong?” He was still in his uniform though not in any sort of gear.

“I’m sorry to bother you again, but it’s kind of urgent.”

“Oh?” It took all her will not to let her eyes drift over to the bedroom where, at the corner of her eye, she could see Kryxispacing. She gripped the edge of her door tight, trying to keep herself hidden behind it as much as possible.

“Listen, I’m not trying to alarm you, but I’m sure you’ve heard, since news spreads like enginefire around here. But a couple of people have sworn they’ve seen something on the ship.”

Dani shifted on her feet. “Like what?”

His eyes drifted over her shoulder to the dark kitchen then back to her. “Something that might have gotten onboard on our return flight from X110.”

She kept her face as unreadable as possible. “What did people see?”

“Nothing concrete. Just movement in the dark, a big shadow. But they claim it was real.”

She could feel her pulse in her ears. “That’s scary.”

He searched her face, and she saw it in his eyes, the thing he wanted to say. He was suspicious but not enough to say the words aloud. “Yeah, so I wanted to ask if I could borrow your garometer. My team did a small search but came up empty. I want to take another look. We got trackers that’ll pick up heat, but I figured if I could get a high energy read, it would give us an idea what we might be dealing with.”

“Right.” Without looking away she said, “Well, sorry, my garometer isn’t working good at the moment. Must have bumped it or something on X110.”

“Really?” His mouth twitched to one side. “That’s too bad...”

“Yeah. It is. Sorry I can’t help. But good luck. Hopefully you don’t find anything.”

He shrugged. “If we do, it’ll be taken care of quickly.”

She gave him a tight smile back. “I’m sure.”

He nodded, tapping his hand beside her door. “All right. Sorry to bother you again. Talk to you later.”

“Sure. Later.” She went to close the door.

“Wait. Dani?”

“Yeah?”

“Just...stay safe, okay?”

“I will.”

As he turned away, she closed the door for good, locking it. She turned around, and Kryxis was already upon her, hissing and growling something in his language.

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“Hey, it’s okay,” she said, trying to calm him. “You know Garret.”

“Niset, do not like.”

“He’s harmless.”

Kryxis didn’t look convinced as he continued to glare at the door. “Don’t want him near, Dani.”

Gently, she pushed him away from the door. He stared daggers at it but allowed her to lead him back to the bedroom. “Harmless,” she repeated. “Now come shower with me and forget all about it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Dani

A soft chime rang out, waking her from a deep, dreamless sleep. She groaned, rubbing her arm against her forehead. Her eyes fluttered open, seeing her dark ceiling above. She looked over at her digital clock on the wall and saw it read 0800 am ship standard time. She’d nearly slept ten hours, a record for the last few months.

She rolled over, reaching out for Kryxis, and found his side of the bed empty. Confused, she looked across to the bathroom and saw it was dark. Rising to a sitting position, she blinked away the sleep.

“Kryxis?” she called. Her heart flipped as she reached for her robe. Wrapping it

around her, she padded into the kitchen. “Hey.”

He was sitting, clothed, by the window, a giant blue gas planet behind him out in the distance with several moons close by. On his lap was her cat, Chowder, purring as he dug his claws into Kryxis’ pantleg while Kryxis scratched along his back.

Dani leaned against the doorframe, crossing her arms. “I’m glad you two are getting along so quickly.”

“Xa,” Kryxis said, petting Chowder’s head.

She wanted to ask him how long he had been sitting there but figured it didn’t matter much. He had spent enough time in her bed. She couldn’t blame him if he wasn’t as tired as her. They had stayed up for a little while before, finishing the meal she made, teaching each other more words as she was desperate to understand everything he said, and she suspected he felt the same. When they did lie down, she fell asleep quicker than usual, curled up against him. It was the best sleep she’d had in a long time.

She went over to her coffee machine and started making a cup for them both. Feeling his eyes on her made her feel warm and giddy as she tapped on the screen. She was going to make a call to Tom after, see if he’d heard anything back yet. Another thing she’d done before they went to sleep was tell Kryxis about her plans.

“If we can get a hold of the alliance, they might be able to help,” she’d said as they sat at the table, finishing the dinner she’d made. “You can’t be stuck in here forever.”

“Don’t mind,” he said. “As long as—”

“Don’t say as long as it’s with me. That’s cheesy, for one.”

“Chees...ey?”

“Yes, and another, you’ll go insane. No matter how much you want to be near, you need to be able to be free to go where you like. You don’t deserve to be caged or forced to hide away. If everything works out...maybe you’ll be able to roam wherever you like.”

“Wherever...”

“Maybe even go to the vrisha home world.”

He grunted, then looked at her gravely. “As long as I’m with you. Don’t care how cheessssy that sounds.”

She laughed. “We will figure it out.” She leaned over and kissed his brow. “You and me.”

There was a soft chime coming from her computer, and she realized she had a new message. She went over to her computer, bringing up the log screen.

It was another message from Nadine. She and the heads wanted to see her straight away.

Damn, they wouldn’t give her a break.

“I have to go out,” she said, closing out the log. “The ship-heads want to see me again. Probably to try and convince me to give up the datachip again.” She grabbed it off the desk and showed it to him. “But this is our ticket to your freedom. We can’t lose it. So, don’t let Chowder accidentally bat it under one of the cabinets. Got it?” It was a silly request, but Kryxis bowed his head and promised to guard it anyway.

She went to the bedroom and slipped on a shirt and pair of pants. “I shouldn’t be long again. It’ll actually be good to talk to them after the dust has settle from that last meeting.” Unless they were calling her out to fire her, which was very possible. She tried to stay positive as she slipped on her belt. She went over to Kryxis and pressed her forehead to his. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Soon,” he said.

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She kissed him then turned for the door, opening it wide enough to make sure no one was outside before she slipped out.

She made her way to the upper levels, accepting she might be facing termination. It had to be the only reason they were calling for her with such urgency. It was painful knowing how many years she put in for the company, her whole life really. She wasn't getting her blue suit and that hurt too. But they weren't getting the datachip. No matter how much they threatened her.

She hopped off the elevator and bee-lined for the meeting room. A security officer at the door gave her a stern look. "They're waiting for you."

"I know."

They stepped aside and let the door slide open. Dani marched inside ready for a fight—then froze at the door.

"Dani, you made it just in time," Nadine said near the head of the table. The other heads were there too, along with her crew. They looked over at her with pale, grim faces. She glanced between them before slowly approaching the table.

"Why don't you have a seat."

Cautiously, she took a seat. "What is—"

"We are going to get right to the point, Ms. Alveraz," another head by the name of Leland started. "It's come to our attention, that you and your crew have brought

onboard our vessel a dangerous individual. Something from X110. Crewmen have seen it. And it has been tampering with our power.”

Her heart sank to her stomach. She clutched her seat, unable to speak.

“Do you deny it, Ms. Alveraz?”

She looked over at the others, feeling cold. “I...I don’t...know what you mean.”

The heads stared at her, disappointed.

“Dani...it’s no use,” Nadine said. “We know about the vrisha.”

Dani shook her head. No. No, this couldn’t be happening now. Why now? “How...how could you.” Her gaze drifted back to her crew. How could they give him up now? Now that they were so close?

Lex gave her a guilty look, shaking their head. “We’re sorry, Dani.”

“Lex...you told them?”

“No,” Nadine spoke first. “Your crew was loyal to the end, no matter how much we questioned them. So, we had to get our sources elsewhere.” Her gaze fell on Tom.

Tom’s head was bowed, unable to look at her. “I should have secured my network better. Should have known. I’m sorry, Dani. My messages were—” He looked up at Nadine, guilty. “Leaked.”

Leaked...no. More like Nexacor hacked into his computer and found his messages. They must have broken into all their computers just to see what they could find and found Tom’s message sent out to the alliance.

“So, we called your team back and they confessed once we showed them the message,” Leland continued. “But they say it was your idea, and that only you know where the vrisha is. Because of your decision to endanger this ship and its crew, you will be terminated immediately. You will be held at the next port for questioning. Your rights to privacy onboard this ship have been stripped, and a team has been sent to your unit to search and seize—”

Dani leaped from her seat. “No!”

“You can’t!” Myrell shouted.

“We can and we will,” said Leland. “And we will have no choice but to put the ship in code-red lockdown. You will return to your units, and we will have every security team available searching the ship top to bottom for the vrisha. Once captured it will be contained and given up to governing officials of the Earthen systems.”

The Earthen systems.No fucking way.“You can’t just give him away to those militant bastards!” Dani snapped. They would lock him away, study him like some experiment. No. No way would she let them. “Who made this call?”

“Your father.”

The blood drained from her face. She sank back in her seat.

“This is monstrous,” Sheek said.

“We only wanted to help,” Phen blurted. “The vrisha might have attacked on my home world once, and hurt some of my people, but this one is different!”

“Phen, I don’t think that’s helping,” Lex said.

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“Maybe you meant well,” said Leland. “But you have no idea what you’ve brought here. The vrisha is attacking our people now.”

“That’s not true. He hasn’t harmed anyone!” Dani cried.

The others grew quiet. Nadine placed her hands on the table, leaning toward her. “That’s not true, Dani.”

“It is!” She wanted to scream, her composure slipping. “He got out once and a few crewmen might have seen him, but he didn’t touch them. He didn’t go near anyone.”

Leland made a noise of impatience. “Just tell her, Nadine.”

Nadine straightened. “A small crew went down to the lower decks some hours ago to investigate further. They have yet to return. They’ve been missing for some time. And all we’ve found so far is this.” Nadine reached under the table and pulled out a helmet with a smiley face on the side, blood splattered across it. Dani would recognize it anywhere. Garret’s helmet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dani

She sat in the conference room, staring at the wall.

Her crew was gone, forced back to their units. And the ship was about to go into full lockdown. She was not allowed to go with them since a team was searching her unit

even now as she sat there.

She couldn't move, could hardly think. Her emotions were tearing through her, but she couldn't calm them if she tried. By now, they would have found Kryxis. By now...

"Dani," Nadine said. Dani looked up and saw the concern on her superior's face. "I can take you down to the medbay if you like. If you need a place to calm your nerves. Or to another safe place."

Safe place. No, there was no safe place. She needed to go, to run. She needed to find Kryxis.

He wouldn't have hurt Garret. No, he couldn't have.

And yet, she couldn't suppress the dread twisting in her gut.

She slept ten hours. He didn't. He could have gone...and come back. He could have...

No.No, he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't. He wouldn't do that to her.

Except there's that small chance he might. He was angry when Garret came to the unit. Because it was clear Garret liked her. And to someone like Kryxis, who only knew his instincts, he saw a threat. He saw a competitor for her attention.

She shook her head. Kryxis was smarter than that. He had to be. He had to know harming Garret put him in danger of exposure. And know she would never forgive him if he hurt someone.

He had to know that.

You thought he would stay put too, said the doubting voice. But he didn't. He went lurking, and he hadn't seen anything wrong with that until you scolded him.

"Dani?" Nadine said.

She blinked away the tears. "I want to talk to my father," she said shakily.

"You sure about that?" Nadine asked after a short pause.

"Yes."

Nadine went up to the table and tapped on the surface to bring up a control screen. She sent a call out to Dani's father, and they waited. When the call went through, a holographic image of a man stood before them with deep dark eyes, black hair slashed with silver, and a hard set mouth. Her father.

"Officer Miguel," he addressed Nadine.

"Officer Pyne, your daughter wishes to speak to you." She glanced over, fixing Dani with a pitiful look. "I'll be outside."

Once she left, Dani stood before her father. He did not greet her, only sized her up.

"I'm disappointed, Dani," he started. "You had one job. You were heading toward a promising field. Yet, I learn you threw it all away for a—"

“Save it,” Dani snapped.

Her father tensed, eyes widening. “You dare speak to me like that.”

“You have no right to give the governing militia permission to come here and take Kry—the vrisha—away. They don’t have the authority. That’s up to the alliance. Because he is one of theirs. He’s protected under their law.”

“Their law only extends so far. We have an agreement with the governing militia. You should know this since eighty percent of our security personnel come from them. If the vrisha had stayed on X110, then perhaps it would have been up to the alliance. But you brought the vrisha onboard, and the ship is our territory. The vrisha has attacked our people and therefore we have the right to get rid of it as we see fit.”

“I...don’t believe it’s him who hurt our crew.”

“What else could it be, Dani?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t believe it’s him. I don’t.”

“Whatever happened to you on X110 has clearly traumatized you. You’re not thinking clearly. You’ve allowed the vrisha to manipulate you into thinking it was harmless, but it is not.”

She shook her head, tears again stinging her eyes. “I’ll prove it. Somehow, I will. And I’ll expose Marityne for what they did. I’ll tell the alliance.”

“You do that and you’ll never set foot in Nexacor.”

“You partnered with them too. With Marityne. But they needed their dirty secrets cleaned up first.”

“You’ll be taken off the ship and left at the next port until I send for someone to pick you up. Then we’ll deal with legal matters.”

“Don’t bother sending someone to grab me. Because I don’t care if you’re my father. I don’t give a fuck about trying to be worthy of you anymore. I don’t give a fuck about Nexacor!” Before he could respond, she severed the signal. She let out a shout of despair, slamming her fist against the table. She pressed her head against the cool metal surface, her body shaking.

The lights above changed from a warm yellow to a deep orange.

“A lockdown is in place,” came a voice overhead. “All staff, please proceed to your designated unit. This is a code-red lockdown. Please proceed to your unit.”

Tears dripped down onto the table, her nails digging into her palms. She had to see him. She had to know. Had to hear him tell her the truth. At the very least. Whether he did it or not, she had to find him.

She pushed herself off the table and made for the door. Nadine was down one side of the hall, speaking to a pair of soldiers. She looked over and they locked eyes.

“Dani!” she called, starting for her.

Dani turned the opposite way and made for the elevator. She slipped inside and slapped the button for her level, letting the doors shut on Nadine before she could reach them. She made her way back down to her floor, bolting out of the elevator and

rushing down the hall to her unit.

Her door was wide open and bent in the middle. She stepped inside and knew immediately that Kryxis was gone. Her table was overturned and a few of the growth tanks on her shelf of plants were shattered on the ground.

She went over to the computer and found the datachip gone.

Covering her face in her hands, she tried to clamp down the cry of rage rising in her throat. She whirled around and rushed to the bedroom but found it dark and empty.

“Chowder?” she called. She swore if they hurt her cat, she would kill someone.

There was a soft mew coming from her closet. She opened it and found Chowder at the bottom sitting on a blanket. Letting out a cry of relief, she swept him into her arms.

Quickly, she found his carrier and set him inside. Then she went for a lock box in the closet. Thankfully, it looked like the search team was only tasked with grabbing the datachip because they hardly touched her things. She also had a feeling Kryxis didn’t get caught. The fact they went into lockdown told her he fled before they could find him.

She opened her lock box and took out the gun Kryxis had given her, latching it to her belt. She grabbed her stunner and shoved it into another pocket then she took out her garometer and clasped it to her wrist. She almost felt sorry for lying to Garret about it, but she was thankful she had it now to track Kryxis down.

Picking up Chowder’s carrier and throwing the strap over her shoulder, she rushed out of her unit. From above, she noticed the vent was open and the grate lay on its side a few feet away. She adjusted her garometer to search for energy higher than

twelve, but nothing came up.

She went back to the elevator and made her way up again, to level five. The passageways were empty as she raced over to another unit and knocked.

Myrell opened her door. “Dani, what in the deep heavens are you doing?”

“I need you to keep Chowder for a little while,” she said, taking off the strap and handing the carrier to her.

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“You shouldn’t be out here alone. Stay here, at least until lockdown is over.”

“I can’t. I have to find Kryxis.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“Dani...if he was the one who hurt Garret...”

“I’m going to find out.”

They heard shouts coming down one hall. Myrell pulled her inside and shut the door. They listened to a group of soldiers pass as they stood by the door.

“It’s not safe,” Myrell said in a low voice. “And you can’t possibly hope to find Kryxis before they do.”

“I have to try.”

“Let me come with you then.”

“No.”

Myrell clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Damn stubborn girl.” She put up her hand and went over to her kitchen table, grabbing a flashlight and small bag. “Take these at least,” she said, offering them to her.

Dani took both. She looked into the bag and her eyes widened. “When did you take this?”

Myrell shrugged. “It got mixed in with my pack. Thought it could be useful.”

Dani tied the bag onto her belt. “I won’t use it on Kryxis.”

“I didn’t expect you to.”

“Message the others and tell them I’m okay. That I’m grateful they tried to keep Kryxis a secret. If I don’t see any of you after the lockdown...”

“Like hell you won’t.” She pulled her into a hug. “You’re kind of crazy, you know?”

“I know.” She broke away and went to the door. “Don’t come out, no matter what.”

The elevator opened, and Dani stepped out onto one of the lower decks. It was dark down the wide passage. The rooms on either side—work stations for the engineers—were completely empty. She aimed her light around but saw no movement. She checked her garometer but still nothing. No energy levels high enough to be him. She crept down the passage until she came to a bend and heard the voices of a security team close by, searching.

“Clear here. Nothing.”

She peered around to a small docking bay. She recognized Saul and Tristan right away, along with a few she didn’t. They carried the weapons with the ice, little wisps of coolant rising from the tips of their guns.

“Good thinking on the ice Saul,” one said. “Freeze that fucker right up.”

“I say we stick our guns into these vents and start blasting. Ice it out.”

“Don’t want to drain our guns too quick,” Saul said. “Just keep an eye out.”

Dani hid back behind the wall. She peered over and saw one of the vents. Silently, she went over and crouched down, wrenching the grate off and carefully setting it aside. The vents were large enough for her to practically crouch in. On all fours, she took a left and crawled her way around trying to find a way to bypass the dock and the soldiers, hoping they didn’t change their mind about icing the vents.

She crawled into a small room with a fan rotating slowly and swore for a moment she caught Kryxis’ scent. But her garometer showed nothing, which meant he might have only been here recently but had since moved on.

Still, it gave her a little hope that she was close. She crawled her way through the dark, her narrow light the only thing to guide her way. Eventually the voices dulled as she turned down another narrow passage leading away from the dock. As she came to a dead end, she found another grate and popped it open, slipping into a small office.

Past the office, she found her way into a mechanic’s bay. A spare one by the looks of it, with several ship parts strung around. Old junk parts that would eventually be used for scrap. She doubted many came in here. In fact, she found the wide bay door to be locked. The large room was warm too, warmer than the rest of the ship. She searched around and noticed steam wafting up from the grates beneath her feet, coming from the engine room below. She could even see a dull red glow from light underneath. Above was a deck running all the way around the sides with chains dangling from the ceiling, some used to lift parts.

Besides being a little creepy, she didn’t see anything. She started back toward the office when something crunched under her foot. She glanced down and frowned. Crouching, she picked up what looked like a piece of....

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Bruiser fungi. She pointed her light around and saw pieces of all shapes and sizes scattered everywhere.

What the...?

As she stood up, a low crackling came from her garometer. Heart in her throat, she checked it immediately.

The level was at fifteen.

She let out a little gasp, whirling around. “Kryxis!” she cried.

A large shadow slunk closer and her garometer grew louder. Through the steam, the shape appeared.

It was not Kryxis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Dani

It was hard to say what it had once been. Something sleek like a giant cat maybe. Furless, with razor-claws and long, snake-like fangs. It was hard to identify because it was mostly covered in bruise fungus, spreading all along its back and on its head, growing where its eyes might have once been. Now, only its mouths remained. Two on each side of its face. Along its back was another pair of arms.

It was intimidating enough as it drew near her on all fours. But when it got closer, it pulled itself up and towered over her on bent legs which made it look so much worse.

It made a low clicking noise at her as it slunk closer. Dani slowly backed away. Never taking her eyes off it, she reached for her gun.

The thing stumbled toward her, its head tilting at a disturbing angle. It growled and swiped at her, trying to grab her. Dani pulled out her gun and let loose. She hit the creature square in the chest, making it jolt back and squirm, shrieking with rage.

Dani bolted away, hitting the back wall, watching the silhouette of the thing search for her through the steam. It broke through one billowing pillar and found her, and she shot at it again in response. It snarled in frustration as it stumbled back and disappeared.

Pressed against the wall, she waited for it, gun aiming high and low. She slid along, back toward the office, hardly blinking. When she saw a glimpse of it again, she went to fire out of instinct and found her gun out of ammo.

Shit.

Knowing she was dead if she stood there, she pushed herself off the wall and rushed for the office—only for something to sweep her off her feet, making her tumble forward. She fell on her stomach, dropping her gun in the process. It clattered a few feet away. She crawled for it, and something caught her ankle, pulling her right back.

She screamed as a heavy claw dropped onto her back, pinning her down. She felt its rancid breath against the back of her neck and knew it was about to bite down.

She braced for pain, and instead felt its sharp claws rip her shirt as it released her. It shrieked again, leaping back, and as she twisted around, a long, sharp tail whipped

out toward the creature, slicing into its leg.

Kryxis came into view, his head bent, eyes narrowed as he stalked the thing, talons at the ready, tail swinging.

The thing roared and so did Kryxis. Without hesitation, he took two strides and leapt, knocking the creature back into a wall of steam.

They fought tooth and claw. Chunks of bruiser fungus dropped from the creature as Kryxis sliced into its back.

Dani crawled away, forcing herself up onto her feet and stumbling to the next wall. She went for the bag on her belt, taking out one of Kryxis' bombs, just one left after their fight through the tunnels. She took out a lighter that had been thrown into the bag and flicked it open. The lighter sparked several times but wouldn't create a flame.

"Come on. Come on!" she shouted at it. She flicked again. When the flame appeared, she lit the wick, then shouted to Kryxis. She threw the bomb, and it bounced a ways before rolling close to his feet. Kryxis, with his red hands, yanked one of the creature's jaws open. He grabbed the bomb with one blue hand then stuffed it into the creature's mouth, forcing it closed before bolting back.

The creature struggled to throw it up but was too late. The bomb went off, and a ball of fire engulfed the center of the room, torching the creature.

Dani sank down against the wall as she stared at the sight. The creature crumbled until it was no more than a pile of burnt flesh and bruiser fungus between them.

As the fire died, Kryxis stood among the pile and faced her, reaching out. "Dani."

Using the wall for support, she rose to her feet. She let out a cry of relief before

pushing off the wall and rushing for him. She nearly knocked him back as she closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him.

“I knew...I knew it,” she said softly against him.

He pulled her in closer, nuzzling the top of her head.

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She was so caught in the moment, she didn't hear the wide service door open nor see the soldiers come in until Kryxis let out a growl and pulled her around to his back.

They spread out and aimed their guns in his direction. "Step away," Saul called, "or we will fire."

Kryxis looked ready to fight again, but she was already one step ahead. Pulling out her stunner, she swept around Kryxis and put him behind her, aiming her weapon toward them.

"If you want him, you'll have to get through me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dani

They sat on the remains of what had once been the hostile creature, wisps of smoke trailing up along the flesh. The lights were on overhead and there were still men surrounding them. Kryxis sat behind her as she settled between his legs, stunner on her lap.

"Come on, Dani, give it up," Saul called. "He's coming with us whether you like it or not."

She didn't say a word, and neither did Kryxis. They merely watched the soldiers, waiting. More showed up, standing by the door. It was obvious now they'd been told Kryxis had been found and were just waiting for orders. But she knew Saul wouldn't

make the call with her there. No matter how bad her relationship was now with her family, she was still a head official's daughter, and Saul knew he'd be worse off if he iced her than not getting a hold of Kryxis.

And she would make them wait hours—days—if she had to. She was going nowhere without Kryxis.

Saul paced by the door, his face starting to turn red. More soldiers came but still they didn't budge. Kryxis wrapped his tail around her protectively and she in turn gripped his thigh.

"You have to give him up, Dani," Saul shouted. "You're only making this harder for yourself. You already face termination, but I doubt your father will object if we take you into custody."

"I'm not moving, so you can forget it," she answered back.

"We could take you by force."

She smiled as Kryxis' head moved above hers, a low growl of warning rumbling in his chest. "I'd like to see you try."

Saul cursed, then disappeared. A moment later, Nadine entered.

"Please, Dani, it doesn't have to be this way," she said, inching toward them.

"Yes, it does."

Kryxis snarled, making Nadine jump back. "We are about to make port soon and we are certain back up will come. You will face too many to fight. It's only a matter of time."

The soldiers were creeping closer, getting bold despite the fact Kryxis could still take them all with ease.

“We’ll see about that, Nadine.”

Eventually she disappeared too. They were getting close, Dani could feel it. They were going to dock soon at whatever port they’d arrived at. They might be swarmed but she would fight. She’d climb on his back if she had to, to keep the ice off him, letting him slice his way through the hordes of soldiers. She didn’t care what it took.

“Let me pass, thumb-head,” someone shouted by the door, “Or I’ll burn the whole lot of you.”

The soldiers parted, and Phen slipped past, flamethrower in hand and a twinkle in her eye. Lex followed close behind. Then came Sheek who pushed a soldier aside with the hilt of her blade, hissing at them. Behind her came Myrell, Tom, and Morse, tools in hand which they now used as weapons.

“What are you doing here?” Dani asked.

They huddled around her and Kryxis. “What do you think?” Myrell said. “We’re all screwed anyway. They planned to demote us and take our pay while not compensating us for the incident on X110. So, we said fuck them. I sent the message out like you asked. Only with a little bit different wording.”

“I’m done with the bullshit here,” said Lex.

“And the lies,” Tom added.

“I grabbed the flamethrower from the ship,” said Phen, attempting to laugh evilly but doing a poor job of it.

They faced the soldiers who glanced at Saul, now looking more red than ever.
“You’ll be arrested once we dock! You’re just prolonging the inevitable!”

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They didn't falter. They sat together and waited for the inevitable.

An hour passed or maybe several, and the soldiers were growing more and more irritated, starting to threaten that they would fire on them. But still they refused to move.

A voice eventually rang out. "Docking in effect. Please stand by." The ship slowed then trembled as it came to a halt. A moment later, the voice returned. "Docking complete, doors now open."

Dani stood up first, then Kryxis, and the others followed.

"Now you let us pass," Dani ordered.

Saul waved at the soldiers. "Let them," he told them. "They'll have more armed men waiting for them."

Dani turned to Kryxis. "Carry me?"

He did so without hesitation, picking her up like the many times he had before and cradling her to him. Her crew came around to guard his back as they made for the exit.

The soldiers followed as she knew they would. But still, they wouldn't fire. She braced herself for a battle as they approached the exit to the ship and entered the massive docking station of a city-sized ship port.

As she feared, there were armed men waiting. Only they looked different. They wore sleek black and gray uniforms with a silver emblem on their shoulders that she didn't recognize. In front of them stood a tall woman with onyx eyes and tightly braided hair. And next to her was—

Dani gasped and Kryxis froze.

It was another vrisha. Female by what she could tell, with slender horns and violet-red scales, wearing stunning leather-like armor.

“Do not fear,” said the woman with onyx eyes, smiling. “We are from the alliance.

The alliance soldiers and Nexacor's were at a standstill, Saul screaming at an alliance officer who didn't budge. No one made a move, knowing they would be banned from the port forever if they started a fight.

The onyx-eyed woman looked unfazed by Saul's threats and approached them, along with the violet-red vrisha female at her heel.

“My name is Morgana. I am an official of the alliance, as is my companion, Crux.” She gestured to the vrisha beside her. “You must be Dani.”

Dani had Kryxis put her down so she could face her. “That's right.”

“And this is your crew?”

“It is.”

Morgana's eyes drifted up to Kryxis and looked at his extra limbs with wonder. She spoke to her vrisha companion in vrishan, and Dani caught some of their words. The alliance member was astounded and had seen nothing like him. The vrisha female

agreed.

“Fascinating,” Morgana said. “We almost thought the message was a hoax. But we had to see for ourselves to be sure.”

“I didn’t think you’d gotten my message,” Tom said, stepping forward.

“We did. We tried to send out a response, but it had been blocked, I assume because of your company. So, we found your location and made our way here. We’ve heard rumors of vrisha fledglings being taken then found stranded many years later, so we took the message very seriously.” She waved over to her soldiers.

Just as Saul came around to try to intimidate the alliance soldiers again, another group of security exited Nexacor’s ship. Dani caught Nadine and the heads among them.

“We are Nexacor’s representatives,” said Leland as they approached. “And this crew has violated our laws therefore is under our jurisdiction, so you cannot take them.”

“On the contrary,” Morgana said. “A corp like yourself doesn’t stand above the law of the alliance. You and the owners of Nexacor will have to make your case in court under the governing systems. Vrisha are protected under us. Any foul play under Nexacor or any company will be held accountable and punished by our laws.”

“Oh, there’s lot of foul play, trust me,” Lex stated.

Leland scoffed. “You have no evidence. This vrisha came aboard our ship and attacked our people.”

“That’s not true,” Dani snapped. “Something else got onboard, and Kryxis took it down. Its corpse is inside.”

Morgana nodded to one of her officers. “Make sure nothing gets taken or thrown off the ship.”

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“That’s not all,” Dani continued. “The company that took Kryxis and experimented on him paid Nexacor to try to hide the evidence.”

“You have no proof of that either,” Leland said. “These are false, baseless accusations.”

Dani went to argue that she did, then remembered the datachip was gone. “We did have proof. I swear we did, but they took it.”

Leland started to argue when Kryxis made a sound. He slipped his hand to the waistline of his pants and revealed a narrow inner pocket. From there, he took out a slender black device. Dani recognized it as the datachip.

“Kept safe.” He grinned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dani

The ship was a decent size. Just big enough to fit her crew comfortably with rooms for each of them and a few extra to spare. It sat in the ship bay shiny and brand new, already stocked with supplies, fueled up, and ready to go.

She’d probably been standing there gawking at it for nearly a half hour now, unable to believe it was all hers.

They’d been traveling with the alliance now for several weeks, fighting together to

expose Nexacor and Marityne for their illegal dealings. The datachip had all the evidence they needed to put Marityne under for good while Nexacor paid heavily, their reputation damaged. The alliance did more investigating, finding the creature that had gotten on board Nexacor's main vessel, discovering it had snuck its way onto the response team's ship and hidden away. They found pieces of bruiser fungus in the ship's engine room, which had gone unreported. They also found the bodies of Garret and his crew, discovered in various places that the creature had hidden them. Despite what she might have thought of Garret, she was sorry for what happened. Sorry that he was gone.

While they had been investigating, Kryxis was examined by a few alliance doctors, who determined he was healthy despite what had been done to him. The spliced DNA shouldn't cause him any problems, though, if it did, he could come to them right away. They took samples of his skin and samples of the bruiser fungus for further study to determine the effects and dangers, promising never to experiment with it like Marityne had.

Once a settlement had been made, the alliance gave her crew their share, compensation for what they had gone through on X110 and for helping Kryxis and aiding the alliance. They had enough credits between them to live out the rest of their lives comfortably on some civilian world, but none of them wanted to leave the crew behind, one that was the closest to family any of them had.

So, she bought a ship to call home and started a new organization. It was small but it was theirs. A team that worked to study and collect life on other worlds, regrow on abandoned ones, and serve as a response team for those stranded.

They were just still fighting over the name.

"Almost ready, just a few more things to load up," Myrell said as she came to her side. She handed her Chowder's carrier. Chowder pawed at her through one of the

little holes playfully. “Where’s Kryxis?”

“He’s close by, just preparing.”

“Better not be messing around.”

Dani laughed. “Not this time.”

“Good. I’ll be inside. The others are on their way.” Myrell tugged at her sleeve. “You were right, the blue looks good on you.”

Dani looked down at their uniform, a deep sea-blue. No emblem yet since they hadn’t determined that either. She brushed her hand along the fabric and smiled. “It does.”

Myrell winked and started for the ship. Lex and Phen arrived not long after, holding hands. “Captain,” they called, nodding her way.

Morse came next, his bag of mechanic’s tools over one shoulder, and nodded. She gave him a spare box of motion sickness pills and patted his back as he made for the ship.

Tom and Sheek came last, Tom talking her ear off about something to do with calibrations for rocket pulsers, which Sheek hardly listened to. She bowed her head and Tom waved as they passed.

Dani watched them climb aboard the ship, a smile growing on her face, when she felt something brush against her neck, making her jump.

“Hello, my mate,” Kryxis hissed in her ear, making her shiver.

She looked around at him and saw him clothed in a leather-like armor the vrisha

called grivhide and pants made of kelva. His scales shined, and she caught a few gold rings tied to his horns. All gifts from Crux.

She stared at him in awe. "Hello, mate."

Kryxis grinned at her, then pulled her into a firm embrace, nuzzling the top of her head.

Crux had helped them both, giving them knowledge of vrisha culture and their customs while aiding them in the language barrier. Once Dani understood more of his words, she learned Vassaladidn't mean just lover. It meant mate. Vassalafor female mate and Vassalarfor male.

He released her and gave her a sly look. "I have something for you," he said.

“Oh?”

He revealed the blue hand he'd been hiding behind his back. In it was a new necklace made with shiny red and blue scales.

Dani took it, her brow furrowing. It was beautiful, but the scales worried her. She brushed her fingers along them. “Where did these come from?”

Kryxis touched the side of his ribs where she saw a few scales missing.

“Kryxis,” she breathed. “You didn’t have to...”

“I did. My gift in thanks for becoming my mate.”

Her lip trembled. She slipped her arm around him, burying her face in his chest. “Let’s go,” she whispered against him. “Xia Vassalar.”

EPILOGUE

Kryxis

A cry came from afar. Soft at first then shrill. Not a cry of pain or fear but of singing. The creature flew high above him, disappearing past the blood-red leaves, its orange and green wings catching in the light.

He felt the warm earth under his feet, smelled fresh spice in the air. The white sun dropped bright beams along the soft ground. Kryxis moved through them, going from

shadow to light.

This place was only one of many worlds he had the pleasure of exploring, filled with sights and sounds and smells he could never have imagined, even in his dreams. And the more he saw, the more he came to understand how closed off he had been on X110. How it had been as much his prison as it had been his home and kingdom.

Climbing up the crest of a hill, he stood on the edge and looked down on the shallow valley below. Their ship was stationed some ways down. Another ship sat next to it, with a cracked wing and broken thruster.

Dani's crew worked around the other ship along with those who had become stranded. Another team of scientists come to do research, their ship malfunctioning, steering them off course.

They had been passing by, making their way across the belts to a place Dani called Terra Centra, the alliance's home world. There he could meet other vrisha and possibly visit the vrishan home world. His home world.

Home was not a place for him though, but a person. He didn't care where he was really. Only that she was always beside him. His den was ever changing, and that was okay. If someday they ever wished to make a permanent place for themselves, he trusted Dani would know where to go.

The breeze picked up and with it her scent, filling his lungs, making his mouth water. He sensed her, close. His hearts hammered in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He moved swiftly but silently through the forest, following the scent of her which was still mingled with his own.

His beautiful prey was close. As he came to the edge of the tree line, he stepped in the shadows and saw her within a field of tall grass, taking her samples. Poor thing would never see him coming.

He crept toward her, as quiet as the wind, until he was right upon her. As soon as his shadow fell over her, she looked up and gasped as he grabbed her by the waist, pulling her into him.

“I swear I feel you watching me.” She laughed.

“Your instincts don’t deceive you,” he said, wrapping his arms around her.

“And yet I get caught every time.”

“True. But you like it.” He brought her down to the ground, making her yelp as he sat back. She sank into him, resting her head against his chest, gripping the arm across her.

They sat together in the field as the grass swayed around them, the sun warming his back. He took her hands in his and enclosed his fingers around hers. Small, delicate hands compared to his own.

“Kryxis?” she said as she studied their hands.

“Yes?”

She looked up at him and smiled. “Never stop catching me.”

He squeezed her hands gently, resting his head against hers. A smile grew on his face.

“You have my word.”