



Xara and the Xenobeast

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Science Fiction

Description: Abducted from Earth.

Left for dead in a world full of monsters.

Claimed by the most dangerous one of all...

Xara's quiet vacation comes to an abrupt end when she is abducted by aliens. Her situation goes from bad to worse when she crash lands on a mysterious alien planet. She's injured, alone, and every creature on the planet seems determined to kill her.

Until one of them saves her.

Huge, silent, and scarred, he doesn't speak, doesn't smile, and doesn't let her out of his sight. But he cares for her. Feeds her.

Protects the orphaned alien babies who've imprinted on her.

The Xenobeast was designed for destruction. Exiled by the creators who once controlled him, he's lived in isolation for years. Until a pretty little female stumbles into his domain with fire in her eyes and a scent that drives him mad. She's soft where he's hard. Light where he's dark. And every time she looks at him, he forgets the monster they made him to be.

But when Xara is threatened, he'll show them exactly how lethal he can be – because no one takes what belongs to him.

Each book in the Alien Abduction series features a different couple and can be enjoyed as a standalone romance. Intended for mature readers.

Total Pages (Source): 78

CHAPTER ONE

Pain came first—throbbing, insistent, like a bass drum behind Xara’s eyes—followed by confusion when she forced her eyes open and found herself surrounded by unfamiliar metal walls twisted at impossible angles. The acrid smell of burning circuitry stung her nostrils, mingling with the metallic tang of blood that coated the back of her throat. Sparks occasionally sputtered from exposed wiring, casting brief, erratic shadows across the wreckage.

She tried to sit up and almost hit her head against the clear shell hanging half-open above her—above a narrow container that bore an uncomfortable resemblance to a coffin. Suddenly desperate to escape she tried to scramble out of the container, gasping at the sharp pain in her side when she moved. She instinctively clutched her ribs and her hand came away sticky with blood—her blood—seeping through her torn blouse and staining her fingertips.

“What the hell?”

Her voice echoed in the cramped space, sounding foreign even to her own ears as she managed to reach the floor, half-falling in the process. Clinging to the container until her head stopped spinning, she forced herself to take stock of her surroundings.

Through an opening in front of her she spotted a pilot’s chair torn from its moorings, stuffing spilling from rips in the strange fabric. Slumped across what must have been controls was body with grey skin and elongated limbs. A definitely non-human body. Its head was disproportionately large, with a delicate, almost translucent quality to the skin where it stretched over an enlarged cranium. Dark fluid—perhaps blood—had

pooled beneath it, viscous and oddly iridescent in the flickering emergency lights.

The sight finally triggered a memory. She'd been walking across the darkened university campus after another late night in the lab when a figure had stepped from shadows—the classic stereotype of an alien with grey skin and huge eyes in an oversized head. Her first reaction had been to assume that it was a joke, a student playing tricks, but then her analytical skills had kicked in. The proportions were... wrong. No human could have been concealed in that long, thin body.

She'd opened her mouth, not to scream but to ask questions, and its hand had shot out. A blinding flash, followed by an even more blinding pain, before darkness took her. And now she was here, with the same alien dead in front of her.

“No, no, no...”

She scrambled backwards, ignoring the pain stabbing through her ribs, her palms scraping against jagged metal fragments. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't real. She was Dr. Xara Reyes, respected biologist, rational scientist. She dealt in observable facts, not science fiction nightmares.

But the dead alien sprawled before her was undeniably real. So was the twisted wreckage around her, and the blood trickling down her side, warm and persistent.

“This can't be real,” she whispered, suddenly desperate to escape the confines of the ship. She stumbled towards what appeared to be an opening in the hull, ignoring the pain streaking through her side with every step. Squeezing through the rough opening, she took a shaky breath of the warm, humid air, heavy with scents she didn't recognize. For a moment the relief of being free of the ship was enough, but then she took a look around and froze, her breath catching in her throat.

She might have been able to convince herself that the dead alien was an actor, that the

wrecked ship was some kind of film set, but no movie magic could have created her surroundings. Trees with bark the color of charcoal rose around her, their trunks twisting in spirals that defied terrestrial botany, their branches heavy with crimson leaves that swayed despite the still air. The ground beneath her feet was covered in strange, pink moss that seemed to pulse as if it were breathing.

The sky above her was wrong—a pale swirling jade, with three moons of varying sizes hanging impossibly close. The largest was amber-hued, its cratered surface clearly visible even to the naked eye. The middle one gleamed silver-blue, almost transparent at around the edge. The smallest burned a fierce crimson, seeming to pulse in rhythm with the moss below. In the distant hills, strange lights flickered between the trees, like fireflies but larger, more deliberate in their movements, following patterns that seemed to suggest intelligence rather than instinct.

Her legs trembling, she reached out to steady herself against the nearest tree. The smooth bark felt warm to the touch, almost like skin, and when she brushed the crimson foliage, the leaves hissed, recoiling from her touch like a living thing, curling inward protectively. The entire branch seemed to shudder and pull away from her, the movement rippling up through the trunk.

She jerked her hand back, heart hammering against her ribs.

“I’m definitely not in Kansas anymore.”

Her scientific mind raced even through the haze of pain and shock—reactive plant life, possibly with a centralized nervous system, exhibiting defensive behavior against unknown stimuli. But she couldn’t focus on the intriguing possibilities. Not when her lungs ached and her injured side burned.

“I need to make a plan.”

Her voice sounded even stranger in the open air, and a ripple ran through the bright red leaves of a vine wrapped around one of the tree trunks. She shuddered, resolving to keep quiet as she took inventory: her clothes were torn and bloodied, but functional. Her watch had stopped at 11:47, the hands frozen in time. No phone. No water. No supplies. The pocket where she normally kept her small Swiss Army knife was empty—had someone searched her while she was unconscious? Just her and a dead alien in a crashed shuttle on a planet that couldn't possibly be Earth.

Think, Xara. Think. She pressed her palms against her temples, forcing herself to breathe slowly, methodically. Panic wouldn't help. The analytical part of her brain—the part that had earned her tenure at thirty—needed to take control.

Shelter first. Water. Food. Basic survival. She'd worry about the impossible later—about being abducted and crashing on an alien world. About how she might get home.

She tore a strip from her shirt, binding the wound at her side as best she could, and wincing as she pulled the makeshift bandage tight. The bleeding had slowed, but the area around the gash was already showing signs of inflammation. Infection was a very real possibility in this alien environment, with microbes her immune system had never encountered.

Despite the presence of the three moons, the sky was light enough that she suspected it was daytime. She needed to find shelter before that changed. The wrecked shuttle might provide shelter, but its hull was breached in multiple places and the dead body would attract predators. Still she hesitated, reluctant to leave her last link with Earth. The crash couldn't have occurred that long ago. Some of the torn foliage surrounding the ship still smoked gently and the dead alien showed no sign of decomposition. What if someone came looking for the shuttle?

More grey aliens?

She shuddered at the thought. While she didn't know why the alien had taken her, she didn't think it was for anything good. That thought decided her. She forced herself to return to the ship long enough to scavenge for anything useful, but only managed to recover a metal container large enough to hold water and a strip of fabric from her coffin-like container.

Then she started walking away from the crash site, following what appeared to be a natural decline in the terrain. Water would flow downhill. Basic geology had to work the same, even here.

The jungle thickened as she walked. Strange, bulbous fruits hung from vines that wrapped around the trees, their surfaces mottled with colors that shifted subtly, as if responding to the light. Luminescent fungi clustered at their bases, casting eerie blue light that created dancing shadows with each step she took. Their caps opened and closed rhythmically, releasing puffs of glowing spores that floated upward before dissipating. Something skittered across her path—too many legs, too fast to identify, with an exoskeleton that gleamed like polished obsidian—and vanished into the underbrush with a chittering sound.

Her head throbbed with each step, a persistent pounding behind her eyes. The wound at her side pulled with every movement, and her throat burned with thirst, her tongue feeling swollen and dry. How long had she been on that shuttle? Hours? Days? Weeks? The pod in which she'd awoken could have been some type of stasis container, disabled during the crash, but the fact that she didn't know only added to the sick sense of panic growing inside her.

The trees seemed to press closer as she walked, branches reaching for her like fingers. Or claws. A shiver ran down her spine, and the hairs rose on the back of her neck. She felt watched. Hunted.

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There's nothing here, she told herself, trying to calm her racing heartbeat. It's just my imagination.

A sound cut through her increasingly frantic thoughts—high-pitched, distressed—almost like a crying child. It carried through the strange forest, a series of soft, plaintive cries that tugged at something instinctive within her.

She froze, listening. There it was again. Not human, but unmistakably the sound of something young and frightened. A universal language of vulnerability that transcended species.

“Bad idea,” she muttered, even as she changed direction, following the sound. “Very bad idea.”

Her scientific curiosity warred with her survival instinct. The biologist in her couldn't resist investigating, even as the rational part of her brain screamed warnings about predators and traps.

The cries led her to a hollow beneath the twisted roots of a massive tree, its trunk easily twenty feet in diameter. Inside, three small creatures huddled together, their oversized eyes glowing faintly in the shadows, iridescent tears tracking down their delicate faces. They resembled nothing she'd ever seen—somewhere between a kitten and an axolotl, with six feathery tendrils surrounding their oversized heads and skin so translucent that she could see bioluminescent organs pulsing in rhythm. The small tendrils on their heads waved in agitation as they cried.

As she knelt beside the hollow, they quieted, three pairs of eyes turning to her. Their

huge dark eyes reflected her own image back at her. Their coloration varied slightly—the largest was a pale blue, the middle one lavender, and the smallest a delicate pink-white that almost glowed in the dim light. The smallest made a soft chirping sound, stretching toward her with tiny, webbed hands that featured suction-cup-like pads beneath tiny claws.

“Where’s your mother?” she whispered, scanning the area. The nest was constructed of woven fibers and what appeared to be shed skin or scales, but what had once been carefully assembled was showing signs of damage. There was no sign of any adult version of these creatures—just the three babies, alone in a hostile environment—and she sighed.

She’d seen this type of abandoned nest countless times in the field. Predators, disease, accidents—nature had many ways to create orphans. These little ones wouldn’t survive long without protection, especially given their apparent lack of defensive adaptations.

The smallest one crawled toward her, its markings pulsing faster as it approached, creating wave-like patterns across its translucent body. It chirped again, more insistently, hopefully.

“I can’t take you with me,” she told it, even as she reached out, letting it sniff her fingers. Its nostrils—three small openings arranged in a triangle pattern—flared as it took in her scent. “I can barely take care of myself right now.”

The creature nuzzled against her hand, its skin warm and surprisingly soft, almost velvety despite its translucent appearance. A gentle vibration emanated from it, not unlike a cat’s purr but higher in frequency. The other two followed, all three soon chirping and climbing onto her lap, their tiny claws carefully retracted as they moved across her torn clothing.

She sighed, feeling her resolve crumble. Whatever doubtful protection she could provide had to be better than leaving them on their own.

“Fine. I suppose you’d better come with me.”

She knew it was likely a death sentence for all of them—one injured human and three alien infants—but she couldn’t bring herself to abandon them.

She shrugged out of her jacket, wincing as the movement pulled at her wound, fresh blood seeping through the makeshift bandage. Carefully, she wrapped the creatures inside, creating a makeshift sling that she could carry against her chest. They settled immediately, their chirping subsiding to contented purrs, their bodies molding together as if sharing warmth and comfort.

“This is insane,” she told them as she continued through the jungle, ducking under low-hanging vines that seemed to reach for her hair. “You know that, right? I’m talking to alien babies while wandering through an alien forest on an alien planet. I’ve either lost my mind or?—”

She paused, unable to formulate a rational alternative. As much as she would have liked to believe it was a hallucination or a dream, the evidence of her senses was impossible to dismiss.

A branch snapped behind her, and she froze, every muscle tensing. The creatures in her jacket sensed her fear, their purring silenced instantly. Slowly, she turned, scanning the crimson foliage. Nothing moved, yet she couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. The creatures in her jacket shivered, their bioluminescence dimming to a barely perceptible glow, an instinctive response to threat.

“Just the wind,” she whispered, even though there was no wind. The air remained unnaturally still, heavy with unfamiliar scents—sweet, musky, with undertones of

decay and something metallic.

The feeling persisted as she pushed deeper into the jungle. Occasionally she caught glimpses of movement in her peripheral vision—shadows shifting where they shouldn't, branches swaying without cause. The forest itself seemed alive, aware, tracking her progress. Once, she was certain she saw silvery eyes gleaming from the darkness between trees, intelligent and calculating, but when she looked directly, nothing was there but the endless crimson canopy and charcoal trunks.

She stumbled on, her head pounding, her feet aching, exhaustion making each step feel as if it were weighted with lead. Every few steps, she would look down, checking the precious cargo in her jacket, reassuring herself that they were safe and secure. Her muscles screamed with the effort of supporting her own weight, but she pushed onward, focusing on the thought of shelter. Somewhere in this godforsaken jungle had to be a place where she could rest.

CHAPTER TWO

The Xenobeast crouched motionless amongst the tangled branches high in the canopy, his body perfectly still despite the precarious height. He tracked the female's halting progress through the undergrowth, noting every stumble, every pained hesitation. His sensory tendrils unfurled fully, tasting the air currents that carried her scent—foreign yet strangely compelling, awakening something dormant within him.

He could scent blood, fear, determination, and beneath it all, a clean, warm signature unlike anything else on this world—a scent that made his pupils dilate and his breathing quicken imperceptibly.

He had never seen anyone like her before—small and soft with smooth golden skin unmarked by xxx. She was not Zarkari. Not Tal'Shai. She was something... new. Something his body recognized before his mind could process it. A low growl

vibrated in his chest, unbidden and primal, and he silenced it instantly, his jaw clenching with the effort of control.

In the hills to the north, the bioluminescent patterns of the Tal'Shai village pulsed their rhythmic warning—outsiderdetected, remain vigilant. Their light signals had drawn him here, but he knew they would not venture out. The scaled natives kept to their territory with rigid discipline and expected others to do the same. They tolerated his presence because he respected their boundaries, a silent agreement forged over years of cautious coexistence.

He'd had a few brief interactions with them over the years about territorial lines or environmental threats. They communicated with him using the same neck-band translators they used with all off-worlders, but amongst themselves they communicated mostly through the shifting colors in their scales—a language he had learned to interpret from a distance.

This female clearly knew nothing of boundaries or survival. She stumbled forward, favoring her right side, blood seeping through a jagged tear in her strange coverings. Her exposed skin—so much of it—looked impossibly vulnerable, utterly unprepared for this world's hostilities. She was small, fragile against the backdrop of a world evolved to kill everything not born to its savage rhythms. Her dark curls caught the crimson light filtering through the canopy, creating an effect that made his tendrils twitch with unwelcome fascination.

He should leave her. She wasn't his concern. Outsiders didn't survive here. The planet consumed them—as it was meant to. As it had tried to consume him.

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He shifted position, preparing to retreat into the shadows, but then she stopped, her head tilted towards a sound his enhanced hearing had detected moments earlier—the distinctive, high-pitched distress calls of Graxlin pups. Orphaned Graxlin pups if they had been left alone long enough to cry out. The sound triggered a cascade of unwanted memories—of labs, of tests involving vulnerable creatures, of his own refusal to participate in certain “experiments.”

He tensed as she changed direction, intentionally following the cries. Foolish. Predators would be drawn to those sounds as well. She could be walking into death, unaware.

He shadowed her silently through the canopy, his massive body slipping through the foliage without disturbing a single leaf, telling himself he merely wanted to observe—to understand why a lone female had appeared on a quarantined death-world. Intelligence gathering. This was a threat assessment, nothing more. He refused to acknowledge the strange pull he felt towards her, the compulsion to remain close enough to intervene if necessary.

The female disappeared beneath a curtain of fronds surrounding the base of a tree and he dropped lower, moving with liquid grace from branch to branch, his claws leaving barely perceptible marks in the bark. When she reappeared, something had changed. She cradled a bundle against her chest with protective care, and even from this distance, he caught the faint silver glow of the Graxlin markings—three distinct patterns, each pulsing with their unique life signatures. Three orphaned pups.

The sight struck something in him—a memory fragment from before. Before the labs. Before they stripped everything away but the weapon. A flash of small creatures he

had once protected, long ago, before they broke him and remade him into what he was now.

She tucked the pups more tightly into her outer covering, wincing as the movement pulled at her injuries, a small sound of pain escaping her lips. Yet she'd burdened herself with three helpless lives when she could barely sustain her own. The action defied tactical logic, but it awakened feelings he had long suppressed.

He clenched his jaw as his instincts warred with his training. The cold calculation of survival against... something else. Something they had tried to burn out of him with pain and reconditioning.

The pups' silver markings pulsed in a pattern he recognized—contentment, safety, bonding. The Graxlins were energy-sensitive creatures, forming deep bonds only with their own kind or with those possessing compatible energy signatures. Yet these three had immediately attached themselves to the alien female in a way he had never witnessed before.

She stumbled again, nearly falling, catching herself against a twisted trunk with a gasp. Her blood scent grew stronger, metallic and rich. His nostrils flared, analyzing the composition—critical, but not immediately fatal.

Without conscious decision, he found himself moving parallel to her path, tracking her labored progress through territory he knew intimately. She wouldn't survive the night cycle alone. This forest harbored predators that would detect her blood trail, her unfamiliar scent, her weakness. Most of the creatures on this world were built for maximum predatory efficiency, just as he had been engineered for maximum lethality.

The female stopped beneath a massive fungal bloom, its spores gently drifting down around her like luminous snow. Her breathing was ragged, her chest heaving with

effort. One of the pups chirped anxiously, and she whispered something to it—words his translation implant couldn't fully process, language patterns it hadn't encountered before. The tone registered though: soothing, protective, intimate.

His tendrils swirled through the air, sampling her emotional signatures with heightened sensitivity. There was no indication of deception or predatory intent, no hidden agenda that might threaten his territory. Just exhaustion, pain, and a fierce determination that reminded him of something he had once possessed—before they broke him.

His claws dug deeper into the bark until sap oozed around his fingers, its acrid scent mixing with the female's blood trail. Foolish to leave such an evident sign of his passing but even more foolish that he cared what happened to this female. He wasn't supposed to care. Caring was weakness, and weakness meant death. His creators had programmed that lesson into every cell, reinforced it with pain beyond imagining.

Yet he couldn't look away, couldn't retreat, and couldn't maintain the cold distance that had kept him alive in exile.

She pushed forward again, heading unknowingly toward a ridge that overlooked the acid pools. It was the wrong direction—a fatal direction. The pools would dissolve organic matter within seconds, leaving nothing but bone fragments behind. He had seen it happen to creatures far more adapted to this world than she was.

A low rumble built in his chest, unbidden and unwelcome. He should let her continue and eliminate the possibility of a complication in his carefully constructed isolation. The strategic choice was clear.

The pups' markings flashed brighter, responding to her voice as she murmured to them, telling them stories perhaps, or making promises she couldn't possibly keep. Their tiny paws kneaded at her covering, seeking the comfort of connection. The

largest of the three nuzzled into her chest, its markings pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

Something twisted inside him—a sensation so long buried he barely recognized it. A feeling they had tried to burn out of him with punishment and reconditioning—protectiveness.

He moved.

Silently, he circled ahead, deliberately disturbing a flock of spined avians that scattered with warning cries, their razor-edged wings slicing through leaves as they took flight. The female froze instantly, looking up with wide brown eyes that caught the crimson light filtering through the canopy. Intelligence shone in those eyes—she recognized the warning for what it was.

She changed direction, away from the acid pools, towards the relative safety of the stone formations that rose like ancient sentinels at the forest's edge, but her gaze swept the canopy, searching. For a moment, he thought she looked directly at him, though he knew his camouflage made that impossible.

Good. She could read basic environmental cues. She possessed survival instinct, if not survival knowledge.

Night was approaching, the largest moon beginning to set. The forest's bioluminescence intensified in response—beauty masking deadly intent. The night predators would emerge soon—hunters that made the Zarkari's bioweapons division look primitive by comparison, creatures evolved over millennia to kill with perfect efficiency.

The female's pace slowed noticeably, each step becoming a battle of will against the physical limitations of blood loss and exhaustion. Her determination couldn't

overcome her physical limits, no matter how strong her spirit.

His implants analyzed her condition automatically: elevated heart rate, dropping body temperature, impaired coordination, respiratory distress. Her survival probability decreased with each passing minute. His military training calculated the exact percentage, but something deeper in him rejected the cold assessment.

He found himself calculating shelter options, water sources, defensible positions. Tactical assessments only, he told himself. Nothing more. He ignored the way his tendrils reached towards her, seeking more information.

She stumbled into a small clearing where ancient stone pillars rose like the ribcage of some long-dead titan, half-consumed by red vines heavy with fruit pods. The pups squeaked excitedly, their markings pulsing in recognition. They knew these fruits were safe, nutritious.

The female hesitated, examining the unfamiliar vegetation with appropriate caution. Then she plucked one of the pods, its skin yielding with a soft popping sound. Smart—she tested it against her skin first, waiting for any reaction before proceeding. When nothing happened, she carefully offered small pieces to the pups, who devoured them eagerly, their tiny mouths working furiously.

He settled onto a nearby branch, watching with growing fascination. She hadn't eaten herself, although her hunger was evident both in her scent and in the way she swallowed repeatedly as she watched the pups eat. Caution or sacrifice? Either option showed a level of intelligence beyond what he expected from an off-worlder. Either suggested she might be... different.

As darkness fell, she worked quickly, despite her injuries, to weave more vines between the pillars and create a crude shelter. Inadequate protection, but better than nothing. The structure would hide her from casual predators, at least. She retreated

inside, sitting with her back against one of the pillars as she stared out into the night. The pups curled in her lap, their markings dimming as they drifted to sleep, tiny bodies rising and falling with synchronized breaths.

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He should leave. Return to his territory. The female had shelter for the night, and the pups would keep her warm. He had no further reason to stay.

Instead, he moved closer, drawn by something he couldn't name.

CHAPTER THREE

Xara peered out into the jungle, trying not to panic at each unexplained sound. In any ecosystem, twilight brought transitions—diurnal predators returning to dens, nocturnal hunters emerging—and even though it was now fully dark, she was still tense with fear. She was under no illusions that the crude shelter she'd formed from woven vines—with some eager if xxx help from the pups—would offer much protection against a determined predator. At least it was not as dark as she'd feared.

As night fell completely, the jungle transformed. Bioluminescent flora came alive, casting the forest in ghostly pinks and purples. Flowers that had been closed during daylight opened, revealing glowing centers that pulsed in hypnotic rhythms. The moss underfoot began to emit a soft phosphorescence, creating pathways of light between the trees. Strange calls echoed through the trees—some melodic, like flutes played underwater, others harsh and grating, mechanical in their precision.

At least the stone pillar at her back was reassuring solid. Thank goodness she'd noticed the pattern the pillars formed—the geometric lines interrupting the organic chaos of the jungle too regular to be natural—before night descended. She'd pushed through a curtain of hanging vines, their surfaces sticky with sweet-smelling resin, and found herself in a small clearing dominated by ancient stone pillars, their surfaces covered in faded carvings. The stones formed a rough circle, some still standing

proudly while others had toppled, reclaimed by the jungle. Vines stretched between them, heavy with what appeared to be fruit—plump, purple orbs that glistened with internal light.

The pups had squirmed excitedly at the sight of the fruit, their chirps growing louder and more insistent. Their tiny limbs had pushed against her jacket, creating moving bulges as they tried to free themselves. One squirmed free of the jacket, climbing up her arm to her shoulder, its tiny claws pricking through her shirt. It balanced there, reaching toward the nearest cluster with surprising dexterity, its feathery tendrils fluttering with excitement.

Hoping it was safe, she plucked one of the purple, pear-shaped fruits. Up close, she could see that its skin was covered in tiny, spiraling patterns that seemed to shift under her gaze. The pup snatched it from her hand, its tiny mouth expanding to reveal rows of small, flat teeth perfectly adapted for plant matter. It devoured the fruit with obvious delight, juice running down its chin, its markings pulsing with pleasure. The other two scrambled for their share, chirping demands.

She hadn't joined them, aware that eating unknown alien fruit seemed like a recipe for disaster. Different biochemistry, different proteins, different toxins—her body might not be able to process any of it. But starvation would kill her as surely as poison, just more slowly. No harm had come to the pups since they'd eaten, and she pulled out one of the fruits she'd pocketed, sniffing it cautiously. The scent was pleasant—like honeysuckle with a faint citrus note—and her mouth watered.

She forced herself to take the tiniest possible bite, sighing with pleasure as the juice flowed into her dry mouth and trickled down her throat. Resisting the urge to devour the entire fruit, she slowly counted to one hundred twice, checking for any sign of a reaction. Nothing. She took another bite, then counted again. After the third bite, her caution began to fade and she eagerly consumed the rest of the fruit.

She immediately reached for another one, then forced herself to wait once again, trying to distract herself by examining the carvings covering the pillars. The carvings depicted figures with elongated limbs that appeared to be engaged in some kind of ritual, arms raised toward stylized representations of the three moons. Someone built this place. Someone intelligent.

She ran her fingers over the stone, her scientific curiosity momentarily overriding her fear. These ruins were old—centuries, perhaps millennia. Erosion had softened the carvings, and plant life had established itself in the cracks and crevices. But they proved something crucial: this planet had—or once had—civilization. Perhaps even the means to send her home, if she could find living members of this species.

And assuming they were friendly.

The pups suddenly shivered and nestled closer to her, their markings pulsing in time with her heartbeat, creating a synchronized light show across their translucent bodies.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, stroking their delicate heads with gentle fingers. Their tendrils curled around her fingers trustingly. “We’re safe here.”

The words were as much for herself as for them, a mantra against the growing dread that prickled along her spine.

A noise cut through the night—a low, wet slithering sound, like something massive dragging its bulk across the forest floor. The pups went rigid, their markings flashing in rapid pulses—warning signals. She peered through the vines of their shelter and froze.

Four yellow eyes glowed in the darkness, arranged in a diamond pattern on what appeared to be an insectoid head. The eyes moved independently of each other, scanning the clearing with predatory focus as the creature slithered into view—a

nightmare fusion of centipede and scorpion, easily six feet long, its segmented body armored with chitinous plates that gleamed with an oily iridescence. Each segment bore multiple legs, jointed and tipped with wicked barbs, and massive pincers clicked at its front.

The pups began to tremble violently, their bodies pressed against her in abject terror. Their markings had dimmed to almost nothing—an evolutionary response to hide from the predator—and she clutched them closer, her mind racing. The monster hadn't seen them yet, those yellow eyes sweeping the clearing methodically. If they stayed still, quiet?—

One of the babies let out a terrified squeal, a high-pitched sound of pure fear that cut through the night like a knife.

Fuck.

The predator's head swiveled toward their shelter, all four eyes fixing on them as its mandibles clicked rapidly. It reared up, revealing more of its segmented underbelly and a barbed stinger at its tail end.

Swearing under her breath, she grabbed a thick branch that had fallen near their shelter, positioning herself between the pups and the approaching monster. The babies scrambled behind her legs, chirping in terror. “Stay behind me.”

The predator charged with shocking speed, its multiple legs propelling it forward in a blur of chitin and malice, and she swung the branch as hard as she could, connecting with its head. The impact jarred her arms to the shoulders, the shock of it traveling through her bones. The creature shrieked but barely slowed, shaking off the blow as if it were nothing more than an annoyance. Its pincers lashed out, catching her across the legs, slicing through fabric and skin with terrifying ease.

Pain exploded through her as she fell backward, hot and immediate. Her thigh burned where the pincers had struck, blood welling from twin gashes that ran from knee to hip. The babies squealed in terror, their tiny bodies glowing brightly now in their panic. The predator loomed over her, its pincers poised for a killing strike as she tried to push herself between it and the pups.

This is it, she thought. This is how I die. On an alien planet, eaten by a giant bug. Not publishing groundbreaking research. Not changing the scientific world. Just another organism falling to a superior predator.

A roar shattered the night—primal, thunderous, unlike anything she'd ever heard. The sound vibrated through her chest, rattling her very bones as something massive burst from the jungle in a blur of motion. Silver eyes blazed in the darkness as it collided with the predator, driving it away from her with such force that both creatures rolled across the clearing, smashing into one of the fallen pillars.

She caught glimpses of the battle through waves of pain—claws tearing through chitin, sending fragments flying. A massive humanoid form moving with lethal grace, muscles rippling beneath metallic skin. The predator fought back, its pincers snapping, its stinger jabbing repeatedly, but it was outmatched by the newcomer's raw power and speed. Blood of different colors mingled on the stone floor—black from the insectoid creature, silvery-blue from her savior.

With a final, brutal movement, her savior tore the predator's head from its body, chitin cracking and fluid spraying in an arc that glistened in the bioluminescent light. He stood over his kill, chest heaving, and let out a roar that shook the ancient pillars, a victory cry that echoed through the jungle and silenced all other sounds.

She tried to speak, to thank him, but darkness was creeping in at the edges of her vision. The world tilted and spun, blood loss and shock taking their toll. She was vaguely aware of the pups chirping anxiously around her, of warm blood soaking

through her torn pants, pooling beneath her on the ancient stone, and then the world went dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Xenobeast's roar echoed through the ancient ruins, vibrating the very air around him. Victory surged through his veins as he stood over the dismembered carcass of the Trex'ik predator, its toxic blood steaming on the jungle floor. He inhaled deeply, letting the primal satisfaction of the kill wash through him before turning toward the female.

She would be terrified now. They always were. He had been engineered to inspire terror before delivering death.

But when he turned, he found her crumpled unconscious on the stone floor instead. Blood pooled beneath her leg where the Trex'ik had struck. The three Graxlin pups circled her fallen form, their lavender fur standing on end, silver markings pulsing frantically as they emitted high-pitched squeals of distress.

Something cold and unfamiliar gripped his chest. He crossed the distance in three long strides, dropping to one knee beside her. Too late. He'd been too late to prevent her injury.

He'd been watching—he'd seen the Trex'ik approach and he'd seen her place herself between the predator and the pups with deliberate intent, her body language shifting from exhausted to alert in an instant.

Foolish. Brave. Doomed. The Trex'ik would tear through her defenses like they were nothing. It would consume her and the pups before her makeshift weapon could even pierce its outer armor but she stood her ground. No screaming. No panicking. No

begging for mercy from a universe that offered none. Instead she swung her branch as the creature lunged, the movement precise and controlled despite her injuries.

A direct hit. Impressive. Tactically sound, if ineffective. His assessment of her capabilities shifted upward.

The Trex-ik shrieked, a sound that could shatter eardrums, recoiling briefly before striking again with doubled fury. Its foreleg caught her across the thighs with devastating force, sending her crashing to the ground with a cry of pain that pierced through him like a physical blow.

Blood bloomed, bright and fresh against the dark ground. The scent filled the clearing—a beacon to every predator within miles.

The pups' distress calls pierced the night, their tiny bodies scurrying to the female's side. She struggled to rise, still trying to shield them with her body, as the Trex'ik loomed over her. Her determination was absolute, even in the face of certain death.

Something snapped inside him, and he launched from his perch, a blur of motion too fast for normal eyes to track. He slammed into the Trex'ik with controlled fury, his claws finding the weak points between chitin plates with surgical precision. The creature whirled, disoriented by the unexpected attack, its serrated limbs slashing air where he'd been a heartbeat before.

He circled, drawing it away from the female and pups with deliberate movements. The Trex'ik lunged again, all eight limbs extended for the kill. This time, he met it head-on, catching its striking limbs in his hands. Chitin cracked under pressure. Toxic ichor sprayed across his chest, sizzling against his skin.

Pain flared as one serrated edge sliced his shoulder, cutting deep into muscle. He ignored it completely. Pain was irrelevant. The mission parameters had changed.

Protect. Defend. Eliminate threat.

He drove the creature back with methodical violence, matching its speed, exceeding its strength. His claws found vulnerable joints between armor plates. His fangs tore through sensor organs with devastating precision. The Trex'ik thrashed, its movements growing desperate as it recognized a superior predator—something it had never encountered before.

With one powerful motion, he wrenched its head from its thorax, severing the neural clusters that controlled its body. The massive form collapsed, limbs twitching in death spasms, ichor pooling beneath it.

Victory surged through him—primal, fierce, satisfying in a way combat hadn't been for years. A roar tore from his throat, echoing through the forest like thunder. Warning to all predators: this territory is mine. These creatures are mine.

Mine.

The thought lingered, even as his senses expanded, seeking additional threats. There was no sound or scent of further dangers, so he turned his attention to the female, now lying ominously still. The pups scurried back and forth around her, their frantic squeals a mixture of terror and desperation.

He reached toward her wound, assessing the damage. Deep, but not fatal if treated quickly. Her skin was pale, her breathing shallow. Too late. He'd hesitated too long before intervening and he'd been too late to prevent her injury.

The realization angered him, but then the anger shifted, redirected inward. Why did he care? She was nothing to him. Just another off-worlder who would die on this planet like all the others. He should leave her. Return to the solitude he'd carved for himself in this hostile world.

But one of his tendrils had already curved possessively around her wrist as the largest Graxlin pup bumped against his hand, chirping urgently. Its tiny paws pressed against his skin, bioluminescent markings pulsing in distress. The female had protected them. Had placed herself between them and the predator without hesitation.

He exhaled slowly. He knew what he had to do.

He gently gathered her into his arms, cradling her wounded body against his chest. The pups chirped anxiously, clinging to her covering with tiny claws and he waited, allowing them to settle before rising to his full height, careful not to disturb them.

She weighed almost nothing against his chest. Small. Fragile. Warm. Her head rolled against his shoulder, exposing the vulnerable line of her throat—a display of unconscious trust that filled him with unexpected satisfaction.

His tendrils brushed her face with feather-light touches, absorbing the silky texture of her skin, the pattern of her breathing, the unique energy signature that had called to him across the forest. Something stirred inside him—a feeling without tactical value, dangerous and forbidden. Something his creators had tried to eliminate with pain and reconditioning.

The pups' markings pulsed once more, this time with a pattern he recognized: trust. Acceptance. Family. One climbed higher on her body to peer at his face. Huge dark eyes reflecting his own image back at him—not a monster, but a protector. One tiny paw reached towards a tendril and he allowed the contact before rising, cradling her against his chest, as he headed deeper into the jungle.

The nearest of his lairs was less than a mile away—a cave system he'd modified for security and comfort. She needed treatment. The Trex'ik's venom would spread if not neutralized.

The contact unsettled him. How long had it been since he'd touched another living being without violence? His sensory tendrils stirred at the base of his skull, unfurling from their dormant state to investigate this new presence. They brushed against her skin, feather-light, absorbing information his other senses couldn't detect.

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Her scent was unlike anything on this world—clean despite the dirt and blood, with complex undertones his brain couldn't quite categorize. Her skin was soft beneath his calloused palms, radiating warmth that seemed to seep into his own cooler flesh. One tendril brushed across her cheek, tracing the curve of her jaw, while another wrapped gently around her wrist, monitoring her pulse.

He growled, forcing the tendrils back. This response was... unexpected. Unwelcome. He was designed for isolation. For hunting. Not for this protective instinct that surged through him with every soft breath she took.

The Graxlin pups chirped, nestling closer to her. They sensed something in her—something he was beginning to sense as well. An energy signature that called to them. Called to him.

By the time he reached the cave entrance, concealed behind a curtain of bioluminescent vines, his tendrils had betrayed him again, curling protectively around her shoulders and threading through her short, dark hair. He snarled at himself, but didn't pull them back this time because the connection seemed to stabilize her breathing.

Inside, he moved past the outer chamber—designed as a decoy for any predators that might track him—and into the true living space. Here, the cave opened into a surprisingly comfortable area. A bed of soft moss and woven fibers occupied one alcove. A small fire pit sat in the center, ventilated by a natural chimney in the rock. Various weapons and tools were scattered along the walls, alongside dried herbs and medicinal plants he'd learned to use through brutal trial and error. His regenerative powers were impressive, but this was a deadly world.

He laid her carefully on the bed, his tendrils reluctantly releasing her. The Graxlin pups immediately nestled against her, their tiny bodies providing warmth. He gathered what he needed—healing moss with anti-venomous properties, clean water from his filtered supply, strips of soft fiber for binding.

He gently examined her wounds, relieved to see that the Trex'ik's venom had barely entered her system—he'd killed it before it could deliver a full dose. Still, the gashes on her leg were deep and he carefully removed her pants, cutting away the torn fabric with his claws to reveal more smooth golden skin.

Her body looked even smaller without her clothing, her limbs delicate but sweetly curved. He brushed his fingertips over her bare leg, feeling the warmth of her skin, the softness. He'd never experienced such a pleasure before, but his tendrils didn't hesitate. They reached for her, wrapping themselves around her legs and hips, stroking the smooth flesh and sending ripples of pleasure through him.

A low growl rumbled in his chest. Foolish.

He focused on cleansing her wounds, then covered them with healing moss, watching as it immediately began drawing out the poison, then secured it with strips of fiber. She whimpered softly but didn't wake.

Throughout the process, his tendrils kept reaching for her, drawn to the soft curve of her neck, the warmth of her skin. He forced them back repeatedly, growling at his own weakness. But when he finished treating her wound and rose to move away, they curled forward again, stroking her cheek, her hair, her shoulder.

This time, he let them. Let them explore the unfamiliar texture of her skin, the rhythm of her breathing. Let them absorb her scent, her warmth, the subtle electrical patterns of her brain as she slept. Information flowed through the sensitive appendages, flooding his mind with data about this strange, soft creature who had stumbled into

his territory.

He settled back on his haunches, watching her. Something primal and possessive swelled in his chest as he surveyed her resting on his bed, in his territory, under his protection. The feeling was alien—a forgotten instinct from whatever base species had contributed to his genetic makeup. He'd been engineered to kill, not to protect. To hunt, not to nurture.

Yet here she was. And here he would keep her.

One of the Graxlin pups yawned, tiny teeth gleaming in the dim light, before curling tighter against her stomach. Another nestled into her neck, its silver markings pulsing in a slow, contented rhythm. The third watched him with huge, dark eyes, chittering softly before settling against her side.

They recognized something in her—something worth protecting.

The pups snuggled closer, their little bodies radiating contentment, and the sensation was...

Nice.

Still crouched next to her, he listened as the night sounds resumed outside—the distant cry of a flying predator, the rustle of nocturnal creatures in the underbrush. This world never rested. Never offered safety.

But in this space, his space, she would be safe. He would make it so.

His eyes gleamed in the darkness as he settled into his vigil. One tendril remained extended, curled protectively around her wrist, monitoring her pulse as she slept. His mind cataloged the new sensations, the unfamiliar emotions, filing them away for

later examination.

For now, she was his to protect. His to heal. His to... keep?

The thought should have disturbed him. Instead, it filled him with a fierce, possessive pride that resonated through his entire being. He didn't understand it. Wasn't even sure he welcomed it.

But as the night deepened and her breathing steadied, he accepted it.

Mine, something primal whispered in the depths of his mind. Mine to protect.

He watched over her until dawn, his eyes never leaving her face, his senses attuned to every breath, every subtle shift of her body as she slept. And when the first light of the day cycle filtered through the vines, he was still there, still watching, still guarding what was now, inexplicably, his.

CHAPTER FIVE

Xara floated through darkness, fragments of memories flashing behind her eyelids. The campus at night. The dead alien in the shuttle. The strange lights in the hills. The insect-like predator with its clicking mandibles and glowing yellow eyes. Pain slicing across her leg. Then—silver eyes and a roar that shook the ground beneath her.

Pain dragged her back to consciousness. Her leg throbbed, a dull, persistent ache that pulsed in time with her heartbeat. She kept her eyes closed, trying to assess her situation before revealing she was awake. The air smelled different—earthy and cool, with a faint smokiness. She lay on something soft, and warmth pressed against her stomach.

She carefully cracked one eye open.

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Firelight danced across rough stone walls. She was in a cave, lying on what felt like a bed of moss tucked against one wall of the cave. Looking down, she saw three little bodies curled against her—the alien babies, their bioluminescent markings pulsing softly as they slept. One made a tiny chirping sound, burrowing closer to her warmth.

Some kind of silvery fur covered her lower half and she pushed it back to inspect the wounds on her leg—her bare leg. Her pants had disappeared although thankfully her panties were still in place. The wounds were covered with patches of dark purple—some kind of moss—held in place by neat strips of dark fiber. The bleeding had stopped, and though it hurt, the searing pain from before had dulled to a manageable throb.

The gash across her ribs felt better as well and when she lift her shirt—also thankfully still in place—it was also covered with more of the purple moss and wide strips of the black fiber. She touched them thoughtfully, recognizing that odd texture, and deciding they must be derived from the bark of the crimson-leaved trees that dominated the jungle.

A sound from the dimness beyond the firelight made her freeze, peering anxiously into the shadows. As her eyes adjusted she caught a glimpse of another cave and a curtain of vines that trembled as if in response to an unfelt breeze. Her breath caught in her throat as something massive shifted in the shadows.

Silver eyes gleamed in the darkness—the eyes from her fragmented memory—the ones she'd seen right before consciousness slipped away.

The fire crackled, sending sparks upward, briefly illuminating a hulking silhouette.

Broad shoulders. Powerful arms ending in clawed hands. A face with sharp, predatory features.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. This male had saved her from the predator. He'd carried her here and tended her wounds. Logic told her she should feel grateful, not terrified. But logic had little to do with the instinctive fear that crawled up her spine as those silver eyes watched her from the darkness. Her savior or her captor? Or both?

She swallowed hard.

"Hello?" Her voice came out weak and uncertain.

The figure didn't respond, didn't move closer. Just watched, utterly still in a predatory way that reminded her of a jaguar she'd once observed during fieldwork in the Amazon—patient, calculating, lethal.

One of the babies stirred against her stomach, making a soft trilling sound. The tiny creature blinked up at her with enormous eyes, then stretched, its claws pricking gently through her torn shirt.

"Hey, little one," she whispered, stroking its head with a finger. The baby chirped, pressing into her touch.

The fire popped loudly, and her gaze snapped back to the shadows. The silver eyes had moved closer, but still remained beyond the circle of firelight.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to test her boundaries. Slowly, wincing at the pain in her leg, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. The babies tumbled into her lap, squeaking in protest at being disturbed.

The figure in the shadows shifted but made no move to stop her.

Encouraged, she carefully swung her legs over the edge of the bed, testing her weight on her injured leg. Pain shot through her, but it held. Using the wall for support, she pulled herself to her feet, swaying slightly.

Her silent rescuer remained in the shadows, but his eyes tracked every movement and she was suddenly extremely conscious of her bare legs. At least the hem of her torn shirt came down far enough to cover her panties.

Curiosity finally began to edge out fear. If he'd wanted to hurt her, he'd had plenty of opportunity while she was unconscious. Instead, he'd treated her wounds and given her shelter.

The smallest of the babies scampered after her, clutching at her ankle with tiny paws. She bent awkwardly, scooping it up and cradling it against her chest. The other two remained curled on the bed, watching with sleepy eyes.

"I'm just going to look around a bit," she said, as much to herself as to the silent figure or the baby in her arms. "That's all."

Limping heavily, she made her way toward the entrance of the outer cave, one hand on the wall for support. Her leg throbbed with each step, but determination pushed her forward. She needed to know where she was, needed to see what lay beyond these walls.

The hanging vines that surrounded the cave entrance glowed with a soft, ethereal purple light as she pushed them aside and stepped out onto the small ledge. Night air brushed her face, unexpectedly cool after the warmth of the fire. The forest stretched away beneath the ledge, its scarlet foliage glowing under the light of the smallest crimson moon.

There was no discernible sound but the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly prickled. Even before she turned around she knew her rescuer had followed her outside, but she barely managed to stifle a gasp as the moonlight illuminated him.

He was even larger than she'd remembered—at least seven feet tall, with broad shoulders and a body that seemed built for combat with powerful arms and legs, and dark claws on his hands and feet. Muscles rippled beneath skin that gleamed like liquid mercury, strange markings pulsing across his body. Even standing at the far end of the small ledge his body loomed over her.

Those extraordinary silver eyes seemed to glow from within as he returned her gaze, his expression unreadable. His face was alien yet somehow beautiful in its ferocity, with sharp, angled features and a jaw built to bite and break. An intelligent face despite his silence and primitive appearance. Her gaze skated down over the strip of fabric—more belt than loincloth—circling his hips before returning to his face.

Long coiled dreadlocks hung almost to his knees, gleaming in the moonlight. No, not dreadlocks, she realized as one of them stirred, swaying gently in her direction. Some kind of tendril, like an exaggerated form of the pups' small, feathery tendrils.

For a long moment neither of them moved, and then she realized she'd been holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, clutching the baby closer to her chest.

"Thank you," she said, her voice steadier this time. "For saving me. For..." she gestured to her bandages, "...this."

The tendrils on his head moved, one of them extending towards her again. She stood very still, unsure whether to retreat or remain in place.

"My name is Xara," she added, watching those silver eyes for any reaction. "Xara Reyes. I'm a biologist—a scientist. I study living things." She laughed nervously.

“Though I’ve never seen anything like you before.”

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The tendril danced closer, and she forced herself not to flinch. It brushed her cheek, so lightly she might have imagined it, and the touch sent an odd tingling sensation across her skin.

“Can you understand me? Do you speak?”

His expression remained unreadable, those silver eyes revealing nothing as they studied her face. The tendril retreated, and he made no sound, no gesture to indicate he’d understood a word she’d said.

The baby in her arms chirped, reaching towards him with tiny paws. Something in his expression shifted—softened, perhaps—as he looked at the small creature.

“I think she likes you,” she said, taking a careful step closer. “What are they? Do you have a name for them?”

Still no response. The silence stretched between them, broken only by the soft sounds of the forest and the baby’s occasional chirps.

She sighed, disappointment settling in her chest. She’d hoped for answers, and instead, found more mysteries. Who was he? What was this place? How had she ended up here?

She turned back toward the cave entrance, her leg throbbing with renewed intensity. The brief exploration had depleted what little strength she’d regained. She needed to rest, to think.

“I should go back inside,” she said, more to herself than to him.

As she limped past him, his scent enveloped her—something wild and alien yet not unpleasant. She was acutely aware of his size, of how easily he could overpower her if he chose. But he simply watched her pass, those silver eyes following her movement, those long tendrils swaying gently in her direction as if drawn by an unseen current. One brushed against her arm, lingering a moment longer this time, thick and smooth and unexpectedly soft.

The same tingling sensation skated across her skin, and she suppressed a shiver as she stared up at him. His eyes flared even brighter, and then he jerked his head towards the inner cave in clear command for her to return. Some odd, defiant impulse made her frown up at him.

“Don’t give me orders,” she muttered. She tried to take a step back but she stumbled on the uneven floor and pain shot through her leg.

He growled, and the next minute she was in his arms as he strode back towards the bed, tucked tightly against that hard, warm chest, his arms and tendrils holding her firmly in place.

She gasped and tried to struggle, then huffed and gave up the useless effort. The sensation of being carried so effortlessly was unexpectedly pleasant and heat rose to her cheeks, intensifying when her stomach rumbled.

He set her on the bed without a word, and the baby leapt from her arms to the bed, chittering as it ran in a circle, clearly delighted with this game.

His gaze fixed on hers, he held up one clawed hand, palm outward. Stay. He pointed to the bed, then to her, then made a flat, pressing motion. The meaning was clear even without words: Stay there. Don’t move. She opened her mouth to argue, then shut it

again. Arguing clearly wasn't going to work.

Instead she sighed and nodded as she sank back on the bed. The babies immediately snuggled against her and her heart warmed. At least someone was happy with the situation.

Her savior stood above her a moment longer, arms folded across his broad chest, no doubt waiting to make sure she obeyed. His stance was clearly protective, his silver eyes watchful, and something about that combination was oddly reassuring. She hadn't felt this safe since she'd been taken.

He didn't move, his attention remaining fixed on her. She yawned as exhaustion overwhelmed her, then smiled and shook her head.

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere," she murmured.

A low, rumbling sound responded, a growl or perhaps a grunt, but then he turned and stalked out of the cave.

CHAPTER SIX

The Xenobeast watched as his female—as Xara—smiled up at him and settled down in his bed, a confusing blend of emotions swirling through him.

Mine.

He had never considered anything his before. He'd been designed without attachments, without a sense of self beyond his programming—until the Zarkari deemed him defective.

He'd been engineered to serve, to obey without hesitation, without question, without

error. He'd done so, without complaint or deviation. But the day had come when he'd had to choose between obedience and his instincts. He'd chosen the latter and as a result he'd been exiled, thrown him onto this hostile planet with nothing but his rage and the lingering echo of betrayal.

Long years of solitude, of nothing but survival, and now this female had changed everything.

When she'd first seen him clearly, her hazel eyes studying his face, his body, his movements, he'd been prepared for the inevitable: The screaming. The panic. The desperate attempt to flee.

It didn't come.

She simply stood there on the ledge, small and fragile, her soft body swaying slightly with exhaustion. The moonlight caught in her short, dark curls and illuminated the curves of her face. Fear flickered in her eyes—he could smell it, taste it on his sensory tendrils—but she didn't try to run.

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That alone unsettled him. He was engineered to inspire terror. His size, his appearance, his very presence was designed to break the will of enemies before combat even began. It was a tactical advantage his creators had engineered into his DNA.

Yet she remained, watching him with those intelligent eyes.

When she spoke, his translation implant activated automatically, converting her sounds to meaning. Not with perfect clarity—the language wasn't in his database—but enough to piece together her attempt to thank him when she gestured to her wounded leg.

She was right to be grateful—the predator's claws had torn through skin and muscle and she would have died without his intervention. The memory of her blood spilling onto the forest floor triggered a surge of anger that made his tendrils stir restlessly.

The fact that he didn't respond didn't prevent her from introducing herself—Xara. A name. Something he hadn't possessed in years.

“Can you understand me? Do you speak?”

He could. Of course he could. But verbal response had been trained out of him long ago. Weapons didn't need voices. Weapons followed orders and executed missions. Silence was discipline. Silence was survival.

One of his tendrils reached toward her of its own accord, brushing against her cheek. The contact sent a jolt through his nervous system. Her skin was warm and soft,

unlike anything on this hostile world.

The Graxlin pup in her arms chirped, reaching toward him with tiny paws, and his chest tightened. The pups had imprinted on her—unusual, but not inexplicable. They were sensitive to energy patterns, and hers must be compatible. But they also seemed drawn to him, which made less sense. He was built for destruction, not nurturing.

She spoke again, asking about the pups. Her voice was melodic, pleasant. Then she sighed, disappointment evident in her posture.

“I should go back inside,” she murmured.

As she limped past him, her scent enveloped his senses—foreign yet intoxicating. His tendrils swayed toward her, sampling the complex chemical signatures of her body. She was in pain. Exhausted. Hungry.

He gestured towards the bed inside the inner cave, a sharp motion meant to convey his command. Rest. Recover.

She either didn’t understand or chose to ignore him, taking another step and swaying dangerously, her injured leg nearly buckling beneath her.

A growl rumbled from deep in his chest. Stubborn female. She would reopen the wound he’d so carefully dressed.

In one swift move, he closed the distance between them. He swept her into his arms, lifting her as effortlessly as he would one of the Graxlin pups. She gasped—a small, startled sound—but she didn’t scream. Her body tensed against his chest for a moment, then relaxed.

The contact was... problematic.

His body responded instantly to her proximity. Heat spread through his core, his heart rate accelerated, and his tendrils curled possessively around her shoulders and arms. The primal part of his brain—the part his creators had enhanced for combat but couldn't fully control—registered her as something to be claimed. Protected. Possessed.

Her warm breath against his chest sent shivers across his skin. The soft curves of her body fitted against his hardened muscles in ways that triggered instincts he'd suppressed for years. The sensation was distracting. Dangerous.

A low growl emanated from her stomach, audible even to non-enhanced hearing. Hunger. The sound cut through his inappropriate thoughts, replacing them with a single, urgent imperative: feed her.

He strode quickly to the bed, depositing her there with more haste than grace. The Graxlin pups immediately scurried to her side, their tiny bodies emitting soft pulses of blue-green light as they nestled against her.

She looked up at him, confusion evident in her expression. Her lips parted as if to speak again, and he motioned for her to stay. She tilted her head, studying him with those perceptive eyes. Then, surprisingly, she nodded.

Relief flooded through him, followed immediately by an unfamiliar urgency. He needed to hunt, to provide for her. The instinct overrode his usual caution, his preference for distance and solitude.

Without another glance at his female—at Xara—he turned and stalked from the cave, disappearing into the moonlit jungle.

The night was alive with sound and movement. Nocturnal creatures slithered through undergrowth, flew between luminous vines, hunted and were hunted in the complex

ecosystem of the quarantine world. He moved amongst them like a shadow, his footfalls silent, his breathing controlled.

His mind, however, was anything but silent.

Xara's presence in his territory disrupted patterns established over the long years of his isolation. She was injured and vulnerable—an alien female with no knowledge of this world's dangers. Logic dictated he should have left her to die—one less complication in his carefully ordered existence.

Instead, he'd saved her. Brought her to his sanctuary. Tended her wounds.

Why?

The question nagged at him as he tracked the spoor of a jikari—a herbivore with tender flesh that should be easily digestible. Its meat would sustain her while she healed.

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Perhaps it was simply that she posed no threat. She wasn't Zarkari, wasn't part of the military complex that had created him, used him, then discarded him when he refused to slaughter innocents. She was just... lost, as he had been when they first exiled him here.

Or perhaps it was the way she'd protected the Graxlin pups. A predator would have seen them as easy prey. She had seen them as lives to be preserved, even at a cost to herself. The concept was... familiar. Resonant.

The jikari's trail led to a small clearing where several of the creatures grazed on phosphorescent fungi. He selected his target—a young male, separate from the herd—and struck with lethal precision. His claws severed the spinal cord at the base of the skull, granting a quick, painless death.

As he hoisted the carcass onto his shoulders, another realization struck him. For the first time in years, he'd be returning to his cave with someone waiting for him. Someone who spoke, who asked questions, who looked at him with eyes that held fear but also intelligence, even gratitude.

The thought quickened his pace as he headed back through the jungle, the jikari's weight nothing to his enhanced strength.

When he reached the cave entrance, he paused, scanning the interior. Xara remained on the bed where he'd left her, though she'd shifted position to accommodate the pups. They were curled against her, their tiny bodies rising and falling with peaceful breaths.

She looked up as he entered, those expressive eyes widening at the sight of his kill. He detected no disgust in her reaction—just surprise, and perhaps relief.

He carried the jikari to the stone slab he used for butchering. With practiced efficiency, he skinned and dressed the creature, separating meat from bone, edible organs from waste.

As he worked, his awareness remained fixed on her presence. On her scent. On the sound of her breathing and the Graxlin pups' contented chirps. On the way the firelight played across her features, highlighting the curve of her cheek, the fullness of her lips.

He caught himself staring and turned abruptly away, focusing on the task at hand. This fascination was... inconvenient. Potentially dangerous. He needed to maintain distance. Control.

When he'd finished butchering his kill, he selected a choice cut of meat—tender, with a good balance of fat and protein—and approached the bed. He extended his hand, offering the food, but she hesitated, her eyes moving from the meat to his face and back again.

A faint growl escaped him, impatience mingling with concern. She needed to eat. To regain strength. Why did she hesitate?

He held out the meat again, and she sighed. Her fingers brushed his as she cautiously took the meat, and the brief contact sent a strange current through his body along with a sense of satisfaction. He had proven himself a worthy hunter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Xara's stomach lurched as she took the glistening piece of flesh, slick and warm in

her hand. Her savior obviously wasn't going to take no for an answer. Perhaps she should have escaped while she'd had the chance.

She'd considered it when he'd stalked out of the cave and disappeared into the jungle, his movements fluid and predatory despite his size. One moment he filled the cave entrance with his massive presence, the next he was gone—swallowed by shadows and crimson foliage.

Despite the sense of safety she felt in his presence, she was only too aware of his size and strength. His orders so far had been for her protection, but what if that changed?

But then she'd glanced down at her bandaged leg. The moss dressing felt cool against her skin, the pain dulled to a persistent throb. Whatever he'd applied to the wound seemed to be working, but she doubted she could make it far on her own. And even if she could, where would she go? The shuttle was wrecked, the landscape hostile, and more of those insect-things were probably out there.

The alien babies squeaked, their luminescent markings pulsing as they nuzzled against her side. Three pairs of oversized eyes gazed up at her, somehow trusting despite everything.

“What do you guys think?” she asked them. “Should we make a break for it?”

The smallest one chirped and climbed into lap, settling against her stomach with a contented sigh.

“Yeah, that's what I thought.” She sank back onto the bed, wincing as her injured leg protested. “It's not like we'd get far anyway.”

And the cave was surprisingly comfortable—clean and dry, with the fire pit in the center and what looked like primitive storage areas carved into the walls. It wasn't

the lair of a mindless beast, but the home of something—someone—with intelligence.

Not that intelligence made him less fearsome—if anything it only made him more dangerous. But he hasn't hurt me, she reminded herself.

She was half-asleep when he returned, something large and multi-limbed slung over his shoulder. Blood dripped from the carcass, leaving a dark trail behind him, and she swallowed hard, praying she'd made the right decision to remain.

He dropped his prey onto a flat stone with a wet thud, and her stomach churned again as she noted the stains indicating past kills. She watched, transfixed, as he set to work—claws slicing through hide and sinew with practiced precision. His movements were economical, almost graceful despite their brutality.

When he'd finished, he selected a piece of raw, bloody meat and approached her, growling when she refused, and she'd been forced to take it.

Now he watched her, those silver eyes unblinking, as he waited for her to eat. Instead, she looked around desperately for something to cook it with.

A variety of vegetation supported the moss on the bed platform and she pulled out the sturdiest stick she could find, doing her best to skewer the meat on it before she held it over the fire pit.

“I can't eat it raw—it needs to be cooked.”

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His head tilted, those sensory tendrils swaying with the movement, then plucked the stick out of her hand. She gave a frustrated cry, but all he did was to attach the meat more firmly to the stick before handing it back to her. He watched her for a long moment as she held it over the fire, then returned to the butchered carcass.

The meat sizzled over the fire, fat dripping into the flames, and her mouth watered at the smell. The only thing she'd eaten since she'd arrived on this world was that one piece of fruit.

He returned a moment with another piece of meat, already skewered on a sharpened stick, and crouched beside her, holding it over the fire as well.

“You understand me, don't you?” she asked softly.

No response. Just that steady, silver gaze.

When the outside of the meat was thoroughly browned, she took a tentative bite. The flavor was gamey but not unpleasant—like venison with a hint of something unfamiliar. Her stomach growled appreciatively, and she realized how hungry she truly was.

He handed her the second piece once it was cooked, then prepared another for her. When she waved away the third piece, he finally ate, tearing into the meat with sharp teeth. For the first time she noticed his extended canines—not fangs exactly, but distinct, elongated cuspids that would allow him to deliver a fatal bite.

“Thank you,” she said between bites. “For the food.”

Silence. Not even a flicker of acknowledgment.

“Do you have a name?” she tried, then patted her chest. “Xara. And you are?”

Still nothing.

“Can you speak at all?” She waved her hand in front of her mouth. “Talk? Words?”

He stared at her, chewing methodically, and she sighed, focusing on her food instead. The pups had awakened from their nap and were sniffing the air hungrily. She’d assumed their blunt teeth indicated that they were herbivores, but then her teeth weren’t particularly sharp—especially compared to her rescuers—and she was certainly capable of eating meat.

“Are you old enough for meat?” she asked, tearing off a small, well-cooked piece. She offered it to the nearest pup, who sniffed it curiously before taking it with surprising gentleness.

The other two crowded around, squeaking demandingly. She laughed despite herself and fed them each a tiny morsel.

“Hungry little things, aren’t you?”

From the corner of her eye, she caught a strange expression flicker across the male’s face—something almost like satisfaction.

“You care about them too,” she realized. “That’s why you saved them as well, isn’t it?”

He turned away, focusing on the fire, and she shook her head. Impossible male.

By the time she finished her meal she felt much stronger. The pups played around her feet, their luminescent markings glowing brighter as they chased each other across the cave floor.

The smallest one, whom she'd decided to name Dot for the distinctive pattern on its forehead, suddenly broke away from the others. It tumbled across the cave toward the huge male, who had settled against the far wall.

She tried to intercept it but the pup paid no attention, continuing its clumsy journey until it reached the male's massive leg. Without hesitation, it began climbing, tiny claws finding purchase on his skin.

She held her breath, hoping she'd been correct in assuming he cared about the pups and ready to intervene if she'd been wrong.

Instead, he remained perfectly still as the pup scaled his leg and settled into his lap. One of those long sensory tendrils gently brushed against the pup's head.

"Well, I'll be damned," she whispered.

The pup chirped happily, curling into a ball against his abdomen. The male's clawed hand hovered over it for a moment, then settled with surprising gentleness on its back, and the lingering remnants of her fear drifted away. If he could be that gentle with these vulnerable creatures, perhaps she was safe with him after all.

The other pups, seeing their sibling's success, scampered back to Xara and climbed into her lap. Their tiny bodies were warm against her skin, their movements trusting and affectionate.

"Looks like we've been adopted," she said, stroking one's head.

The cave was growing darker as the fire burned lower. Her eyelids felt heavy, the combination of food, warmth, and fading adrenaline making it difficult to stay awake.

She leaned back against the cave wall, cradling the pups against her chest. “I don’t suppose you have any idea how I got here? Or how to get me home?”

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The male's eyes gleamed in the firelight, but he remained silent.

“No, I didn't think so.” She yawned. “I don't even know if Earth still exists from here. Or how long I've been gone.”

The thought brought a wave of grief. Her students, her colleagues—did they think she was dead? Had they given up searching?

One of the pups squeaked softly, nuzzling against her hand as if sensing her distress.

“It's okay,” she murmured, stroking its back. “We'll figure something out.”

Her gaze drifted back to her rescuer. He hadn't moved, still cradling the smallest pup in his lap. Dot was fast asleep, the softest of purrs emanating from its little body. The contrast was striking—those lethal claws, capable of tearing apart a predator, now delicately supporting a creature that could fit in the palm of her hand.

Her eyelids grew heavier. She fought to keep them open, unwilling to make herself vulnerable by sleeping, but exhaustion was winning. The last thing she saw before sleep claimed her was the alien male, still sitting motionless across the cave. His silver eyes reflected the dying firelight, watching over her as darkness fell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Xenobeast remained motionless, one pup still curled in his lap as the female slept across the cave. His body was perfectly still, but his mind raced with unfamiliar impulses. The firelight cast soft shadows across her face, highlighting the curve of

her cheek, the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the curve of her hips and legs, golden in the firelight.

He had never seen anything so beautiful.

His gaze dropped to the pups snuggled against her breasts, and a deep purr vibrated in his throat. Her care for them—the way she'd defended them, even though it had resulted in her injury—had triggered some type of primal response in him. Her scent carried the complex chemical signatures of a predator-prey species but he had no desire to hunt her, only to protect her.

And she wasn't afraid of him.

That fact alone disturbed the careful isolation he'd maintained for years. Fear was a weapon he wielded like his claws—a necessary barrier between himself and everything else on this death-world. Yet this small, soft creature had looked at him without terror in her eyes.

His sensory tendrils coiled restlessly. They wanted to reach across the cave, to brush against her skin again, to absorb more of her scent. He forced them back with practiced discipline, but the effort cost him.

The sleeping Graxlin pup in his lap shifted, its tiny claws flexing against his thigh. Its bioluminescent markings pulsed with contentment. The creature should have been terrified of him as well—everything was terrified of him. That was how he'd survived. How he'd kept others safe from what he was.

A low growl built in his chest. He wasn't supposed to protect. He was built to hunt. To kill. To destroy.

Yet when he'd attacked that predator he'd simply acted on pure, protective instinct.

Dawn light began filtering through the cave entrance. Xara murmured something in her sleep, her brow furrowing. One of the pups nestled closer, its tiny body vibrating with comfort.

He needed to hunt. Needed space to clear his head.

He carefully lifted the sleeping pup from his lap and placed it on the bed. The creature squeaked in protest, its tiny paws reaching for him. He stared at it, perplexed by its reaction. Nothing reached for him. Nothing sought his touch.

Xara was still slumped against the wall and after a brief hesitation, he reached down and picked her up, cradling her gently against his chest. He froze, his heart pounding, waiting for her to wake and protest.

Instead, she sighed softly and nestled against him, her soft curves melting against his chest. His senses were flooded with her scent, her warmth. A strange, possessive satisfaction surged through him, and his tendrils coiled around her, their touch almost possessive.

The remaining Graxlin pups awoke and scurried after him as he strode towards the bed. With great care, he deposited her there. Her eyes blinked open and she gazed up at him, her hazel eyes sleepy and content. One of his sensory tendrils reached towards her, gently stroking her cheek, and she made a soft, contented sound before her eyes closed again. The smallest pup immediately nestled against her stomach and he tucked the other two next to it before covering them with one of his furs.

With silent footsteps, he moved toward the cave entrance, pausing only once to look back at the sleeping forms huddled together on his bed. Something primal and possessive flared in his chest at the sight.

Mine to protect.

He snarled at the thought and plunged into the jungle.

The crimson foliage parted silently before him as he moved through the predawn shadows. This was his territory—every tree, every hollow, every hunting ground. He knew where prey gathered at this hour, knew which predators to avoid and which to confront.

Yet today, his usual hunt-focus eluded him. His thoughts kept circling back to the cave. To her.

She didn't belong here. No soft creature could survive this place. The planet had been quarantined for good reason—it consumed the weak. Stripped away pretense. Left only the brutal truth of survival.

He climbed silently up into the canopy, his claws finding purchase in the rough bark. From this height, he could see the faint glow of the Tal'shai village in the distance. They were the only other sentient species that had adapted to survive here. They appeared harmless enough but they were fiercely territorial and quite capable of defending their territory. They preferred to avoid confrontation but if she had accidentally stumbled into their territory...

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He shook his head sharply, dislodging the thought. Below him, a herd of six-legged herbivores moved cautiously through the underbrush. Larger than the jikari, they would provide enough meat to last several days.

He dropped from the tree with lethal precision, landing on the largest of the herd. It was over in seconds—a clean kill, merciful by this planet’s standards. He hoisted the carcass onto his shoulders, its weight nothing to his enhanced strength.

As he made his way back toward the cave, his mind returned to the Graxlin pups. Their attachment to Xara made sense—Graxlins were empathic creatures, drawn to compatible energy signatures. They imprinted easily on those who showed them kindness, even if that was not common on this planet.

But why had they reached for him? His energy signature was designed for war, not nurturing. He was a weapon, not a protector.

Yet the smallest one had climbed into his lap without hesitation and had fallen asleep against him, trusting and vulnerable.

Trust. The concept was as foreign to him as mercy had once been.

When he reached the cave entrance, he paused, listening. Soft breathing, the occasional chirp from a dreaming pup. They were still asleep.

He moved silently inside, depositing his kill near the fire pit. Xara had shifted in her sleep. One pup nestled against her neck, its pale lavender fur stark against her brown skin. Another curled against her stomach, rising and falling with each breath she took.

The third, the smallest one, had escaped from the bed and crawled into the curved depression in the rock where he usually sat. It was his place—worn smooth from years of vigilant watches. Yet the tiny creature had claimed it, curled into a ball with its markings pulsing gently.

Something uncomfortable twisted in his chest. The pup had sought out his scent, his presence, even in his absence.

He approached the sleeping female cautiously, his steps making no sound on the stone floor. Up close, the wound on her leg looked better—the healing moss was working. Her face was relaxed in sleep, unguarded. Vulnerable.

One of his sensory tendrils extended without conscious command, reaching toward her face. He should have pulled it back—instead, he watched as it gently brushed her cheek, absorbing the warmth and softness of her skin, the subtle electrical patterns of her brain in sleep.

She made a soft sound, almost a sigh, and turned her face toward the touch.

His entire body went rigid. No one sought his touch. No one leaned into contact with him. He was a monster, a beast, a weapon. But first the pup and now Xara had turned to him.

He forced himself to withdraw the tendril and turned to the fire pit. He quietly built up the fire, then butchered the carcass before arranging the meat on a smoking rack. The smoke would preserve it, keeping it edible for days. She would need to eat when she woke.

Why did he care so much if she ate? Why did he care if she lived or died?

He had no answer that didn't disturb him.

The meat secured, he cast one last look at his sleeping female and the pups. The sight tugged at something deep within him—something that had no place in what he'd become.

He turned and slipped back into the jungle, moving deeper into the wild territory beyond his usual hunting grounds. He needed to put distance between himself and the cave. Between himself and these unfamiliar urges.

But even as he ran, silent and deadly through the crimson undergrowth, he knew it was futile. Some invisible tether kept pulling his thoughts back to the cave. To her. To the strange, unsettling feeling of having something to protect rather than something to destroy.

He had survived on this planet by embracing his nature—the lethal purpose for which he was created. He'd accepted his exile, his solitude, his role as predator rather than prey.

Now, with her arrival, those carefully constructed boundaries were crumbling. The beast was still there, coiled and ready beneath his skin. But something else stirred alongside it—something he'd thought long dead.

He paused at the edge of a cliff overlooking the vast, hostile landscape. In the distance, the twisted spires of an ancient ruin pierced the crimson canopy—remnants of the Tal'Shai's original civilization, long abandoned now.

He should leave her to find her own way. Should retreat to one of his other shelters, let her heal, and then disappear. It would be safer. Smarter. Yet even as he considered it, he knew he wouldn't. Couldn't. The tether was already too strong, pulling him back towards the cave with every breath.

Back towards her.

The realization should have angered him. Instead, it settled into his bones with the weight of inevitability. Whatever happened next, he was bound to her fate now. And that binding was as terrifying as it was inexplicable.

With a silent snarl, he turned and began making his way back to the cave, already calculating the most efficient route, already listening for threats that might emerge between him and his?—

No. Not his. She wasn't his anything.

But the denial rang hollow even in his own mind as he moved through the jungle with renewed purpose, drawn back to the cave where she slept.

Drawn back to her.

CHAPTER NINE

Xara woke to a gentle tugging sensation at her scalp. Something warm and small nestled against her neck, making tiny suckling noises. She blinked the sleep from her eyes and reached up, fingers connecting with soft fur and a tiny body.

One of the alien babies had snuggled against her neck during the night and was now contentedly nibbling on her curls. Its lavender fur tickled her skin, and its silver markings pulsed with a gentle, soothing rhythm.

“Hey there, little one,” she whispered. “That’s not food.”

The pup squeaked and nuzzled closer, undeterred. She carefully extracted her hair from its mouth and sat up, wincing as pain shot through her injured leg. The other two pups were curled together at the foot of the bed, their markings synchronized in sleep.

A rich, savory aroma filled the cave, and her stomach growled in response. Strips of meat were smoking over the carefully banked fire. The meat was arranged with precision, clearly meant to be preserved rather than immediately consumed.

She glanced around the cave. No sign of her silent, intimidating host.

Why would he do this? Tend her wounds, feed her, protect her and these small creatures? Everything about him screamed predator, from his massive frame to those lethal claws and the way he moved—like violence held in perfect check. Yet here she was, alive and cared for.

The contradiction didn't fit any model she understood.

She shifted to the edge of the bed, testing her weight on her injured leg. The moss bandage felt cool against her skin, and the pain, while still present, had dulled considerably.

The pup that had been nibbling her hair chirped in protest as she stood, clinging to her shoulder. She stroked its head absently as she limped toward the cave entrance, drawn by the fresh air and morning light.

At the mouth of the cave, she paused. The alien jungle sprawled before her in all its crimson glory, but something else caught her attention. In the distance, between the twisted trees and carnivorous vines, pinpricks of light flickered in distinct patterns.

She'd seen those flickering lights before but now she was even more convinced that they weren't random bioluminescence. They were organized, deliberate.

Three short pulses, followed by two long ones. A pause. Another pattern, and then another, but eventually the cycle repeated.

"Something is creating those signals," she murmured. The pup on her shoulder trilled in response, its markings flashing rapidly.

The scientist in her couldn't ignore the implications. Patterns meant intelligence, and intelligence meant potential communication, perhaps even civilization.

She needed to investigate.

Returning to the cave, she found a sturdy branch near the fire pit that would be perfect for a makeshift crutch. She hobbled over to retrieve it, then paused to grab a strip of smoked meat. The rich flavor burst across her tongue as she took a bite,

savoring the smoky taste.

“I’ll be back soon,” she told the two sleeping pups. The third chirped from her shoulder, clearly intending to accompany her.

Using the branch for support, she made her way back out of the cave, then hesitated. Perhaps it would be better to wait until her rescuer returned. Then again, she suspected he wouldn’t approve of her leaving the cave. The jungle looked safe enough in daylight and nothing had attacked her during her previous explorations. No doubt the real predators only come out at night, she thought optimistically as she marked her surroundings and set off into the forest.

Each step was a challenge, but the branch took enough weight off her injured leg to make progress possible. The pup clung to her shirt, occasionally making soft sounds that almost seemed encouraging.

The lights grew more distinct as she approached, still pulsing in their mesmerizing patterns.

“What are you?” she whispered, pushing aside a frond of crimson vegetation.

The jungle floor grew increasingly treacherous as she moved deeper. Roots twisted underfoot, and the vegetation seemed to shift and recoil from her touch. The makeshift crutch caught in the undergrowth, forcing her to tug it free repeatedly.

After twenty minutes of slow progress, sweat beaded on her forehead. Her leg throbbed, and her arms ached from supporting her weight. But the lights were closer now, just beyond the next tangle of vegetation.

She pushed forward, determined.

The branch caught again, more firmly this time. As she yanked it free, her injured leg buckled beneath her, and pain exploded up her thigh as she collapsed to the ground. The pup on her shoulder squealed in alarm, its markings flashing wildly.

She tried to stand, but her leg wouldn't support her weight. The moss bandage had come loose in the fall, revealing angry red flesh beneath. The wound wasn't healing as well as she'd thought.

"Damn it," she muttered, dragging herself toward a nearby tree trunk. "So much for exploration."

The pup leapt from her shoulder, landing on the ground with surprising grace. It faced the direction they'd come from and emitted a high-pitched series of squeals that made her wince.

“What are you?—”

A shadow fell across her. She froze, then slowly looked up.

Her rescuer stood there, massive and terrifying, silver eyes blazing with an emotion she couldn't name. His sensory tendrils writhed like angry snakes. His chest heaved as though he'd run a great distance at top speed, but he'd made no sound as he approached. Not a single footfall or broken twig had betrayed his presence until he chose to reveal himself.

For a heartbeat, they stared at each other—her sprawled on the ground, him looming above her, radiating barely contained fury.

Then he moved.

In one fluid motion, he crouched and scooped her up, one arm behind her back, the other under her knees. He lifted her as though she weighed nothing, cradling her against a chest that felt like warm steel. Her head spun from the sudden movement, instinctively gripping his shoulders for stability. Her pulse quickened and her skin prickled at his closeness, a reaction she couldn't entirely attribute to fear.

The pup chirped, bouncing in circles around his feet until he bent slightly, allowing it to scramble up his leg and perch on his shoulder—mirroring how it had ridden on Xara.

Without a word, he turned and strode back toward the cave, his gait so smooth she barely felt the movement, despite his obvious fury. His grip was firm but careful,

mindful of her injury.

She didn't know if it was the pain, the adrenaline, or his proximity, but the combination made her giddy.

"I take it this means you're not a big fan of field research."

That earned her a quick glance. His eyes narrowed, and his lips tightened, but he didn't speak.

"It's not my fault," she continued. "Your stupid planet keeps trying to kill me."

He snorted and turned his attention back to the jungle.

She should have been terrified. His body was designed for war. Every muscle was chiseled from stone, and those deadly claws could eviscerate her in an instant. Yet she was safe in his arms, and when she looked into his eyes, she could see his concern for her.

"Are you taking me back to the cave?"

He glanced down at her, his eyes darkening with an emotion that looked like hunger, but the expression vanished before she could identify it. He increased his pace, striding through the jungle without effort despite the thick underbrush and uneven ground.

"I can walk, you know," she grumbled.

A low, rumbling sound emerged from his chest, vibrating against her ribs. A warning, perhaps.

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Be that way.”

He stopped and lowered her legs to the ground. When she tried to stand, her injured leg buckled again.

He caught her easily and gave her a look that was somehow both smug and frustrated.

“Fine, I can’t walk,” she admitted, her face heating.

He sighed and tucked her back against him but he no longer seemed quite as angry. One of his tendrils slid around her waist, slipping beneath the hem of her shirt, its touch both strangely comforting and unexpectedly arousing. Arousing?

Don’t be ridiculous, she told herself, but then the tip of the tendril brushed against the underside of her breast and even with her bra in the way, the touch was electrifying. Her nipples hardened instantly, and the warmth in her cheeks spread downward.

His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened as he inhaled. She held her breath, waiting for him to acknowledge the sudden change, but instead, he continued walking.

She exhaled, disappointed and relieved at the same time.

She’d assumed that they were headed back to the cave but instead they emerged from the trees at the base of a cliff, a towering wall of jagged rock and crimson vegetation. She gasped as he swung her around to his back, easily supporting her with his tendrils as he started to climb. She clung desperately to his shoulders until she realized how firmly the tendrils supported her.

“I didn’t realize how strong they were,” she murmured, settling against him as the tendrils supported her, allowing her to relax against his back.

When they reached the top, the tendrils released her, allowing her to slide down his back. He strode forward a few paces, scanning the area and she followed, looking around curiously. The pup chirped and she lifted it down so it could explore as she joined him at the edge of the cliff.

The jungle spread below them, a sea of crimson leaves and winding vines. It was strangely beautiful, the light of the three moons casting glittering reflections on the dense foliage.

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“Are you going to tell me what’s going on now?” she asked.

He pointed, his arm raised, and she followed the gesture to an area where lights flickered beneath the trees. Then he indicated another, and another. They were clustered in regular groups, the area the lights covered varying only slightly.

“Are those... settlements? Villages?”

He nodded and her heart started to pound.

“Is there someone there who could help me get back home?”

His eyes darkened and his lip curled in a snarl as he shook his head violently.

“No, they can’t help me? Or no, you don’t want me to try?” she asked suspiciously.

He hesitated for a moment, then sliced a claw deliberately across his arm. She gasped as silvery blue blood welled in the cut, but he ignored it. He pointed at one patch of lights, then flicked blood across the ground. He pointed to the second patch and repeated the gesture. She paled, reaching out to grab his hand before he could do it a third time.

“You’re telling me they’re dangerous?”

He nodded decisively and her shoulders slumped in defeat. So much for the idea of escape.

“I guess everything on this planet really does want to kill me.”

He frowned at her and shook his head.

“Not everything?” she guessed. “Well, I suppose the pups don’t.”

His eyes darkened and one of his tendrils slipped around her waist again, drawing her closer. The heat of his body radiated into her skin, and her heart skipped a beat. By accident or intent, it had reached through one of the rips in her shirt and she could feel the smooth heavy warmth against the sensitive skin of her back.

“Or you,” she whispered.

His gaze locked on hers, the strange, silver depths mesmerizing. Then his tendril tightened around her, drawing her fully against his body.

His lips claimed hers in a kiss that was more than just a kiss—it was a declaration of ownership, of possession. His teeth grazed her lower lip, demanding entry. She parted her lips with a moan and his tongue swept into her mouth, the taste of him intoxicating.

A rush of desire flooded her core. She had never been kissed like this before, never felt so completely and utterly consumed. His scent surrounded her, musky and masculine, and his strength overwhelmed her. Her hands slid up over his chest and his muscles rippled under her touch. He growled softly, deepening the kiss, and she arched against him, unable to resist the temptation of his hard body pressed against hers.

As quickly as it began, the kiss ended, his lips leaving hers. He drew back, his breathing ragged, and she could see the raw hunger in his silver eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

A soft sound emerged from his throat. Then, with obvious reluctance, he gently set her down and backed away. She immediately stumbled and he lunged forward to catch her.

She opened her mouth to demand answers, but then their eyes met and the pain in those silver depths tore at her.

“Let’s go home,” she said instead.

His eyes blazed so fiercely she thought he was going to kiss her again. Instead he only picked her up and settled her on his back once more. He paused long enough to settle the pup back on her shoulder then headed back down over the cliff, leaving her confused, shaken, and more than a little aroused.

CHAPTER TEN

The Xenobeast headed back to his lair, his body thrumming with arousal and his mind swirling with confusion. Females were off-limits—that lesson had been painfully drilled into him since the first time his body exhibited signs of arousal. He was too dangerous to trust with a female, and his training had been focused on directing lust into violence.

But none of that training had prepared him for her.

Even now, her soft, curvy body pressed against his, and the scent of her arousal filled his nostrils. She had been warm and... willing in his arms, but he could never take the chance of hurting her.

He didn’t let her down once they reached the bottom of the cliff but marched directly

back to his cave and deposited her firmly but gently on the bed. The two pups who'd been left behind squeaked excitedly, tumbling all over her, but their bodies flickered with distress when they realized her leg was bleeding again.

Fuck. How had he forgotten her injury? It only proved his instincts were correct—he was too dangerous to be trusted with a delicate female.

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He knelt down next to the bed and carefully removed the remains of the bandage before cleansing the wound. Fortunately, the new damage was only minor. He retrieved more of the healing moss from his rapidly diminishing supply and placed it carefully over the wound. His focus has been on her injury but as he began to tie the fiber strips around the moss he became increasingly aware of the smooth golden skin beneath his hands.

Her scent surrounded him, the warm, feminine fragrance making his pulse quicken and his cock stiffen. A growl built in his throat, his need for her growing by the second.

His fingers trailed across her inner thigh and she gasped, a soft startled sound than only added to his arousal. He looked up and found her watching him, her eyes wide and dark, those pretty lips parted as she leaned towards him.

He jumped back so quickly that he almost fell, his usual control deserting him, and she gave a frustrated sigh. He ignored it, pointing sternly at the bed as he rose to his feet. Stay.

“Don’t you growl at me,” she said, sitting up straight despite the pain in her leg. “I’m not one of your—whatever you hunt out there. I’m a person. A scientist. I’m just trying to understand what’s happening.”

He stared at her, momentarily frozen by her outburst. No one spoke to him that way. Not since... before. Her finger jabbed toward his chest, stopping just short of contact, her eyes flashing with defiance rather than fear.

“You’ve been feeding me, tending my wounds, protecting me—which I appreciate, by the way—but you won’t talk to me. Won’t explain anything.”

She jabbed a finger at him again not quite touching him but making her point.

“I understand you’re some kind of apex predator with the whole silent-and-deadly routine, but if you expect me to stay put, you’re going to have to give me something. Information. Communication. Anything. I know you understand me.”

She was right. He understood her perfectly through his translation implant. He’d been trained to comprehend dozens of languages, though speaking them had been deemed unnecessary for a weapon. Weapons didn’t need to communicate—they needed to execute.

But she wasn’t treating him like a weapon. She was treating him like a person.

The realization unsettled him deeply.

He turned away, retrieving a piece of meat from the fire, offering it as a distraction while he gathered his thoughts. When their fingers brushed, the contact sent another jolt through his system—her skin so warm and soft against his.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “But food isn’t answers.”

He studied her face—the determined set of her jaw, the intelligence in those hazel eyes. She wasn’t going to back down. She wasn’t going to cower.

He hesitated, then picked up a stick from the floor. With deliberate movements, he began to sketch in the dirt near the fire pit. Simple lines formed a crude but recognizable figure—elongated limbs, a scaled body, large multi-faceted eyes.

She leaned forward, her curiosity instantly engaged. “What is that? Who are they?”

He tapped the drawing, then pointed at the already fading mark on his arm.

“The lights? They’re made by these creatures?” She studied the drawing intently. “Are they sentient? Do they have a civilization?”

The barrage of questions made his mouth twitch with something almost like amusement. He nodded once, a short, sharp movement, and her eyes widened.

“I knew you understood me!” Her face lit up with a smile that made his chest ache. “Do they have a name? These beings?”

He hesitated. Speaking was forbidden. Communication led to connection, and connection led to weakness, but her eager expression broke through decades of conditioning.

“Tal’Shai,” he said, his voice a deep, rough rumble from disuse. The sound of his own voice startled him. How long had it been since he’d spoken aloud?

“Tal’Shai,” he said, his voice a deep, rough rumble from disuse. The sound of his own voice startled him. How long had it been since he’d spoken aloud?

Her pretty lips parted in shock.

“You can talk!” She leaned toward him, excitement radiating from her entire body. “These Tal’Shai—up on the cliff you seemed to indicate that they were hostile. Was that what you were trying to tell me?”

The smallest Graxlin pup chose that moment to scamper across the bed, chirping excitedly. It climbed onto his knee, then began batting playfully at one of his sensory

tendrils. The tendril curled reflexively, gently lifting the pup into the air as it squealed in delight.

Xara laughed—a bright, unexpected sound that punched straight through his defenses and into some long-dormant part of him. The sound was pure joy, unrestrained and genuine.

He froze, his tendril still holding the squirming pup. Her laughter was... beautiful. Like nothing he'd heard in years. Decades, perhaps.

“Look at you,” she said, her voice warm with amusement. “The big, scary predator playing with a baby.”

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He should have been offended, should have growled and asserted his dominance, reminding her of what he was capable of. Instead, he found himself carefully lowering the pup back to the bed, where it immediately pounced on another tendril.

“Tal’Shai—territorial,” he said again, his voice still rough. “Boundaries.”

“Boundaries?” She caught the word immediately. “That’s why you were warning me?”

He nodded once, and she frowned thoughtfully.

“Boundaries,” she repeated. “Do you know that because you’ve interacted with them?”

The question hung between them, loaded with implications. He looked away, uncomfortable with her perception, but he could feel her studying him, her gaze traveling over his powerful body, over the silver markings that pulsed beneath his skin, and the claws that could tear through chitin and bone.

“They’re afraid of you,” she said softly. It wasn’t a question, but she wasn’t entirely correct. It would be more accurate to say that they respected his abilities.

He met her eyes again, expecting to see that same fear reflected there. Instead, he found something closer to understanding.

“Made to be feared,” he admitted, the words scraping his throat like rough stone.

The pup continued to play with his tendril, completely unafraid. It chirped happily as it swung from the appendage, tiny claws gentle against the sensitive flesh. The other two pups had crept closer, watching the game with interest.

“Not by everyone, apparently,” she said, smiling at the pups.

Something shifted inside him—a tectonic surge of emotion he couldn’t name. He had been engineered for death, built to destroy, trained to kill. Fear was his companion, his weapon, his shield. Yet these creatures didn’t flinch from his claws or his scars. Not the pups. Not the female.

“Don’t know what I am,” he said softly.

“I think they know exactly what you are,” she countered. “They just see something different than what you think you are.”

He almost reeled at the assertion. What was he, if not the weapon his creators had intended? What remained when the killing stopped?

One of the other pups grew bold, scrambling onto his knee to join its sibling. He found himself lifting it carefully, cradling it in one massive palm. Its tiny body was warm against his skin, its markings pulsing with contentment.

She smiled again, warm and soft. “See? They trust you.”

Trust. The concept was foreign, dangerous—trust was for the weak, the naive, the soon-to-be-dead—but something protective stirring in his chest as the curled into a ball in his palm.

“Tal’Shai,” he said, forcing himself back to safer ground. “Won’t help. Threat.”

A delicate eyebrow arched.

“I’m a threat?” A smile curved her lips as she tilted her head, studying him. “But you don’t see me as a threat, do you?”

The question caught him off-guard. Did he see her as a threat? She was small, soft, injured. Physically, she posed no danger to him. But the way she looked at him, the way she spoke to him—as if he were more than just a beast—that threatened something far more fundamental than his physical safety.

“Rest,” he said instead of answering. “Heal.”

She looked like she wanted to continue the conversation, but her exhaustion was evident in the shadows beneath her eyes. Her brief excursion had drained what little strength she’d regained.

“Fine,” she sighed, settling back against the bed. “But this conversation isn’t over. Now that I know you can talk, I have about a thousand questions.”

Of course she did. He could see the curiosity burning in her eyes, the scientist’s need to understand.

The third pup, seeing its siblings receiving attention, approached cautiously. When he made no move to stop it, it climbed up his arm, tiny claws tickling against his skin. It settled on his shoulder, chirping contentedly.

“They really do love you,” she murmured sleepily, her eyes fluttering closed.

He remained still, acutely aware of the small lives trusting him not to harm them. The pup in his palm had fallen asleep, its tiny chest rising and falling with each breath. The one on his shoulder nuzzled against his neck, its fur soft against his skin.

He should return them to her and move away, protect himself from this dangerous softening. Instead, he found himself settling more comfortably beside the bed, careful not to disturb Xara or the sleeping pups. Her breathing deepened as exhaustion claimed her.

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He watched her face relax in sleep, struck by how vulnerable she looked. How trusting. His sensory tendrils reached toward her of their own accord, drawn to her warmth.

One tendril gently brushed a dark curl from her forehead. She didn't stir, her breathing remaining deep and even. Encouraged by her lack of response, he allowed the tendril to explore a little further, tracing the delicate shell of her ear and the soft vulnerable pulse of her neck.

Time passed. The pups slept, tiny bodies warm against his skin, and Xara slept equally peacefully. He should have moved away.

He didn't.

The smallest sound broke the silence as she whimpered. Her face contorted, no longer peaceful. Another whimper, then a soft cry. Her body tensed, hands clutching at the bedding.

Nightmare.

He immediately settled the pups against her stomach and slipped into the bed behind her. His tendrils reached for her, wrapping gently around her shoulders, her arms, her waist. He gathered her carefully against his chest, mindful of her injury, cradling her as he might one of the pups. The feel of her body against him reawakened his simmering arousal, but it was less important than providing her comfort.

Her body stiffened momentarily, then relaxed against him as the whimpering stopped.

Her breathing steadied and, without waking, she turned towards him, her face pressing against his chest, one hand coming up to rest over his heart.

The contact froze him in place. No one touched him like this. No one sought comfort from him, yet here she was, nestled against him, quieted by his presence and trusting him even in sleep.

The realization settled into his bones—she was his to protect.

The thought should have alarmed him. Instead, it filled him with a strange, fierce warmth as he held her, watching over her sleep, his tendrils wrapped protectively around her small form.

His. To protect. To keep safe.

The universe had taken everything else from him and stripped him down to the beast, the weapon, the monster. But this—this soft creature who defied him and laughed at him and trusted him—this, perhaps, it would let him keep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Xara woke to the soft chirping of the pups. Light filtered through the vine curtain in the outer cave, brighter than she'd expected. How long had she slept?

Her body felt oddly warm and secure—memories of strong arms and tendrils wrapped around her filled her head—but when she opened her eyes, she found herself alone on the bed, the pups tumbling over each other nearby.

Had she dreamed it? The nightmare, the comfort, the feeling of being held?

She pushed herself up, carefully testing her injured leg. It was less painful than she'd

expected after her previous excursion so perhaps she had slept long enough to allow it to recover.

“Good morning to you too,” she murmured as Dot abandoned its siblings to climb onto her lap, its pale pink fur impossibly soft, and the silver markings along its spine pulsing gently as it nuzzled against her hand.

Her rescuer—why hadn’t she asked his name when he spoke to her?—was nowhere to be seen. Probably hunting again. He seemed to do that a lot—disappear into the jungle and return with food.

She glanced toward the cave entrance and the dappled light filtering through the vines, tempted to explore a little further, but given his warnings, perhaps it would be best to remain inside. Of course, that didn’t mean she couldn’t do some investigating she decided as she noticed a passage deeper into the rock at the rear of the cave. How far did this cave system extend?

“What do you say we do a little exploring?” she asked Dot and it chirped, blinking enormous dark eyes at her.

Carefully, she set the pup down and pushed herself to her feet. Her makeshift crutch from yesterday was propped against the wall—he must have brought it back at some point—so she grabbed it, cautiously testing her weight. Her leg ached a little but it really felt much better.

“Not too far,” she promised herself. Just enough to get a better sense of her surroundings.

The three pups formed a little procession behind her as she hobbled deeper into the cave. The main chamber narrowed into a corridor that curved gently to the left. The natural rock formations were beautiful—glittering mineral deposits caught the light

from small cracks in the ceiling, creating a subtle glow.

But something about the walls seemed... off. Too smooth in places. Too regular.

She ran her hand along one particularly flat section. Definitely not natural. Someone—or something—had carved this passage.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” she murmured.

The pups chirped, scampering around her feet as she continued forward. The passage widened again into a smaller chamber, and here the evidence of artificial construction was unmistakable. Embedded in the far wall was what appeared to be a control panel—now dark and silent, its surface cracked and scorched.

“This isn’t just a cave,” she whispered, running her fingers over the dead panel. “It is—or was—a structure of some kind.”

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Dot gave an alarmed squeak as it slipped on a loose stone, and she bent to steady it. As she did, she noticed something glinting beneath a pile of rubble. She carefully brushed away the debris to reveal tangled bundles of what could only be wiring—synthetic cords with metallic cores, now frayed and broken.

“This place was built. Or... carved out and modified,” she said, more to herself than the pups.

She continued her exploration, moving deeper into the network of chambers. Each revealed more signs of technology—burned-out lighting fixtures, the remains of what might have been computer terminals, scorched sections of wall where something had clearly exploded.

A base? A research station? she wondered, cataloging possibilities. Living quarters?

The pups seemed fascinated by her discoveries, particularly when she uncovered a small cache of shiny metal objects—tools, perhaps.

“Don’t eat those,” she warned as Dot attempted to nibble on something that looked like a power coupling. “Who knows what’s in them.”

She hobbled into a narrow side passage, the pups trailing behind her like ducklings. This corridor ended in a small, roughly circular chamber with a high, domed ceiling. Unlike the other rooms, this one seemed almost untouched by whatever catastrophe had damaged the rest of the facility.

In the center stood what appeared to be a pedestal or workstation, its surface dusty

but intact.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” she murmured, brushing away years of accumulated dust and grime.

The pups chirped excitedly, racing around the room, their bioluminescent markings flashing in patterns she was beginning to recognize as expressions of curiosity and delight.

“Stay close,” she called to them. “Don’t go wandering off.”

As if in direct defiance, the largest pup—the one with the slightly darker fur—darted toward a narrow crevice in the far wall. Before she could stop it, it had squeezed halfway through.

“Hey! No! Come back here!” she hobbled after it as quickly as her injured leg would allow, but she was too late.

The pup squeaked, its hind legs kicking frantically as it tried to push the rest of its body through the gap. But it was stuck, its pudgy middle wedged firmly in the narrow space.

“Oh no,” she groaned, dropping to her knees beside it. “What did you do, you silly thing?”

The pup’s distress calls grew more frantic. The other two pups gathered around, chirping anxiously, their markings pulsing with alarm.

She tried to reach into the crevice, but she couldn’t get a good grip on the struggling pup and she was afraid to hurt it

“Hold still,” she urged, trying to keep her voice calm despite her rising panic. “You’re just making it worse.”

The pup either didn’t understand, continuing to thrash as its cries grew more desperate.

“Please,” she whispered, her heart racing. “Please don’t hurt yourself.”

A shadow fell across her, and she froze. Then a long tendril reached past her into the crevice, and with a single, fluid motion, he extracted the struggling pup, its body sliding free with surprising ease.

He held the trembling creature for a moment, examining it for injuries, then gently placed it in her outstretched hands.

“Thank you,” she whispered, cradling the frightened pup against her chest. “I was so worried.”

For a heartbeat, his silver eyes met hers. Something shifted in that metallic gaze—a warmth she hadn’t seen before. The corner of his mouth twitched, not quite a smile, but... almost.

It transformed his face, that tiny movement, making him look less fearsome and far too attractive for her peace of mind. Her gaze dropped automatically to his mouth, remembering the way he had kissed her, as if he needed her the way she needed air to breathe. One of his tendrils curled around the back of her neck, gently tugging her towards him.

She had no intention of resisting, eager to kiss him again, but the pup chose that moment to squeak and wriggle in her arms.

He jerked back, the tendril withdrawing as his expression returned to his usual impassive mask.

“I was just exploring,” she explained, gesturing around the chamber. “This place... it wasn’t always a cave, was it?”

He didn’t answer, and she sighed. So he was back to not speaking.

“Was this your home?” she asked softly. “Before...”

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His gaze swept the room, lingering on the pedestal and the damaged technology, before he shook his head. At least it was a response.

The pup in her arms had calmed, its markings returning to their normal gentle pulse. It nuzzled against her collarbone, making a soft, contented sound. She laughed and held it up to her face.

“I’m definitely calling you Trouble.”

The other two pups were circling the male’s feet, chirping for attention, and to her surprise, he crouched down, allowing Dot to climb onto his palm. He lifted it carefully, studying its tiny face with an intensity that might have seemed threatening if not for the gentleness of his touch.

“They’re getting bigger,” she continued, filling the silence with her observations. “Stronger too. This one—” she nodded to the pup in her arms “—nearly gave me a heart attack when it got stuck, but it’s good that they’re curious. It means that they’re healthy and developing normally.”

He set Dot down and petted the middle pup before he straightened, his gaze returning to her face. He gestured firmly towards toward the entrance to the chamber—a clear indication to return to the main cave.

“I’d like to explore more,” she said, not moving. “If that’s okay. There’s so much history here.”

He seemed to consider this, his silver eyes unreadable, but he finally nodded—a

small, sharp movement.

Permission granted.

“Thank you,” she said, unable to keep the smile from her face. “I promise I’ll be careful. And I’ll keep the little ones out of trouble.”

As if to prove her wrong, Trouble squirmed free of her grasp and scampered toward another narrow opening in the wall.

“Oh no you don’t!” She lunged for it, forgetting her injured leg.

Pain shot through her as her weight came down on that leg and she stumbled forward. Strong hands caught her before she could fall, steadying her with hands and tendrils. He held her for a moment longer than necessary, his body radiating heat against her back, and she made no attempt to move away.

“Sorry,” she murmured, smiling up at him over her shoulder. “I’m still not quite steady on my feet.”

He released her slowly, as if unsure she could stand on her own. Trouble, meanwhile, had abandoned its exploration and returned to circle her ankles, chirping with what sounded remarkably like concern.

“I’m fine,” she assured it, bending carefully to stroke its soft fur. “Just clumsy.”

When she straightened again, she found him watching her with that same unreadable expression, but there was a warmth in his eyes that made her skin tingle.

“I suppose I should probably rest this leg a bit more,” she admitted. “But I’d like to come back.”

He nodded again, then gestured back the way she'd come.

"Lead the way," she said, gathering the pups around her.

As they made their way back through the winding passages, she noticed how he matched his pace to hers, slowing when she struggled, pausing when she needed to rest. His huge body blocked most of the light from ahead, casting her in shadow, yet somehow she didn't feel afraid.

When they reached the main chamber, he guided her to the bed, his hand hovering near her elbow but not quite touching.

"Thank you," she said as she settled onto the soft moss. "For letting me explore. And for rescuing our little troublemaker."

Our. The word slipped out so naturally she didn't even notice until she saw his reaction—a slight widening of those silver eyes, a momentary stillness.

The pups scrambled onto the bed around her, their energy apparently inexhaustible. Trouble immediately began chewing on the edge of a fur.

"No, don't eat that," she scolded gently, redirecting it to a small pile of fruit she'd set aside earlier.

When she looked up again, he had moved over to the cave entrance, but he wasn't leaving. Instead, he seemed to be... watching, observing her interactions with the pups with an intensity that might have been unnerving if she hadn't glimpsed that almost-smile earlier.

"They're a handful," she said, smiling at him. "But worth it."

And for just a moment—so brief she might have imagined it—the corner of his mouth twitched again. Not quite a smile. But almost.

It was enough to make her heart skip a beat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Blood. Screams. Pain.

The Xenobeast thrashed against the restraints, metal biting into his wrists as the conversion chamber filled with searing light. Every nerve ending burned as they rewrote him cell by cell, turning flesh to weapon.

“Subject displays heightened resistance,” a cold voice observed from beyond the light. “Increase neural suppression.”

He recognized that voice. Commander Vask D’ravak. The architect of his suffering.

The pain doubled, tripled. His body arched against the table.

“You’re our finest creation,” Vask’s voice continued, closer now. “A perfect killing machine. Why fight what you are?”

The scene shifted. Bodies lay strewn across the ground—women, children, their eyes still wide with terror. A village burning. His hands covered in blood that wasn’t his.

“No,” he growled, backing away from the carnage.

“Yes.” Vask appeared beside him, a cold sneer on his face. “It’s what you were made for.”

The tribunal chamber materialized around them. Twelve Zarkari officials staring

down at him with calculating eyes.

“Asset K-7 has malfunctioned,” Vask announced. “It refuses direct orders. It questions. It... feels.” He spat the last word like poison.

“The asset is defective,” another voice agreed. “Terminate and recycle.”

“No,” Vask’s eyes gleamed. “I have a better punishment. Let it live with what it is. A monster among monsters.”

The tribunal chamber dissolved into the drop ship. His wrists bound, his body drugged into compliance. Through the viewport, he watched a crimson-hued world grow larger. His prison. His tomb.

“No one survives this place,” Vask whispered as the guards dragged him toward the airlock. “But you’ll try, won’t you? That’s what makes this so perfect. You’ll fight. You’ll suffer. And you’ll die knowing you failed at being the weapon we created—and at being whatever else you thought you could become.”

The airlock hissed open. A final push.

Falling.

He jerked awake, his body rigid, breath coming in sharp, shallow gasps. Cold sweat slicked his skin, making the bioluminescent markings along his torso pulse with agitated light. His sensory tendrils writhed, tasting the air for threats that existed only in memory.

He pushed himself upright, fighting the urge to flee into the jungle where he could lose himself in the primal simplicity of the hunt. The darkness called to him—a familiar comfort where he could hide from the ghosts that haunted his dreams.

But the small, warm bodies of the Graxlin pups slept nearby, their tiny chests rising and falling with peaceful breaths. And beyond them, curled on her side with one hand tucked beneath her cheek, lay Xara.

His gaze lingered on her. In sleep, her face softened, the determined set of her jaw relaxed. A dark curl fell across her forehead, and he fought the urge to brush it away with his claw.

The night air felt suddenly too thick, too close. His skin crawled with the memory of restraints, of pain, of everything they'd done to make him what he was.

He needed to run—to hunt and to forget—but he couldn't leave them unprotected.

The smallest of the pups stirred, sensing his distress. It blinked awake, eyes glowing faintly in the darkness, and chirped a soft question. The sound tugged at something deep in his chest—something that had no place in the weapon they'd tried to forge.

He remembered how Xara had clung to him during her nightmare, how she'd calmed at his touch. How her fear had eased when he'd wrapped her in his arms.

Comfort. She'd found comfort in him—not fear, not submission, comfort.

Could he find the same in her?

Before he could question the impulse, he slid beneath the furs next to her, careful not to wake her. Her scent enveloped him immediately—warm, sweet, alive. His sensory tendrils reached for her instinctively, drawn to the warmth of her body, and he let them curl gently around her waist.

The moment he settled beside her, something inside him quieted. The frantic pace of his heart slowed. The memories receded, pushed back by her presence. The warmth

of her body seeped into his, chasing away the cold sweat of the nightmare. His muscles began to uncoil, tension bleeding out of him with each breath. The comfort was immediate, profound—and entirely unfamiliar.

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But as his body relaxed, another tension built. Her nearness awakened a different kind of hunger, one that had nothing to do with survival and everything to do with the curve of her hip, the soft parting of her lips, the memory of her lips beneath his

His body responded, hardening with a need that made his skin flush hot. The reaction shamed him. He'd been made for death, not desire. His creators had never intended for him to want like this—to ache for connection rather than conquest.

He should leave. Return to his place by the fire. Distance himself before?—

She shifted beside him, her breathing changing rhythm, and her eyes fluttered open, focusing slowly in the dim light of the cave. She blinked, registering his presence, and he tensed, his arms instinctively tightening around her, ready for her to pull away.

Instead, her lips curved into a sleepy smile.

“Hey,” she murmured, voice husky with sleep. “You okay?”

The simple question undid him. No one had ever asked him that before. Not once in his existence.

He couldn't speak—wouldn't speak—but he allowed his eyes to answer for him. Let her see the shadows there, the remnants of the nightmare still clinging to his thoughts.

Her smile softened with understanding. Without hesitation, she shifted closer, tucking herself against his chest. Her head nestled beneath his chin, her breath warm against

his throat.

“Bad dreams?” she whispered.

He tensed again, surprised by her perception, but after a moment, he gave a single, sharp nod.

“I get them too.” Her hand came to rest against his chest, directly over his heart. “It helps not to be alone.”

The touch was innocent, meant to comfort. But his body didn’t understand the distinction. His arousal pressed against her, impossible to hide in their closeness.

Once again he braced himself for her to pull away in disgust, or worse—in fear.

Her eyes widened slightly as she became aware of his condition, but instead of recoiling, her smile returned—different now, tinged with something that made his pulse quicken.

“I guess you do like me after all,” she murmured, amusement and warmth mingling in her voice.

The words made his chest ache. Like me. As if it were that simple.

But the way she looked at him—without fear or disgust—made him wonder if perhaps he was. If perhaps there was more left of him than the weapon they’d tried to create.

He didn’t move, barely breathed, as she shifted against him. Her hand slid up from his chest to cup his jaw, thumb brushing over the sharp angle of his cheekbone. The touch was feather-light, cautious, but unafraid.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “I like you too.”

Something cracked open inside him—a fissure in the wall he’d built around whatever remained of his original self. The part of him that existed before they remade him into a monster.

Slowly, giving her every chance to pull away, he lowered his head until his forehead rested against hers. His sensory tendrils curled forward, brushing against her cheeks and her neck, drifting down her back to hover just above the soft curve of her ass, learning her in ways his hands didn’t dare.

She didn’t flinch from the alien touch. Instead, she sighed, eyes drifting closed as the tendrils explored her with delicate precision.

“That feels nice,” she murmured.

The simple admission loosened something in his chest. His arms tightened around her, drawing her closer, careful of his strength but unable to resist the need to feel her tucked against him.

She fit against him perfectly, soft where he was hard, yielding where he was unyielding. Her hand slid from his jaw to the back of his neck, her fingers gently stroking his sensory tendrils. The touch sent a shiver down his spine, pleasure rippling through him in waves.

No one had ever touched him like this. With gentleness. With care.

Her eyes opened, meeting his in the darkness.

“Is this all right?” she asked, fingers still moving through his tendrils.

The question nearly undid him. She was asking his permission—as if he had the right to want, to choose.

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He nodded, the movement jerky, uncoordinated. His control was slipping, desire clouding his thoughts, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away. Not when she looked at him like that. Not when her touch felt like salvation.

She smiled again, that same warm, knowing smile that made his chest ache with unfamiliar emotions. Then, with deliberate slowness, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was gentle, questioning, her lips soft against his, the contrast between them heightening the sensation.

For a moment, he remained frozen, overwhelmed by the intimacy of the act, but then instinct took over, and he responded, kissing her with all the pent-up longing and confusion and need of a lifetime spent alone.

His claws threaded into her hair, holding her steady as he deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth. She tasted like the sweetness of fruit and the intoxication of the sun-warmed vines, and it only fueled his hunger.

The tip of his tongue traced her lower lip, and she parted for him with a soft moan. One of his tendrils circled her neck, bringing her closer, and her hands slipped from his neck to clutch at his shoulders. Another drifted down her body, finding the softness of her breast as his hand followed the gentle curve of her hip, his claws tracing lightly over her thigh, and she arched into his touch. He ached to possess her, his cock throbbing with a need that terrified him.

He broke the kiss, pulling back just enough to search her face. To make sure she

understood what she was doing, and who she was doing it with. What he saw in her eyes wasn't fear or hesitation—it was want. Clear, unmistakable desire—for him.

“I know what you're thinking,” she whispered, her fingers tracing the sharp line of his jaw. “You're worried about hurting me.”

He nodded, relief flooding through him that she understood without words.

“You won't.” Her confidence was absolute. “I trust you.”

Trust. Another gift he'd never been given. Never earned.

He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the weight of that responsibility and by the fierce, protective surge that accompanied it. When he opened them again, she was watching him with a patience he didn't deserve. She was waiting for him to decide. To choose.

He made his choice by drawing her closer, his mouth finding hers again with new purpose. This time, the kiss was deeper, hungrier, but still measured. Still controlled.

She responded with equal fervor, her body arching against his, her hands exploring the contours of his shoulders, his chest. Each touch was a revelation, a reminder that he was more than the sum of his scars and modifications.

One of the pups stirred nearby, letting out a sleepy chirp before settling back into slumber. The sound was enough to remind him of his responsibilities and he pulled back, his breathing ragged, his control hanging by a thread. He searched her face again, needing to be certain.

She smiled up at him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with desire and something softer, something that made his chest ache.

“It’s all right,” she whispered, understanding in her voice. “We have time.”

The reassurance settled something inside him. She wasn’t afraid, and she wasn’t leaving. Whatever this was between them, it was more than just physical need or momentary comfort. It was something he’d never dared to imagine for himself. Something he’d been certain was beyond his reach.

She settled back against him, her head tucked beneath his chin, her body relaxed in his arms. One of her hands found his, fingers interlacing with his clawed ones without hesitation.

“Try to sleep,” she murmured sleepily. “I’ll keep the bad dreams away.”

He didn’t believe that was possible, not with the weight of his past and the blood on his hands. But as her breathing evened out, her body warm and trusting against his, he found himself willing to believe that perhaps, with her, he could be something more than just a weapon.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Xara woke to a gentle pressure against the back of her neck. One of the pups had nestled into her hair, tiny paws kneading at her scalp like a contented cat. The other two were curled against her stomach, their fur warm and silky against her skin.

Her silent companion was gone again—hunting, probably. He never seemed to sleep more than a few hours, always alert, always watchful. After their shared moment in the night, she’d expected... well, she wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but waking alone wasn’t it.

She sighed and stretched carefully, mindful of the sleeping pups. Her leg still ached, but it felt even better today. The moss poultice he’d applied must have some

remarkable antibacterial properties—something she'd love to study under proper lab conditions.

The thought made her chest tighten. Her lab. Her students. Her life. All of it seemed impossibly distant now, like a half-remembered dream.

Dot blinked awake and chirped at her.

“Good morning to you too,” she murmured, stroking her head.

She'd started thinking of Dot as female, though she had no idea if the pups even had conventional genders. Dot was certainly the most delicate of the three, with a curious, gentle nature that contrasted with her siblings' more boisterous personalities.

She sat up, the movement dislodging the pup in her hair, who tumbled down with an indignant squeak. She caught it before it hit the bed, and stroked its feathery tendrils apologetically.

“Sorry, little one.”

The cave was silent except for the soft crackling of the fire and the pups’ occasional chirps. The remains of last night’s meal had been cleared away, the fire stoked, fresh water placed in the makeshift basin he’d fashioned from a piece of wreckage.

She frowned, taking in these details. How long had he been awake? How long had he slept with her before slipping away?

She gathered the pups and made her way to the basin, washing her face and hands in the cool water. As she did, she found herself studying her surroundings more critically, remembering the evidence she’d discovered the previous day of artificial construction. Now that she was aware of the possibility, she identified a few indications she’d missed before—a scorched area like the ones she’d seen deeper in the cave network. The too smooth slab of stone he used to butcher his kills.

Now that she was looking beyond the rough-hewn surface, she could see that the space was meticulously organized. Every item placed with precision, nothing out of alignment. Even the way he moved reflected that same sense of order. She’d noticed it before when he returned from hunting—the careful placement of each foot, the economy of movement, the way he cleaned his work space each time.

The discipline of a soldier, she realized, even though she suspected he wouldn’t see it that way.

The pups scattered across the cave floor, exploring and playing. Dot stayed close to her feet, while the other two wrestled and tumbled over each other.

Trouble was clearly the most aggressive, always nipping at his sibling, always wanting to be on top during their play fights. The other was more strategic, less forceful but ultimately more successful in their contests. Soldier, she thought with a smile as she watched them. They were developing distinct personalities already.

A shadow fell across the cave entrance, and she looked up to see him standing there, silhouetted against the vines. He carried a brace of rabbit-sized creatures with iridescent scales instead of fur.

Her breath caught at the sight of him. In the soft light, his alien beauty was even more striking—the play of light across his silver skin, the ripple of muscles, the way his sensory tendrils seemed to reach toward her even as the rest of him remained perfectly still.

“Good morning,” she said softly.

He inclined his head slightly—acknowledgment, not greeting—and moved past her to the fire, where he began preparing the morning meal with the same methodical precision she’d observed in everything he did.

She watched him work, fascinated by the contrast between his massive strength and the delicate way he handled the food. His claws, capable of tearing through predators with ease, moved with surgeon-like precision as he filleted the meat.

The pups, sensing food, abandoned their play and crowded around his feet, chirping excitedly. He paused in his work to look down at them, and she could have sworn she saw the corner of his mouth twitch upward.

Dot tried to climb his leg like a tree, and one of his tendrils reached down and placed her gently on his shoulder.

“She likes you,” she said, approaching cautiously.

He glanced at her, then down at the pup, who was now nuzzling against his neck, her bioluminescent markings pulsing with contentment.

“Did I tell you that I’m calling her Dot?” she asked, testing the waters.

His eyes flickered to hers, unreadable but attentive.

Encouraged, she pointed to the aggressive pup, who was now trying to climb his other leg. “And you already know he’s trouble.”

The third pup—the clever one—had managed to snatch a small piece of meat while they were distracted and was now retreating to a corner to enjoy his prize.

“And that one,” she said with a laugh, “is Soldier. He’s always planning his next campaign.”

Something crossed his face too quickly for her to read, but he didn’t look away.

“So now we all have names, All of us but you. What do we call you?”

A frown darkened his brow and for a long moment she didn’t think he was going to answer her, but he finally spoke, his voice rough and low from disuse.

“Xenobeast.”

“Xenobeast?” This time she was the one to frown. “That’s not a name.”

He hesitated.

“Made,” he finally said, and her throat tightened.

“That’s what they made you to be?” she whispered, and he nodded abruptly, looking back down at his kill.

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“No,” she said, surprising herself with the ferocity of her tone. “I refuse to accept that.”

His head jerked up, eyes fixing on hers.

“You’re not a weapon. You’re not a beast. You’re a person.”

His head jerked up, a sudden desperate hope in his eyes, but then his face shuttered as he shook his head.

“Xenobeast.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him, taking refuge in anger to avoid the ache in her heart.

“Well, I refuse to call you that so you can either give me your real name or I’ll make one up.”

He shook his head again and for a moment she thought he was rejecting her offer, but then he spoke, the words halting and hesitant.

“Don’t... know.”

The hurt in his eyes made her want to gather him into her arms and hug him tight. Instead, she held out her hands.

“Come here. Please.”

He hesitated, then set aside his kill and washed his hands before reaching for her. Her hands looked ridiculously small in his but she did her best to tighten them around him as she studied his face.

“I think perhaps, Ash,” she said at last, and the silver of his eyes gleamed brighter.

“Ash?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I like it.”

She thought that he might object, but he remained silent. Then his hand lifted and the back of one claw stroked along her cheek, a surprisingly tender gesture.

“Xara,” he growled, as if testing the sound. “Ash.”

She smiled up at him, and his expression eased, the harsh lines of his face softening.

“Do you like it?”

Instead of answering, he lowered his head, capturing her lips in a kiss that was both fierce and possessive. Heat flooded her body, his hunger awakening her own. His claws threaded through her hair, sending prickles of desire down her spine.

“Oh,” she gasped as he deepened the kiss, and she clutched at his shoulders, anchoring herself to him. The powerful muscles shifted beneath her touch. He was all sharp angles and hard lines, the only softness the velvety tendrils that explored her with equal curiosity before he raised his head

His conflicted expression had returned but he didn’t immediately pull away. He bent his head, his forehead briefly touching hers before he finally stepped back and returned to his kill.

Despite the arousal still coursing through her body, she smiled as she went to rescue Trouble from the vines in which he entangled himself. She was making progress.

The rest of the day passed in a rhythm that was rapidly becoming familiar. He hunted and gathered while she tended the fire and the pups. She chatted cheerfully to him during their shared meals, telling him about her life on Earth, her research, her students.

He rarely responded, but she caught him watching her with those intense silver eyes, tracking her movements as she moved around their shared space. She half-expected, half-hoped he would join her at bedtime, but he remained by the fire and he was still there when she finally fell asleep. He was gone when she woke but she'd dreamed that he was holding her and his wild scent still surrounded her.

That day he returned early and began working in a small alcove at the back of their cave. Trouble immediately tried to investigate the odd sounds coming from the alcove, but Ash gently brought him back to her and she did her best to keep the pups out of his way, although she was as curious as they were.

He didn't pause for the mid-day meal, and finally finished his project half way through the afternoon. He stepped out of the alcove and beckoned to her, that intriguing almost smile on his face.

"What have you been up to?" she teased as she joined him, then gasped with pleasure.

He'd created a small opening in the rock, allowing a natural spring to bubble out of the opening and gather in a wide basin beneath it before flowing down to the floor and under the wall.

"Running water? That's marvelous!" She gave him an excited hug and smiled up at

him. “Can I try it out? I’d love a real bath.”

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His eyes blazed silver and she felt the unmistakable evidence of his arousal against her stomach before he quickly stepped back.

“Do you want to join me?” she added, not entirely sure she was teasing, but he was already backing away. She shrugged and turned back to the water, already stripping out of her shirt and, after a brief hesitation, her bra. The alcove was not entirely shielded from the main cave and she was sure he was watching her but the pleasure of the cool, clean water overcame any lingering shyness.

A sudden indignant squeak made her whirl around to find a very wet and unhappy Trouble behind her. She reached for him just as Ash stepped into the alcove and plucked him out of the water. He shook him once and the pup gave a violent shiver. He tucked the pup against his chest but his silver gaze was fixed on her bare breasts. She probably should have covered herself, but instead she arched her back slightly.

His expression shuttered, and for a moment she thought he might retreat, but then he reached out one clawed hand to trace the curve of her breast. The touch was feather-light, but it sent a shiver through her entire body. His eyes blazed at her reaction, and his hand lingered, circling her aching nipple with exquisite care.

She leaned into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed.

He gave her nipple a gentle pinch, the pleasure so intense it made her gasp, then he was gone, the sound of his steps fading as he retreated to the main cave.

Her cheeks flushed and her entire body hummed with need. It was going to be a very long evening.

It was indeed a long night, made even longer by the awareness that the male sitting so silently by the fire was also awake and suffering.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Xenobeast lay motionless, every muscle in his body tense with awareness. Xara had finally fallen asleep, her breathing deep and even, her face peaceful in the dying firelight, and he'd crawled in with her as he did every night. The Graxlin pups nestled around them, small bodies radiating warmth, their bioluminescent markings pulsing in time with their dreams.

He should move. Get up. Hunt. Run. Anything to escape the torment of being so close to her.

But her hand rested against his forearm, five small fingers splayed across his skin like a brand. The contact sent electricity through his veins, awakening sensations he'd thought long dead. Pleasure. Desire. Need.

His sensory tendrils coiled restlessly, yearning to explore the curves of her face, of her body, but he forced them back, maintaining his rigid control.

She shifted in her sleep, murmuring something unintelligible. Her hand slid higher on his arm, her fingers tightening slightly, and the innocent gesture nearly undid him.

His body responded instantly, primal and demanding. Heat surged through him, pooling low in his abdomen. His skin flushed with bioluminescence, silver-blue patterns rippling across his chest and arms.

Take. Claim. Mine.

He closed his eyes, fighting for control, and the smallest pup—the one she'd named

Dot—stirred, squeaking softly as she sensed his distress. The pup crawled over its siblings to nuzzle against his chest, her tiny claws gripping his skin. Her presence was both comforting and accusatory.

These creatures trusted him and depended on him, despite knowing what he was.

No. They didn't really know. Other than that one fight with the predator, they'd seen only what he allowed them to see—glimpses of gentleness, moments of restraint. If they knew the blood on his hands, the destruction he'd wrought...

Xara sighed in her sleep, her lips curving into a slight smile. What did she dream of? Her world? Her life before? Or this strange existence they'd carved out together?

The firelight caught in her dark curls, making them gleam, and her skin glowed warm and soft in the amber light. The urge to touch her overwhelmed him. Before he could stop himself, one tendril extended toward her face, hovering just above her cheek. He felt the heat radiating from her skin, the faint electrical field that surrounded all living things. Just one touch. One taste.

His tendril brushed her cheek, feather-light and her scent flooded his senses. His body hardened further, desire coiling tight in his core as he remembered her body wet and naked by the bath he'd created for her. The markings on his skin flared brighter, pulsing with his accelerated heartbeat.

She stirred again, turning her face toward his touch, and he jerked back, ashamed. Taking advantage of her vulnerability went against everything he'd fought to become. He was not the weapon they'd created. He would not be ruled by instinct alone.

Dot chirped questioningly, her head tilted in confusion at his sudden movement.

"Sleep," he commanded silently, stroking the pup's head with one careful claw.

She yawned, showing her tiny fangs, then curled back against her siblings. Their trust was a gift he hadn't earned, a responsibility he'd never sought.

Just like her.

She'd crashed into his world, bringing chaos and warmth and complications. She'd seen his violence and still smiled at him. Touched him without fear. Laughed in his presence.

The sound of her laughter haunted him—bright and unexpected, like finding water in the desert. Had there ever been laughter in his life? If there had it had been buried beneath years of training and pain.

Her hand shifted again, sliding down to rest against his wrist. Her fingers curled around him, holding on even in sleep as if she needed him.

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The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating.

No one had needed him before—not as anything but a weapon. His creators had wanted his strength, his killing efficiency. They'd never wanted his thoughts, his questions, his refusal to destroy the innocent.

But she looked at him and saw... what? A protector? A companion? Something more?

"I guess you do like me after all," she'd said when she'd discovered his arousal, her eyes wide but unafraid. Not disgusted or frightened, but almost... pleased.

The memory made his skin burn hotter. What would she do if she woke now and found him watching her? If she saw the hunger in his eyes, felt the heat radiating from his skin? Would she still smile? She hadn't pulled away from him in her bath, but she didn't know what he was capable of doing—what he had done.

Carefully, with excruciating control, he began to withdraw his arm from beneath her hand. Her fingers tightened reflexively, a small sound of protest escaping her lips. He froze.

"Stay," she murmured, the word slurred with sleep.

His heart hammered against his ribs. Had she spoken consciously? Or was it just dream-talk, meaningless sounds shaped by unconscious wants?

Either way, he couldn't deny her. Not when every cell in his body yearned to be closer to her.

He settled back, allowing her hand to remain on his wrist. The pups shifted, adjusting to his movement, then settled again with contented chirps.

Dot crawled onto his chest, curling into a ball directly over his heart. Its tiny body rose and fell with his breathing, a strange counterpoint to the turmoil inside him.

Outside, the jungle hummed with night sounds—predators hunting, prey hiding, the endless cycle of survival. He'd been part of that cycle for so long, existing only to persist another day. Fighting not for joy or purpose, but because surrender wasn't in his programming.

Now, watching her sleep, feeling the weight of trust from these small creatures, he wondered if there could be more—more than survival, more than exile, and more than the half-life he'd carved out of pain and solitude.

Her scent wrapped around him, intoxicating and maddening. Beneath it, he detected subtle changes—chemical shifts that had occurred since her arrival. Her body adapting to this world, to its atmosphere, its food.

To him.

The thought sent another surge of heat through him, and his markings flared brighter, casting blue-silver light across her sleeping face. She was changing, becoming part of this place. Part of his territory.

Mine.

He had no framework for this—no training, no programming, no experience to guide him through these unfamiliar waters. His creators had designed him for war, not connection. For killing, not caring. But he'd refused to be only what they made him. He'd chosen differently and paid the price for that choice, but he'd survived.

Perhaps this too was a choice. Not just to protect her, not just to tolerate her presence, but to... what?

Want her? He already did, with an intensity that frightened him.

Trust her? Against all logic, against years of brutal training, he did.

Love her?

He didn't know if he could love, but watching her sleep, feeling the weight of her hand on his skin, he knew one thing with absolute certainty: he would die before he let anything harm her.

The fire crackled, sending shadows dancing across the cave walls. Outside, a predator screamed—a hunting call, distant but clear. The pups stirred, sensing danger even in their sleep and one whimpered softly.

Instinctively, he curved his body around them, shielding them from a threat that couldn't reach them here. His arm brushed against hers, skin to skin, and the contact sent another jolt through him.

She sighed, turning toward him in her sleep. Her face was inches from his now, her breath warm against his cheek. So close. So vulnerable. So trusting.

He could taste her breath—sweet with fruit, rich with life. His sensory tendrils coiled forward again, drawn to her warmth and this time, he didn't pull back. He let one tendril brush her hair, absorbing the texture, the scent. Another traced the curve of her ear, the line of her jaw. Mapping her, memorizing her.

She made a soft sound—not quite a moan, not quite a sigh. Pleasure, not pain. His control slipped another notch, and the markings on his skin pulsed faster, brighter.

Take. Claim. Mine.

He could. She was right here, warm and soft and...

No.

With brutal force, he reined himself in. She deserved better than to wake to his hands on her body, his need pressing against her. She deserved a choice. Consent. Things his creators had never given him.

He would not become like them and take what wasn't freely offered—even if it killed him.

And it might. The ache in his body was physical pain now, desire transmuted to agony by denial. His skin felt too tight, his blood too hot, his control too fragile.

He needed to move, to run until exhaustion dulled the edge of this knife-sharp want, but her hand still held his wrist, and the pups still slept against him, trusting and vulnerable. He couldn't leave them. Wouldn't.

So he lay there, rigid with restraint, watching the firelight play across her face. Memorizing every curve, every shadow, every soft breath.

Dawn was hours away. Hours of exquisite torture, of wanting what he couldn't have, wouldn't take.

The fire popped and hissed, the only sound besides their breathing—hers soft and even, his carefully controlled.

He would endure. He would protect. He would wait, and until then, he would lie beside her, aching and wide awake, caught between the beast he was made to be and

the male he was struggling to become.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Over the next few days Xara's leg improved enough that she could explore more of the cave system without the makeshift crutch. The pups scampered ahead of her, their bioluminescent markings casting playful shadows on the rough stone walls. Their confidence had grown with her recovery, and now they treated the entire cave as their playground.

"Wait up, you little monsters," she called, following them down a narrow passage she hadn't investigated before.

The passage opened into a room unlike she'd seen before. Most of the rooms followed the cave's natural formations, but this room had straight edges and flat surfaces beneath years of dust and debris. The ceiling was partially collapsed, allowing thin beams of red-tinted sunlight to filter through.

"What is this place?" she whispered, running her fingers along what appeared to be a control panel embedded in the wall.

Dot chirped excitedly and scrambled over a pile of rubble. The other two followed, their markings pulsing with excitement.

"Hey, be careful!" she called, picking her way through the debris. "There might be?—"

Her foot caught on something, sending her stumbling forward. She caught herself against the wall, dislodging years of accumulated dust and revealing another metallic surface beneath. She continued clearing the wall, revealing what looked like script—alien characters she couldn't begin to decipher.

Dot squeaked again, uncovering something half-buried in the rubble—a flat, rectangular object about the size of a tablet.

“What did you find, little one?”

She knelt beside the pup, carefully lifting the object. It was cracked across one corner, the surface scratched and dulled with age, but as she turned it over, a faint blue light flickered along its edge.

“It still has power?”

She sat cross-legged on the floor, the tablet balanced on her knees as the pups gathered around, their markings pulsing with curiosity. She ran her fingers along the edges, feeling for any kind of button or interface.

“Come on,” she muttered. “How do I?—”

A section of the screen illuminated, displaying more of the alien script, and she sighed. What good was finding working technology if she couldn’t understand any of it?

She tapped experimentally on different areas of the screen. Most did nothing, but when her finger brushed across a small icon in the corner, the display changed. New symbols appeared, arranged in what looked like a list.

“Files,” she realized. “These must be files or entries of some kind.”

Dot climbed into her lap, her tiny claws clicking against the tablet’s surface as she accidentally stepped on the screen. A new display appeared—this one with what looked like waveforms.

“Careful,” she said, gently moving the pup aside. “You might damage?—”

The tablet emitted a burst of static, then a voice—deep, mechanical, and unintelligible. She nearly dropped the device in surprise.

“It talks!” She stared at the tablet, her heart racing. “It actually works!”

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The voice continued, and amidst the alien syllables, she caught what sounded like a few words in English.

“—subject shows remarkable?—”

Her breath caught. “That was English! How is that possible?”

Except... she’d understood the few words Ash said. Perhaps the alien who’d taken her had provided some type of translation implant.

The words disappeared in a wave of static and she tried to fine-tune the settings further, her hands shaking with excitement. The next file played, and while much of it remained unintelligible, she could make out more words:

“—adaptive capabilities beyond expected parameters?—”

She continued adjusting settings, playing file after file, gleaning fragments of understanding from the sea of alien speech. Most seemed to be research notes or reports, mentioning terms like “adaptation trials” and “combat efficiency.”

Then she found a file that made her blood run cold.

“Project: K-7 final assessment,” the mechanical voice intoned, clearer than any previous recording. “Subject refused to execute target purge despite direct neural override. Primary conditioning failed. Secondary failsafes bypassed. Subject deemed defective and dangerous. Recommendation: immediate termination.”

Her hands trembled as she tapped to the next file.

“Termination order overruled by High Command. Subject to be permanently exiled to quarantine planet XK-13. All communication channels severed. Asset officially decommissioned.”

The tablet slipped from her fingers, clattering to the stone floor. The pups squeaked in alarm, huddling against her legs.

“Oh my god,” she whispered, staring at the device. “They were talking about him.”

Everything clicked into place. The way he moved—precise, lethal, but always controlled. His understanding of her language despite never speaking.

He was engineered—created as a weapon—and when he refused to kill, they’d cast him out and abandoned him on this hellish planet to die alone.

But he hadn’t died. He’d survived and built a life in the ruins of whatever this place had been.

And when she’d crashed here—injured, vulnerable, an easy target—he could have ignored her. He could even have killed her. Instead, he’d chosen to save her and to care for her.

Just as he’d chosen not to kill whoever those “targets” had been. She clutched the tablet to her chest, tears blurring her vision. Dot nuzzled her hand, sensing her distress.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, stroking her head. “I’m just... processing.”

A shadow fell across the chamber entrance, and she looked up to see him standing

there, his silver eyes gleaming in the dim light, his powerful form silhouetted against the passage.

How long had he been watching? Had he heard the recordings? Did he know what she'd discovered?

She rose slowly, still clutching the tablet. The pups chirped, scampering toward him, but he remained motionless, his gaze fixed on her face.

"You were made to be a weapon." She took a step toward him. "But you chose not to be."

His sensory tendrils coiled tighter, a reaction she now recognized as tension or discomfort.

"They exiled you because you wouldn't kill." Another step. "Because you showed mercy."

His massive chest rose and fell with his breathing but he said nothing.

"Just as you chose to save me."

She reached out, her hand hovering inches from his chest. He could step back and retreat into the shadows as he had so many times before.

Instead, he remained still, allowing her to close the distance. Her palm pressed against his chest, feeling the powerful heart beneath the warm skin, the luminescent patterns brightening at the contact.

"Thank you," she whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks. "For choosing me."

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For a long moment, they stood like that—her hand on his chest, his silver eyes locked on hers, the air between them charged with unspoken emotion. Then, slowly, one of his hands rose to cover hers. His touch was gentle, those lethal claws carefully sheathed for the first time.

Dot squeaked, breaking the moment as she tried to climb up his leg, and one of his tendrils immediately responded, lifting her to his shoulder.

Despite everything—the weight of what she’d learned, the emotion thick in the air—she couldn’t help but laugh.

“I think they knew all along,” she said softly. “They chose you too.”

She watched him cradle Dot, this being created for destruction who now treated a tiny life with such care. The contrast made her heart ache.

“You’re more than what they made you,” she said quietly. “You always were.”

The tablet lay forgotten on the floor, its secrets revealed. But as she stood there, her hand still pressed against his chest, she knew the most important truth wasn’t recorded in any file.

It was standing right in front of her, written in every choice he’d made since the day they met.

That afternoon Ash disappeared off to hunt again and Xara decided it was time to make some changes. The cave had clearly been his sanctuary for years, but it bore the

stark efficiency of someone focused solely on survival.

She wanted to make it a home.

She began sorting useful items from debris, creating designated areas for cooking, washing, and storage, building on his original system. The pups tumbled around her feet, determined to help.

She smiled when Dot dragged a twisted piece of metal twice her size toward her pile. Her markings pulsed with pride as she praised her.

“Good job! That’s perfect.”

Trouble squeaked indignantly as he struggled with a bundle of fibrous vines, and she laughed and knelt to help him.

“Those are perfect for the sleeping area,” she said, taking them from his tiny claws. “Thank you.”

She’d decided to create her own sleeping space—not because she didn’t want to share his bed, but because the unfulfilled desire between them was growing harder and harder to ignore. She wanted him to come to her because he was ready, not because she was only an arm’s length away.

Soldier dragged in leaves with silvery undersides that felt surprisingly soft to the touch. Perfect for bedding.

“Where did you find these?” she asked, stroking his head.

The pup chirped and scurried toward a small crevice near the back of the cave. She followed, ducking beneath a low-hanging stalactite to discover a smaller chamber

only a few feet high. Daylight filtered through a narrow opening in the ceiling, illuminating a patch of the silver-leafed plants growing along the wall.

“Well done, Soldier,” she murmured, gathering an armful of the leaves.

By that evening, she had transformed the main chamber. The fire pit was properly ringed with stones, salvaged metal containers lined one wall for storage, and she’d even fashioned a crude broom from stiff reeds to sweep the floor clear of debris.

The pups darted around her legs as she worked, occasionally disappearing to bring back new treasures—shiny pebbles, bits of tech with blinking lights, even a small creature that resembled a cross between a lizard and a butterfly, which promptly escaped when she shrieked in surprise.

Finally, she turned her attention to the sleeping area. His bed was on a low ledge lined with vegetation and covered with moss. She created her own space nearby, building it with soft vines and lining it with the silver leaves, creating something that looked almost inviting.

The pups immediately tested it, tumbling onto the new bedding and rolling around with delighted squeaks.

“I’m glad you approve,” she laughed, watching them play.

She was so focused on her work that she didn’t notice his return until a shadow fell across the cave entrance. She looked up to find him standing there, silver eyes taking in the transformed space. His expression, as always, was difficult to read, but she thought she detected surprise in the slight tilt of his head.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, gesturing to her handiwork. “I thought it could use a woman’s touch.”

He moved into the cave, his gaze sweeping over the organized supplies, the cleaned floor, the improved fire pit. One of his sensory tendrils extended, brushing against a stack of metal containers she'd arranged by size.

He made a low sound in his throat—not quite approval, not quite a question.

“It seemed like the least I could do, since you’ve been keeping me alive,” she explained, watching him inspect her work.

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The pups abandoned her new bed to swarm around his feet, chirping excitedly, and he gathered them into his arms as he continued his survey.

“I also made myself a bed,” she added, pointing to her creation. “So I don’t have to keep invading yours.”

His head snapped toward her, silver eyes narrowing slightly. He looked at her new sleeping space, then back at her, something unreadable flickering across his features.

She turned away to busy herself with the fire, and the rest of the evening passed in comfortable silence as they shared a meal of roasted meat and the strange, sweet tubers he’d brought back from his hunt. The pups ate scraps from their hands, chirping contentedly, occasionally climbing into laps or across shoulders.

When it came time to sleep, she yawned and stretched, her muscles pleasantly tired from the day’s work. She moved toward her new bed, settling onto the soft silver leaves with a satisfied sigh.

“Goodnight, Ash,” she said, curling onto her side.

A low growl rumbled through the cave.

She opened one eye to find him looming over her, silver eyes gleaming in the firelight. Without a word, he bent down and scooped her up, one arm beneath her knees, the other supporting her back.

“Hey!” she protested, though without much conviction.

He carried her the few steps to his bed and deposited her there, his eyes narrowed as if waiting for her to object. The pups, already half-asleep, barely stirred as they adjusted to the change in location.

She sighed, looking up at him with exasperated amusement.

“You could have just said you wanted me to stay.”

For once he didn’t retreat to the first, but settled beside her, his larger body radiating heat in the cool cave air. One of his tendrils brushed against her cheek—the closest thing to an apology she was likely to get.

She didn’t really mind. In fact, as his arm curled around her waist, pulling her against the solid warmth of his chest, she had to admit this was far more comfortable than her makeshift bed would have been.

“Fine,” she murmured, nestling closer. “But I’m keeping the silver leaves. They’re softer than the moss.”

His chest rumbled with what might have been amusement.

The pups rearranged themselves around their bodies. It felt strangely domestic, this little family they’d cobbled together from circumstance and survival and as she drifted towards sleep, she realized something that should have frightened her but didn’t: she was beginning to think of this place as home. Not just a temporary shelter, but somewhere she belonged.

And it wasn’t the cave that made it feel that way—it was him. This silent, fierce creature who had saved her life, who watched over her with those intense silver eyes, who growled when she tried to sleep apart from him.

She placed her hand on his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her palm. His arm tightened around her in response.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered, not sure if he understood the deeper meaning behind her words.

But as his tendrils curled protectively around her, she thought perhaps he did.

Tomorrow she would continue making improvements, perhaps explore more of the cave system, maybe even convince him to tell her more about the Tal’shai village and its mysterious lights. But for now, she was content to lie in his arms, surrounded by the soft chirps of sleeping pups and the gentle rhythm of his breathing.

Her last thought before sleep claimed her was that being abducted by aliens had turned out far better than she could have possibly imagined.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Xenobeast dreamed of her again.

In the dream, she walked through crimson jungle foliage toward him, unafraid. Her dark curls caught the light of the triple moons. Her smile promised things he’d never known he wanted until she crashed into his world.

He woke with a start, disoriented by the heat coursing through his body. The cave was still dark, pre-dawn light barely filtering through the entrance. The pups slept in their usual spots—curled at the foot of the bed, breathing in synchrony.

But something was different.

Xara lay beneath him, her small body trapped under his much larger one. His weight

pressed her into the sleeping platform, one of his arms wrapped possessively around her waist. His body was hard, aching, primed for claiming.

How had this happened? He'd fallen asleep beside her, not on top of her.

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He started to pull away, ashamed of his lack of control, when her eyes fluttered open. Instead of fear or disgust, her lips curved into a sleepy smile.

“Good morning,” she murmured, her voice husky with sleep.

He froze, unsure how to respond. His sensory tendrils curled toward her of their own accord, drawn to her warmth.

She reached up slowly, giving him a chance to pull away, then gently traced the line of his jaw, exploring the contours of his face. When her thumb brushed across his lower lip, a growl rumbled from deep in his chest.

Her eyes widened, but not with fear. “Is this okay?” she whispered.

He couldn’t speak—couldn’t form words to explain the storm raging inside him. How could he tell her that he’d been engineered for violence, not tenderness? That the heat crawling beneath his skin terrified him because he didn’t know how to control it?

But she didn’t wait for an answer. She lifted her head from the bedding and pressed her mouth to his.

The kiss was soft, tentative—a question rather than a demand. Her lips were warm and yielding against his, and for a moment, he remained perfectly still, afraid that any movement might break this fragile connection.

Then instinct took over.

His mouth moved against hers, claiming, tasting. His sensory tendrils wrapped around her arms, her shoulders, her neck—seeking contact, drawing her closer. One of his hands cupped the back of her head, tilting her face to deepen the kiss.

She made a small sound of pleasure that vibrated through him like a shock wave. Her arms wound around his neck, fingers tangling in his tendrils, sending sparks of excitement down his spine.

For one glorious moment, he surrendered to it—the heat, the hunger, the primal need to claim her as his own. His body pressed more insistently against hers, and she arched into him, encouraging.

Then reality crashed back over him like an icy wave.

He broke away abruptly, rolling off her and onto his feet in one fluid movement. His chest heaved with ragged breaths as he stared down at her—lips swollen from his kiss, eyes heavy-lidded with desire, skin flushed with warmth.

She looked beautiful. Desirable. Breakable.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, pushing herself up on her elbows.

He backed away, unable to form words. The beast inside him clawed for release, demanding he return to her and finish what they’d started. His body throbbed with need, but his fear was stronger.

Not fear of her—fear of himself.

He gestured toward the cave entrance, miming the action of hunting. Food. They needed food. It was a flimsy excuse, but it would have to do.

Before she could protest, he fled into the pre-dawn jungle.

The crimson foliage brushed against his skin as he moved with practiced silence through the underbrush. His senses were hyper-alert, cataloging every sound, scent, and movement—but his mind remained fixated on her.

The softness of her lips. The small sounds she made when he kissed her. The way her body fit against his, as if designed for him alone.

He ran faster, pushing his body to its limits, trying to outpace the desire that followed him like a shadow. The jungle blurred around him, familiar territory becoming a red-black smear as he raced toward the river that ran down from the mountains and cut through the eastern sector.

When he reached the water's edge, he didn't hesitate. He dove into the frigid current, letting the shock of cold water steal his breath and numb his overheated skin. He stayed submerged until his lungs burned for air, then surfaced with a gasp.

It didn't help.

Even as the river's chill penetrated his core, the memory of her warmth remained. He floated on his back, staring up at the alien sky as it shifted from deep emerald to the pale jade of dawn.

What was happening to him? He'd survived for years in isolation, content with solitude, needing nothing but the hunt and the kill. Now he couldn't imagine a day without seeing her smile, hearing her voice, watching her interact with the pups.

He closed his eyes, but that only made it worse. His mind immediately conjured images of her—bent over the fire last night, the curve of her hips outlined by firelight as she tended the flames. Wet and naked as she bathed. The way she'd looked up at

him with that teasing smile, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking.

And she probably did. He wasn't built for subtlety or deception. His creators had designed him for one purpose: to be a perfect weapon. Emotions were flaws to be eliminated. Desires were weaknesses to be exploited.

Yet here he was, floating in a river at dawn, trying to cool the fire that had ignited the moment she smiled at him.

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With a frustrated growl, he dove back under the water. This time when he surfaced, he forced himself to focus on the hunt. They needed food. The pups were growing rapidly, their appetites increasing daily. Xara needed protein to maintain her strength.

Xara. Even her name sent a pulse of heat through him.

He snarled and launched himself out of the river, water cascading from his body as he scanned the shoreline for tracks. There—the distinctive three-toed print of a dunar, a herbivore with tender meat that she seemed to enjoy. He set off in pursuit, grateful for the distraction.

The hunt was quick and efficient. He cornered the dunar in a small clearing, dispatched it with a single strike, and hoisted the carcass onto his shoulders. As he made his way back towards the cave, his thoughts inevitably returned to her.

He couldn't keep running. Sooner or later, he would have to face what was happening between them. The way his body responded to her presence. The way his chest tightened when she laughed. The way his instincts screamed to claim her, protect her, keep her.

But what if he lost control? What if the beast they'd engineered into his DNA broke free and hurt her? The thought made him physically ill.

As he approached the cave, he heard the excited squeaks of their pups—no longer frightened orphans but confident little creatures with personalities all their own. They must have sensed his return, because they came tumbling out of the cave entrance, rolling and chirping in greeting.

Trouble reached him first, scrambling up his leg to perch on his shoulder. The others followed, sniffing curiously at the bundle in his hand and the dunar carcass he'd retrieved.

Soldier had something shiny clutched in his tiny mouth. The pup dropped it into his palm with a proud chirp.

A shard of a medical scanner—standard Kaisarian technology, broken but potentially still functional. It must have come from the wreckage of Xara's shuttle.

He pocketed it without comment. Later, when he was alone, he would see if it could be salvaged. Such technology could be useful, especially for monitoring her health.

As if his thoughts had conjured her up, she appeared in the cave entrance, silhouetted against the firelight behind her. Her hair was tousled, her clothes rumpled from sleep. She looked soft, warm, inviting, and his body immediately responded, the cold river bath rendered useless by a single glimpse of her.

"You've been gone a while," she said, her voice carefully neutral. "I was getting worried."

He held up the dunar carcass as explanation, then approached cautiously, unsure of his welcome after his abrupt departure.

She stepped aside to let him pass, and he caught a whiff of her scent—skin still warm from sleep. His sensory tendrils reached for her automatically before he forced them back.

Inside the cave, he busied himself with preparing the meat, skinning and portioning the carcass with methodical precision. It gave him something to focus on besides her presence, though he remained acutely aware of her every movement.

She approached slowly, as if afraid of startling him, but when she reached out and placed her hand on his arm, he didn't pull away. Her touch was light, warm, grounding.

"About this morning..." she began.

He tensed, his sensory tendrils coiling tightly against his skull.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," she continued, her voice gentle.

"But I want you to know that I'm not afraid of you."

He looked at her then, really looked at her. She met his gaze steadily, her hazel eyes clear and unafraid.

She wasn't lying. She wasn't afraid.

She should be.

He turned away, resuming his work on the dunar meat. Behind him, he heard her sigh softly before she turned to the pups.

Domestic. That was the word for this scene. It felt dangerously, temptingly domestic.

As he worked, he stole glances at her—the curve of her neck as she bent over the pups, the gentle way she stroked Dot's head, the smile that lit her face when one of the pups did something particularly endearing.

Heat clawed at his skin every time she smiled. His instincts roared beneath the surface, urging him to claim, to touch, to taste.

But he held back, focusing on the task at hand. He wasn't built for this—for

tenderness, for connection, for whatever was growing between them—but he couldn't deny the truth any longer.

He wanted her. Not just physically, though that hunger was undeniable. He wanted everything—her smile, her laughter, her fearless spirit. He wanted to wake up beside her every morning. He wanted to hunt for her, provide for her, protect her.

He wanted to be worthy of her—and that was the most terrifying realization of all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Xara's leg had almost completely recovered, and she was determined to map more of the ruins surrounding their cave. Ash had reluctantly agreed to let her venture further each day, though his silver eyes followed her movements with wary intensity whenever she prepared to leave.

"We'll be fine," she assured him, as the pups tumbled excitedly around her feet. "Just going to check out that eastern section we haven't explored yet."

He growled softly, his sensory tendrils coiling with what she now recognized as concern.

"I know, I know. Be careful, stay alert, don't touch anything that looks dangerous." She smiled up at him. "We won't go far."

After their kiss that morning—and his abrupt departure afterward—she welcomed the chance to clear her head. Whatever was happening between them felt both inevitable and impossible. A human and an alien bioweapon. She almost laughed at the absurdity.

The three pups scampered ahead of her, although Soldier kept circling back to check on her, chirping insistently whenever she lagged behind.

"I'm coming, bossy," she said, picking her way carefully over fallen stone blocks.

The ruins extended much further than she'd initially realized, and parts of it were far

more ancient than the scorched tech she'd discovered in the cave system. Stone pillars and indications of previous buildings were hidden beneath the blood red vines. She pushed a curtain of vines aside and paused to examine a section of wall covered in unfamiliar script.

"This place must have been important," she murmured to the pups, who were busy digging in the soft earth near her feet. "I wonder what happened here?"

A soft chirp from one of the pups drew her attention. It had uncovered something shiny and was batting at it with curious paws. She knelt to examine the find—a small metal cylinder with a cracked display panel.

"Good job, little one." She pocketed the device. Maybe it would yield more information about this place, about him.

The further they ventured, the more the landscape changed. The jungle thinned, revealing more extensive ruins—collapsed domes and twisted spires. A research station, perhaps? Or a military outpost?

She climbed atop a fallen column for a better view, the pups scrambling up after her. From this vantage point, she could see that the ruins formed a rough circle, with their caves near the western edge. At the center stood what might have once been a control tower, now a crumbled ruin jutting toward the sky.

"That's our next destination," she told the pups, who chirped in agreement.

As they made their way toward the central structure, the hairs on the back of her neck began to rise. The jungle had gone eerily silent. No distant shrieks or calls, no rustling in the underbrush. Even the ever-present hum of insect-like creatures had ceased.

The pups sensed it too. They huddled closer to her legs, their bioluminescent patches

pulsing with anxiety.

“Let’s head back,” she whispered, suddenly aware of how far they’d strayed from the cave.

Too late.

A low, rattling hiss came from behind a collapsed wall. The pups froze, then began to puff up their bodies—a defensive posture she’d seen only once before.

Her blood turned to ice as a massive form emerged from the shadows. It was taller than her by at least two feet, its body a nightmare of chitinous plates and jointed limbs. Glowing green eyes tracked her movements as it advanced, claws clicking against stone.

Unlike the insectoid predator Ash had killed when she first arrived, this creature moved with deliberate intelligence. It tilted its head, studying her with predatory calculation.

She backed away slowly, her hand groping blindly for anything she could use as a weapon. Her fingers closed around a length of metal—part of an old support strut, its end jagged and sharp.

“Stay behind me,” she hissed to the pups, who were now fully inflated, their glow patches flashing in rapid, distressed patterns.

The creature lunged forward with shocking speed, forcing her to stumble backwards. She swung the makeshift weapon, connecting with one of its limbs. The impact jarred her arms, but the creature barely seemed to notice.

It opened its maw, revealing row upon row of needle-like teeth, and emitted a shriek

that sounded like tearing metal. The sound pierced her skull, momentarily disorienting her.

The pups darted forward, tiny but fierce, positioning themselves between her and the predator. They flashed their glow patches in aggressive patterns, emitting high-pitched squeals of challenge.

“No!” she cried, terrified for their safety. “Get back!”

The creature reared up, front limbs raised to strike—and then the world exploded into motion and fury.

A massive form crashed into the predator from above, driving it to the ground with bone-crushing force. Silver skin flashed in the dim light, sensory tendrils whipping through the air like living weapons.

Ash had found them.

She clutched her metal rod, frozen in place as the two bodies collided in a blur of claws, fangs, and raw power. The predator was massive, but Ash moved with lethal precision, each strike calculated for maximum damage.

He ducked under a swipe of razor-sharp claws, then drove his own into the creature's underbelly, ripping through chitinous armor with terrifying ease. The predator shrieked and twisted, managing to catch him across the shoulder with one of its barbed limbs.

He didn't even flinch. He grabbed the offending limb and wrenched it backward until something cracked. Then he was on the creature's back, one hand gripping its head while the other drove repeatedly into a vulnerable spot where its plates didn't quite meet.

The battle was brutal, efficient, and over in seconds. With a final, decisive movement, he snapped the creature's neck, silencing its metal-tearing shriek forever.

Silence fell over the ruins, broken only by his heavy breathing.

When he turned to face her, her breath caught in her throat. He was covered in the predator's viscous blue-black blood, his silver eyes blazing with battle rage. His chest heaved with exertion, muscles coiled tight beneath his gore-splattered skin.

But it was his hands that caught her attention. They trembled slightly as he clenched and unclenched them, as if trying to regain control.

The pups approached him cautiously, chirping in subdued tones. One nudged at his leg, and he looked down, some of the wildness fading from his eyes.

She set down her makeshift weapon and took a tentative step towards him, her hands open and extended. His gaze snapped to her, wary and uncertain.

She moved slowly, deliberately, until she stood directly before him. Up close, she could see a gash across his shoulder where the predator had caught him. Blue blood—his blood—mingled with the creature's darker fluids.

Without hesitation, she placed her hand on his arm, feeling the tension in his muscles, the slight tremor still running through him.

"I'm safe," she said softly, holding his gaze. "So are you."

For a long moment, he didn't move. Then, slowly, his sensory tendrils reached for her, wrapping gently around her waist, her arm, her shoulders. They were warm, pulsing slightly with his heartbeat.

The pups crowded around their feet, chirping with relief. The smallest one began grooming Ash's leg, meticulously cleaning away the predator's blood.

"Thank you," she whispered. "You saved us."

His eyes held hers, and she saw something shift in their silver depths—a softening, a vulnerability he rarely allowed himself to show. One of his hands came up to touch her face, hesitant, as if afraid she might pull away from his blood-stained fingers.

She leaned into his touch instead.

His exhale was almost a sigh, the tension draining from his powerful frame. He

pulled her closer, enfolding her in an embrace that felt like shelter and strength and barely restrained emotion.

She pressed her face against his chest, heedless of the gore. His heartbeat thundered against her ear—faster than a human's, but strong and steady. His sensory tendrils wrapped more securely around her, as if afraid she might disappear.

“I’m okay,” she murmured. “We’re all okay.”

He pulled back just enough to look at her face, his eyes searching hers for confirmation. His hand came up to trace the line of her jaw, his touch feather-light despite the deadly strength she’d just witnessed.

The pups had settled, their glow patches returning to normal patterns. Trouble was investigating the dead predator, poking at it with suspicious chirps.

“We should head back,” she said, glancing at the darkening sky. “That shoulder needs cleaning.”

He nodded, but made no move to release her. Instead, he bent his head until his forehead rested against hers, his eyes closing briefly. The gesture felt intimate, vulnerable—a moment of quiet after the storm of violence.

When he straightened, his expression had regained some of its usual composure, though his eyes remained softer than before. He gestured toward the cave, then bent to scoop up the pups, tucking them securely against his chest.

She retrieved her metal rod, deciding it might make a useful tool back at the cave. As they walked, she found herself studying him—the fluid grace of his movements, the careful way he cradled the pups, the occasional glance he cast her way, as if reassuring himself she was still there.

This wasn't just protective instinct. This wasn't just the mindless violence of a weapon. She'd seen the calculation in his attacks, the precision, the control even in the midst of fury.

He'd made choices. To follow her. To protect her. To risk himself for her and the pups.

The data tablet's words echoed in her mind: 'subject refused to execute target purge... deemed defective.'

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He wasn't defective. He was evolving beyond what they'd made him to be.

And as they walked side by side through the alien jungle, Xara realized something that should have terrified her but instead filled her with a strange, warm certainty: she was evolving too—into someone who could face this strange new world. Into someone who could stand beside this complex, wounded creature who fought so fiercely to protect what he cared about.

Into someone who was starting to care about him just as fiercely.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Xenobeast kept his steps measured and even as they returned to the cave, careful not to betray the searing pain radiating from his side. The predator's barbed claws had caught him deeper than he'd initially realized, tearing through muscle and scraping bone. Each movement sent fresh waves of agony through his torso, but he refused to show weakness.

The Graxlin pups scampered ahead, their bioluminescent patterns pulsing with excitement as they led the way home. Dot stayed close to his ankles, occasionally looking up with what seemed like concern in her oversized eyes.

Xara walked beside him, casting sidelong glances his way. He kept his breathing controlled, his posture rigid. He'd endured worse. Much worse.

The cave entrance appeared ahead, a dark mouth in the rock face now softened by Xara's touches—woven vines framing the opening, smooth stones marking a path.

His cave had never looked like a home before she arrived.

“You’re bleeding,” she said suddenly, stopping in her tracks.

He continued walking, ignoring her observation. The injury was his to bear.

“Hey.” She caught up, moving to block his path. “Stop. Let me see.”

He growled low in his throat, a warning, but she didn’t flinch.

“I saw you favoring your side. That thing got you, didn’t it?”

His sensory tendrils curled defensively, and he stepped around her, entering the cave. The pups chirped in agitation, sensing the tension. Dot pawed at his leg, her markings flashing rapidly.

Inside, he moved to the far wall, where shadows would hide the extent of his injury. He’d clean it himself later, after she slept. He’d always tended his own wounds.

She followed, her expression hardening with determination. “Let me see..”

He bared his teeth slightly, his silver eyes narrowing.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said, crossing her arms. “I know you’re hurt. Let me help you.”

The concept was foreign to him. Help was a weakness. Pain was private. He’d been conditioned to suffer alone, to push through, to never show vulnerability—especially not to a potential mate.

Mate. The word slipped unbidden through his mind, but he pushed it away.

She came closer, her hands raised in a non-threatening gesture. “Please.”

Something in her voice—the genuine concern—made his resolve waver. He remained motionless as she drew closer, his muscles tense with the effort of appearing unaffected.

“At least sit down,” she said softly, but he didn’t move. Sitting would reveal how much the wound hampered him.

She sighed and reached for him, her fingers brushing the edge of his wound where blue blood had mixed with black. The contact sent a jolt through his system—pain mingled with something else, something warmer.

“You’re being stubborn,” she murmured.

His body betrayed him then, a wave of dizziness forcing him to brace one hand against the cave wall. The motion pulled at his torn flesh, and he couldn’t suppress a sharp intake of breath.

Her eyes widened. “It’s worse than I thought.”

The pups gathered around his feet, their chirps taking on a worried tone. Dot began to climb his leg, her tiny claws digging in for purchase, and the pain from that small weight was enough to make his vision blur momentarily.

“Sit,” Xara commanded, her voice leaving no room for argument. “Now.”

His legs buckled before he could decide to obey, and he slid down the wall to the floor. The movement sent fresh agony lancing through his side, and he couldn’t suppress a low, rumbling groan.

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She was beside him instantly, her hands gentle but firm as she began cleansing the area around the wound. “I need to see how bad it is.”

He should stop her, push her away, but the pain was becoming harder to ignore, and his thoughts were growing fuzzy around the edges. The predator’s claws must have carried some toxin—not enough to kill him, but enough to weaken.

She inhaled sharply as she cleared away enough of the predator’s blood to reveal the extent of his injury.

“This needs treating right away.”

He tried to rise, to indicate he would handle it himself, but his muscles refused to cooperate. The cave tilted strangely around him.

“Don’t you dare try to get up,” she warned, her voice tight with worry. “Stay put.”

She moved quickly around the cave, gathering supplies: the moss that grew near the thermal springs, which he’d used on her own wounds when she first arrived; fragments of tech salvaged from the ruins; water from their store.

The pups followed her, chirping anxiously. One returned with a piece of clean fabric clutched in its mouth—a scrap she’d found and kept for bandages.

“Good job, little one,” she murmured, taking it.

He watched through increasingly unfocused eyes as she knelt beside him again,

quickly cleaning away the rest of the blood. Even through his pain-hazed vision, he could see her concern deepen. The gashes were deep, the edges already swelling with an unnatural purple tinge.

“Venom,” she said quietly. “We need to draw it out.”

She pressed a water-soaked cloth against the wound again, cleaning away the rest of the blood to better assess the damage. Each touch sent fresh waves of pain through him, but he remained silent, his jaw clenched tight.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, noticing his tension. “I’m trying to be gentle.”

No one had ever apologized for causing him pain before. The concept was so foreign that for a moment, he forgot the agony in his side.

She worked methodically, applying poultices of crushed moss to the gashes. Dot climbed onto his lap, curling against his stomach and emitting a soft, soothing hum. The other two positioned themselves against his legs, their glow patterns synchronizing into a gentle, pulsing rhythm.

“They’re trying to help,” she said with a small smile. “They can sense your pain.”

The thought was strange—that these tiny creatures would care about his suffering. Stranger still was the female beside him, her brow furrowed in concentration as she bound his wounds with strips of fabric and thin, flexible pieces of salvaged tech to stabilize his ribs.

The cave grew warmer, or perhaps it was him. Sweat beaded on his skin as fever took hold. The venom was spreading, despite her efforts.

“Stay with me,” she urged, her voice seeming to come from far away. “Focus on my

voice.”

He tried, but darkness pulled at the edges of his consciousness. His head fell back against the stone wall as the fever tightened its grip.

“No, no, no,” she murmured, her cool hand pressing against his forehead. “You’re burning up.”

The cave dissolved around him, replaced by sterile white walls and harsh lighting. He was back in the Zarkari medical bay, strapped to an examination table. Faces loomed over him—cold, calculating, assessing his worth as a weapon.

Commander Vask stood at the foot of the table, his slate-gray face impassive as he reviewed the data on a floating screen.

“The subject continues to demonstrate resistance to conditioning,” a technician reported. “Emotional responses persist despite neural recalibration.”

Vask’s expression hardened. “Increase the suppression protocols. If it cannot be controlled, it cannot be deployed.”

Pain lanced through his skull as the machines hummed to life, probing, altering, attempting to strip away anything that wasn’t useful to their purpose.

“You will obey,” Vask said, leaning closer. “Or you will be terminated.”

The scene shifted, melting into the tribunal chamber. He stood before the High Command, still bleeding from the battle where he’d refused to slaughter civilians. His hands were bound with energy restraints that burned into his flesh.

“Subject K-7 has demonstrated critical defects,” Vask announced to the assembled

officials. “It disobeyed direct orders and turned against its handlers.”

“It was programmed for combat efficiency,” another commander argued. “Not mindless slaughter.”

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“It was programmed to obey,” Vask countered. “Its hesitation cost us tactical advantage and resulted in the loss of elite troops.”

He remembered those troops—how they’d laughed as they herded terrified civilians into a building, how they’d prepared to set it ablaze. How he’d torn them apart instead.

“The subject is defective,” Vask continued. “A failed experiment. I recommend exile to the quarantine world. It will not survive long there, and we can salvage what we need from its remains when it falls.”

The tribunal nodded in agreement. No one asked for his defense. No one considered that he might have been right.

“Defective,” they declared. “Broken. Unfit for purpose.”

Vask turned to him, satisfaction gleaming in his cold eyes. “You were meant to be perfect. Instead, you’re nothing but a failed prototype. A beast.”

The scene dissolved again, replaced by the drop ship that had delivered him to this world. They hadn’t even bothered with proper restraints for the journey—they’d simply drugged him to near-death and dumped him like garbage.

“Defective,” the voices echoed. “Broken. Beast.”

“No.”

A different voice cut through the nightmare—warm, firm, familiar.

“You’re not defective. You chose.”

Cool fingers stroked his face, traced the line of his jaw.

“Come back to me,” the voice urged. “You’re burning up.”

Something soft and damp pressed against his forehead. The pups chirped anxiously nearby.

With tremendous effort, he forced his eyes open. The nightmare receded, replaced by the familiar contours of the cave. Xara leaned over him, her face tight with worry as she bathed his face with cool water.

“There you are,” she whispered, relief flooding her expression. “Stay with me, okay?”

He realized he was lying on their bed, no longer propped against the wall. She must have somehow moved him while he was unconscious. The pups were curled against his uninjured side, their tiny bodies vibrating with concerned purrs.

“The fever spiked,” she explained, wringing out the cloth and reapplying it to his brow. “You were thrashing, talking in your sleep.”

He stiffened. What had he revealed?

“I couldn’t understand the words,” she added, as if sensing his concern. “But I could tell they weren’t good memories.”

His sensory tendrils reached for her of their own accord, curling weakly around her

wrist. She didn't pull away.

"The wound is clean now," she said. "I've been changing the poultices and they seem to be drawing out the venom. Your fever should break soon."

He tried to sit up, but she placed a gentle hand on his chest.

"Don't. You need to rest."

Rest was vulnerability. Vulnerability was death. These lessons had been burned into him from creation. And yet...

Her hand remained on his chest, a warm anchor against the fever-chill that racked his body. The pups snuggled closer, their glow patterns a soothing rhythm against his skin.

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised quietly. "I'll be right here."

Something inside him—something that had been rigid and unyielding for as long as he could remember—began to soften. The pain was still there, the fever still burned, but for the first time, he wasn't facing it alone.

His sensory tendrils wrapped more securely around her arm, a silent acknowledgment. A thank you. A surrender to her care.

She smiled, understanding what he couldn't say. "That's it. Just rest."

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As darkness claimed him again, it wasn't the cold void of unconsciousness, but something warmer. Safer. The nightmare voices were silent, replaced by the gentle sounds of Xara humming softly and the pups' soft chirps.

For the first time since he could remember, he allowed himself to be vulnerable in another's presence. To accept comfort. To trust that when he woke, she would still be there, keeping watch.

And she was.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Two days later, Xara woke before dawn. Ash slept beside her, his breathing deep and even, one arm flung protectively across her waist. She touched his forehead, checking for fever, but his skin was cool. His wounds were already healing—faster than any human's would—but she could still see the angry dark lines across his ribs.

She slipped carefully from beneath his arm, smiling as he growled softly in his sleep but didn't wake. The pups were curled together at his side, tiny chests rising and falling in perfect synchronicity.

She'd thought she heard the sound of water a few days ago and she was determined to track it down, hoping for a more abundant source than the small trickle of spring water. With Ash recovering and the pups sleeping soundly, this was the perfect time.

Grabbing a makeshift torch from their supply pile, she lit it from the embers of last night's fire and made her way toward the passage. It was narrow but not cramped, the

walls smooth as if worn by water over millennia. The air grew cooler as she descended, carrying a faint mineral scent that reminded her of limestone caves back on Earth.

The torch cast dancing shadows on the walls, and as she moved deeper, she noticed markings etched into the stone. Not random scratches, but deliberate patterns—glyphs of some kind. She traced her fingers over them, feeling the precise indentations.

These weren't natural formations. Someone—or something—had created them.

The markings became more elaborate as she continued, evolving from simple geometric patterns into complex pictographs. Some depicted what appeared to be tall, slender creatures with elongated limbs and large, compound eyes—unmistakably similar to the sketch Ash had drawn of the Tal'Shai.

“So this was their place once,” she murmured, fascinated.

One panel showed the Tal'Shai gathered around what looked like thermal vents, their hands extended toward the heat. Another depicted them cultivating strange, bulbous plants that seemed to glow. A third showed them communicating with other species—including one that looked suspiciously like the pups.

The history of an entire civilization, written in stone.

Her torch flickered, the flame guttering in a gentle breeze that shouldn't exist this deep underground. Curious, she followed the draft, the tunnel widening as she walked. The sound reached her before the sight did—a soft, rhythmic lapping of water against stone.

The passage opened into a chamber that took her breath away. A natural spring filled

most of the cavern, its surface glassy and still except where a small waterfall trickled down from a crack in the ceiling. Bioluminescent fungi clung to the walls, bathing everything in a soft purple glow that made the torch almost unnecessary.

Steam rose from the water's surface—a hot spring, then. The air was humid and warm, a welcome change from the cool dampness of the tunnel.

She wedged her torch into a crack in the wall and approached the edge of the pool. She dipped her fingers in and sighed at the perfect temperature—hot enough to soothe tired muscles, but not scalding.

When was the last time she'd had a proper bath? The small basin of cool water she used for washing in the main cave was functional but hardly luxurious.

She glanced back toward the tunnel entrance. Ash would likely sleep for hours yet, and the pups rarely stirred before he did.

Decision made, she stripped quickly, laying her clothes on a dry rock ledge. The water welcomed her with silky warmth as she slipped in, enveloping her body in blessed heat. She dunked her head, running her fingers through her curls to work out the tangles, then surfaced with a contented sigh.

The pool was deeper than it looked—deep enough that she had to tread water in the center, though natural stone shelves around the edges provided convenient places to sit. She made her way to one such shelf and leaned back against the smooth rock wall, letting the heat seep into her muscles.

Her thoughts drifted back to Ash—to the way he'd spoken to her during his fever, to the vulnerability he'd shown. To the way his silver eyes tracked her movements, lingering on her curves when he thought she wasn't looking. Each time the heat between them built, he pulled away, as if afraid of his own desires.

She understood his hesitation. He'd been created as a weapon, trained to destroy. The gentleness he showed her and the pups was a rebellion against everything he'd been programmed to be.

But she'd seen beyond the fearsome exterior to the male beneath—the one who chose mercy over murder, who cared for orphaned alien babies, who treated her with a reverence that made her heart ache.

A soft sound from the tunnel entrance snapped her from her reverie.

He stood there, silver eyes gleaming in the dim light, his big body filling the passage. His hungry gaze was fixed on her.

“Hi,” she said softly, making no move to cover herself. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He took a step into the chamber, his movements careful, favoring his injured side. “You didn’t.”

His voice still sent a thrill through her—deep and rough from disuse, but beautiful in its rarity.

“The pups?”

“Sleeping.”

He approached the edge of the pool, his eyes never leaving her. The bioluminescent light played across his features, highlighting the sharp angles of his face, the ripple of muscle beneath iridescent skin.

“The water’s perfect,” she said, holding out her hand to him. “Join me?”

He hesitated, his gaze dropping to her outstretched fingers, then back to her face. Something vulnerable flickered in his expression—uncertainty, perhaps, or fear of his own desire.

“Unless your wounds?—”

“Healing,” he said, cutting her off, but he still didn’t move.

“Please,” she whispered.

That single word seemed to break something in him and he stripped away the leather cloth that encircled his hips. Her breath caught. He was glorious—all corded muscle and sleek power beneath that shimmering skin. And his cock...

She swallowed hard as it sprang free, already fully erect.

It was longer than a human penis, ridged with thick, raised bands that ran its length.

The crown was shaped differently, more like a flat plate than a rounded tip. She had a sudden urge to know what that flat surface would feel like inside her.

He slipped into the water with barely a ripple, his natural grace undiminished even by injury. He kept his distance, watching her warily, as if expecting her to change her mind now that she saw all of him.

“Come here,” she said, her voice gentle but firm.

He moved closer, the water lapping around his broad shoulders. When he reached the ledge where she sat, he hesitated again.

She didn’t wait. She closed the distance between them, sliding her arms around his neck and pressing her body against his. The contact drew a sharp intake of breath from him, his hands coming to rest tentatively on her waist.

“I want this,” she whispered, her fingers tracing the sharp line of his jaw. “I want you.”

His silver eyes darkened, pupils expanding. “Why?”

The genuine confusion in his voice broke her heart. Had no one ever wanted him for himself? Had he only ever been a weapon, a tool?

“Because you’re beautiful,” she said simply. “Strong. Gentle when you want to be. Fierce when you need to be.” She brushed her lips against his. “Because you chose to save me when you could have let me die.”

His hands tightened on her waist, drawing her closer. “I couldn’t let you die.”

“I know,” she whispered against his mouth. “That’s why I want you.”

She kissed him then, a deep, hungry claiming, and he responded instantly, his mouth hot and demanding against hers, his arms wrapping around her to pull her flush against him.

His sensory tendrils curled around her shoulders, her waist, her thighs—touching everywhere at once, sending shivers of pleasure across her skin. She gasped into his mouth as one tendril brushed the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, and he swallowed the sound with a growl of approval.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmured against her lips, “and I will.”

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, her hands framing his face. “Don’t you dare stop.”

Something fierce and possessive flashed in his eyes, and he lifted her effortlessly, setting her on the edge of the pool with her legs dangling in the water. Before she could question the change in position, he moved between her thighs, his hands sliding up to cup her breasts, his claws retracted.

“Beautiful,” he said reverently.

Then his mouth was on her skin—her neck, her collarbone, the curve of her breast. Each touch of his lips sent heat spiraling through her, building a delicious pressure low in her belly. His tendrils continued their exploration, wrapping around her thighs, her waist, even teasing at the sensitive skin behind her ears.

When his mouth closed around her nipple, she arched into him with a cry. His tongue was hot and clever, swirling around the sensitive peak before he moved to lavish the same attention on its twin. His hands meanwhile slid lower, gripping her hips, her thighs, pulling her closer to the edge of the pool.

“Please,” she gasped, not entirely sure what she was begging for, only knowing she needed more.

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He seemed to understand. One hand slipped between her legs, finding her already wet and ready for him. The first touch of his fingers against her core had her moaning, her head falling back as pleasure surged through her.

He worked her with devastating precision, as if he'd memorized every reaction, every gasp and shudder, cataloging what made her writhe beneath his touch. One finger slipped inside her, then two, stretching her deliciously as his thumb circled her clit

“Look at me,” he commanded, his voice a low rumble.

She forced her eyes open, meeting his silver gaze. The intensity there stole her breath—hunger and wonder and something deeper, something that made her heart race for reasons beyond physical pleasure.

“Look,” he repeated, curling his fingers inside her in a way that made her cry out.

She couldn't have looked away if she tried. His eyes held her captive as surely as his hands, the pleasure building with each stroke of his fingers, each circle of his thumb. His tendrils tightened around her thighs, holding her open for him as he increased his pace.

The pressure built and built until she was trembling on the edge, her hands clutching at his shoulders, her breath coming in short, desperate gasps.

“Now,” he ordered, his voice rough with desire, and the word pushed her over the edge.

She shattered with a long wailing cry, waves of pleasure crashing through her as she clung to him. He worked her through it, drawing out her climax until she was limp and trembling in his arms.

When she could breathe again, she reached for him, wanting to return the pleasure he'd given her. Her hand slid down his chest, tracing the ridges of muscle, following the glowing markings that led lower. But as her fingers brushed his ribs, he flinched.

She pulled back, alarmed, and noticed for the first time the fresh streak of blood on his side.

"You're bleeding," she gasped, guilt washing over her. "Your wound reopened."

He glanced down, seeming genuinely surprised. "Not important."

"It is important," she insisted, sliding back into the water. "Let me see."

He tried to turn away, but she caught his arm. "Please. Let me help."

After a moment, he relented, allowing her to examine the injury. The deepest of the claw marks had indeed reopened, though not severely. Still, guilt gnawed at her.

"I'm so sorry," she said, gently trickling water over the wound. "I shouldn't have?—"

"Don't," he cut her off, his hand catching hers. "Don't regret."

She looked up at him, struck by the vulnerability in his expression. "I don't regret being with you," she clarified. "I regret hurting you."

Something softened in his gaze. He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Not hurt."

“Your side?—”

“Will heal,” he said firmly. “Worth it.”

The simple statement warmed her more than the hot spring ever could. She leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. “Let’s get you back to the cave so I can put fresh moss on that wound.”

He nodded reluctantly. As they climbed from the pool and began to dress, he kept watching her, his gaze heated despite the pain he must have been feeling.

“We’ll come back,” she promised, understanding his unspoken desire. “When you’re healed.”

A small smile tugged at his lips—rare and precious. “Yes.”

As they made their way back through the tunnel, she found herself studying the glyphs with new eyes. They told a story of survival, of adaptation, of finding beauty and purpose in a hostile world.

Not so different, she thought, from what she and Ash were building together—day by day, touch by touch, creating something neither of them had dared to hope for.

A home. A family. A future.

CHAPTER TWENTY

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The wound had healed well, leaving only two faint silver lines across his side where the predator's claws had marked him. Ash traced them with one finger, satisfied with her handiwork. The moss poultices she'd applied had drawn out infection and accelerated his natural regeneration.

He flexed experimentally, feeling strength return to his muscles. The weakness had frustrated him, but now energy surged through his body again. Time to put it to use.

Their cave shelter was functional but inadequate. He'd chosen it for strategic reasons—defensible position, hidden entrance, proximity to water—not for comfort. Now, with Xara and the Graxlin pups sharing his space, he saw its shortcomings through new eyes.

The uneven floor where she stumbled in the dark. The narrow sleeping area where they pressed together by necessity rather than choice. The drafts that made the pups huddle for warmth. The lack of privacy for bathing.

Unacceptable.

He moved silently through the tunnels, assessing what could be improved. The cave system had once been part of an outpost—abandoned long before his exile, its technology scavenged or decayed. But structural elements remained, buried beneath soil and vegetation.

In the light of early morning, he began to excavate. His claws made quick work of packed earth, revealing metal plating that had once formed walls. The alloy was scratched but intact, designed to withstand centuries of corrosion. Perfect.

He carried sections back to their main chamber, positioning them against the roughest walls. The metal was cool against his palms as he fitted pieces together, sealing gaps with a resin he'd collected from some of the jungle trees. Each panel locked into place with satisfying precision.

By midday, the cave's transformation had begun. Smooth walls replaced jagged stone. Drafts disappeared. The space felt more contained, more deliberate.

But it wasn't enough.

He returned to the ruins, digging deeper. Beneath collapsed corridors and twisted support beams, he found treasures: intact power conduits, filtration components, thermal regulators. His fingers remembered their configurations despite years of disuse. These weren't weapons—they were tools for survival, for comfort.

For her.

The sleeping area needed attention next. Their current arrangement—a pile of salvaged cushioning materials on stone—was inadequate. She deserved better.

He dismantled an abandoned storage unit, repurposing its frame into a platform raised above the cold floor. Flexible panels from a decommissioned shuttle formed a supportive surface. He covered it with layers of the softest materials he could find—processed fiber from the heart of certain plants, treated hides from his hunts, even the downy undercoating shed by forest creatures during seasonal changes.

The result was large enough not only for the two of them but the pups as well. He ran a hand across the surface, imagining her reaction.

The water system presented a greater challenge. The underground spring they'd discovered was perfect for bathing, but required a journey through side tunnels.

Inconvenient. Potentially dangerous if predators breached their perimeter.

He spent hours tracing the spring's path, calculating pressure and flow. Then, using salvaged piping and a repurposed pump mechanism, he began the painstaking work of redirection. His hands moved with remembered expertise, splicing connections, sealing joints. When he activated the system, water flowed exactly where he'd intended—into a natural depression in the rock he'd modified into a shower area.

He adjusted the final connection, pleased with the results. The thermal spring's natural heat would make the water comfortable. The drainage system would prevent flooding. It was efficient. Practical.

And if he imagined her standing there, water cascading over her curves, that was no one's concern but his own.

He'd just finished installing the last wall panel when his sensory tendrils detected familiar vibrations. She was returning with the pups. He'd sent them to gather fruit while he worked, wanting to surprise her with the changes. Hearing her approach, he straightened, surveying his work with critical eyes.

The metal walls gleamed dully in the filtered light. The new bed dominated one side of the chamber. The shower area waited, ready for use. It wasn't perfect, but it was better. Safer. More worthy of her.

She appeared in the entrance, the three Graxlin pups tumbling around her ankles, their mouths stained with fruit juice. She carried a woven basket filled with their harvest—plump purple berries, star-shaped yellow fruits, and the red spike-fruits the pups favored.

She froze at the threshold, eyes widening as she took in the transformed space. The basket slipped from her fingers, spilling fruit across the now-smooth floor.

“What—” She looked around in amazement, stepping further inside. “How did you?—”

He watched her reaction closely, uncertain. Had he overstepped? Changed too much without consultation? The thought hadn’t occurred to him until this moment.

But then she smiled, that brilliant expression that still caught him off-guard, and something tight in his chest loosened.

“This is amazing,” she breathed, running her fingers along one metal wall. “You did all this today?”

He inclined his head slightly, pleased by her approval.

She explored the space with growing excitement, exclaiming over each discovery. When she reached the bed, her steps slowed. She pressed a hand against the surface, testing its give, then looked back at him with a question in her eyes.

Heat flickered through his body at her expression. He remained where he stood, unwilling to crowd her, to pressure her decision.

“For us?” she asked softly.

He nodded once, definitively.

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away, but not before he caught the smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She continued her exploration, the Graxlin pups scampering ahead to investigate each new feature.

When she reached the shower area, her face lit with delight. “Is this?—”

She reached for the simple activation lever he’d installed, then hesitated, looking to him for permission.

He nodded again.

She pulled the lever, and water flowed from the redirected spring, splashing into the stone basin. Steam rose in delicate curls.

“Oh!” she gasped. “It’s warm!”

Pride swelled in his chest at her reaction. This was why he’d done it—to see that look on her face. To provide for her in ways that mattered.

She turned back to him, her expression soft with wonder. For the first time, he allowed himself to truly look at her—not with the clinical assessment of a protector, but with the hunger of a male.

Her hair had grown since her arrival, the dark curls now brushing her shoulders. The planet's sun had deepened her skin to a rich bronze that glowed in the cave's light. The simple garment she wore, fashioned from salvaged cloth, clung to those curves in ways that made his blood heat.

She was beautiful. And she was his.

As their eyes met across the chamber, something electric passed between them. Her gaze dropped to his bare chest, lingering on the play of muscles beneath his skin as he shifted position. Her lips parted slightly, her breath quickening.

He recognized that look now. Desire. For him.

The realization sent heat pulsing through his body, settling low in his abdomen. His sensory tendrils stirred, reaching toward her instinctively, seeking her scent, her warmth.

She took a step toward him, her eyes never leaving his. The air between them thickened with unspoken want.

And then Dot sneezed violently, startling them both. The pup shook her head, blinking in confusion at her own outburst, then chirped questioningly.

The tension broke. She laughed, the sound bright and unexpected in the cave's confines. Even his lips twitch in response—not quite a smile, but close.

He turned away, returning to his work on the final wall panel, but remained acutely aware of her presence and her eyes on him. Of the heat that still simmered between them, momentarily interrupted but far from extinguished.

As he worked, he heard her moving around the cave, settling the pups, arranging their

gathered fruit. Domesticity. Another concept he'd never considered until her arrival.

"Thank you," she said quietly from behind him.

He turned, finding her closer than he expected. She stood just an arm's length away, her expression earnest.

"For all of this," she continued, gesturing around the cave. "For making it...home."

Home. The word resonated strangely in his chest. He'd had habitats. Shelters. Strategic positions. Never a home.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment, not trusting himself to speak. Words had never been his strength, and now, with her so close, with the scent of her skin teasing his senses, they failed him entirely.

Instead, he reached out slowly, giving her time to retreat, and brushed a tendril against her cheek. The contact sent a shock through his system—pleasure and connection intertwined.

She leaned into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. When they opened again, the heat there nearly undid him.

"I should help you finish," she said, though her tone suggested other activities entirely.

He gave her that almost-smile again and returned to his work, hyperaware of her presence beside him as she picked up a piece of metal plating. They worked in companionable silence, fitting pieces together, their hands occasionally brushing in ways that sent sparks across his skin.

The air remained thick with unspoken want, with possibilities hovering just beyond reach. But for now, this was enough—building something together, creating a space that was theirs. The rest would come in time.

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As the day's light began to fade, casting long shadows through the cave entrance, he watched her arrange their evening meal with the pups clustered eagerly around her feet. She moved with easy confidence through the space he'd created, belonging there in ways he couldn't articulate,,in this place that was, improbably, becoming home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Xara lay awake in their shared bed, watching the dancing shadows cast by the fire's flickering light. The flames had burned low, leaving mostly embers that pulsed like a heartbeat against the cave walls. She'd been trying to sleep for hours, but her body refused to surrender to rest.

Ash breathed deeply beside her—not quite asleep, but settled. His massive form generated heat that radiated across the small space between them. She'd grown to find comfort in that steady rhythm, the rise and fall of his chest as predictable as tides.

Three small lumps of fur were scattered across the bed. Dot ad curled into a tight ball against her stomach. The other two nestled against Ash, one tucked into the crook of his arm, the other sprawled across his chest, rising and falling with each breath.

Their little family. The thought caught her by surprise, but she couldn't deny the truth of it.

She shifted slightly, careful not to disturb Dot. The movement sent a twinge through her leg, a reminder of how close she'd come to death when she first arrived. How he'd saved her.

And kept saving her.

She watched him in the dim light. His features had softened in repose, the harsh angles of his face less severe. The sensory tendrils that framed his face lay mostly still, occasionally twitching as if responding to dreams. His skin seemed to reflect the firelight, the iridescent silver taking on amber undertones that highlighted the faint bioluminescent patterns beneath.

Beautiful. Dangerous. Hers?

The memory of their activities in the underground spring sent heat flooding through her body. The way his mouth had felt against hers, hungry and hesitant all at once. The gentle strength in his hands as he brought her pleasure—a pleasure that hadn't occurred again, even though his wounds had healed.

She swallowed hard. How long could they continue this way? Sleeping side by side, pretending not to notice the current that sparked between them whenever they touched?

She was tired of waiting. Tired of wondering.

Carefully, she shifted Dot to a warm spot on the bed where the pup immediately curled into a tighter ball, purring softly. Then, heart hammering against her ribs, she inched closer to Ash.

The bed was a marvel of his creation—broad and sturdy, lined with soft mosses and salvaged fabrics. She moved across it silently until barely a handspan separated them.

She studied him up close, noting the details she'd grown so familiar with. A thin scar traced the line of his jaw. Another, deeper mark crossed his shoulder. Warrior's marks. Survivor's scars. Each one a story of pain endured.

Her hand hovered above his forearm, hesitating. Was she crossing a boundary? Would he reject her advance?

The memory of his lips against hers gave her courage. She lowered her fingertips to his skin.

He flinched at the contact, muscles tensing beneath her touch. For a heartbeat, she thought he might pull away—but then he went utterly still, as if afraid any movement might shatter whatever was happening between them.

Emboldened, she let her fingers trace the contours of his forearm, feeling the ridges of muscle, the smooth texture of his skin. It was cooler than human skin, but warming rapidly beneath her touch. The bioluminescent patterns beneath pulsed faintly, responding to her caress.

She moved closer still, until her body pressed against his side. The pup on his chest stirred, blinking sleepily before settling back down with a contented chirp.

She continued her exploration, trailing up to his bicep, his shoulder, the strong column of his neck. His pulse jumped beneath her touch, rapid and strong, and she felt an answering flutter in her own chest.

His eyes opened, finding hers in the dim light. They glowed with an inner luminescence, pupils dilated wide. He didn't speak—but she read the question in his gaze.

She answered by pressing her palm against his cheek. His sensory tendrils stirred, brushing against her wrist with feather-light touches that sent shivers down her spine.

"I'm tired of pretending," she whispered, the words barely audible above the crackling embers. "Tired of wanting you and not having you."

He remained motionless beneath her touch, but his breathing had quickened, his chest rising and falling in shallow bursts. One of his hands moved, hesitant, to rest at her waist. The weight of it, the heat, made her skin tingle even through the thin fabric of her sleep shirt.

She leaned closer, her lips a breath away from his. “Tell me to stop,” she murmured, “and I will.”

His response was to tighten his grip on her waist, pulling her fractionally closer. His other hand rose to her face, his claws retracting as he gently traced the curve of her cheek. A tendril brushed her temple, twining into her curls with a touch so intimate it made her gasp.

She closed the final distance between them, pressing her mouth to his. This kiss ignited instantly. His lips parted beneath hers, hungry and demanding. His hand slid from her waist to her back, drawing her against the hard planes of his chest.

The pup squeaked in protest at being disturbed, scampering down to join its siblings at the foot of the bed, but she barely noticed, lost in the sensation of his mouth on hers, his hands mapping the curves of her body through her clothes.

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She shifted, moving to straddle him, her knees bracketing his hips. The position brought them flush against each other, and she felt the unmistakable evidence of his desire pressing against her core. The contact drew a low growl from his throat that vibrated through her entire body.

His hands settled on her thighs, claws carefully retracted as they kneaded the soft flesh. The sensation made her rock against him, seeking friction, seeking more.

She broke the kiss, gasping for air. “I want you,” she breathed against his mouth.

His eyes searched hers, and she saw the conflict there—desire warring with something deeper. Fear? Uncertainty?

She cupped his face between her palms. “You won’t hurt me,” she assured him. “I trust you.”

Something shifted in his expression at her words. His tendrils wrapped more firmly around her, drawing her down until their foreheads touched. The gesture felt reverent, intimate in a way that transcended the physical desire between them.

When he kissed her again, it was with devastating tenderness. His hands moved to the hem of her sleep shirt, questioning. She nodded, lifting her arms as he drew the garment over her head, leaving her bare from the waist up.

The cool cave air pebbled her skin, but she felt no chill—not with the heat of his gaze warming her. He looked at her with such raw hunger that she felt herself flush from head to toe.

“Your turn,” she whispered, tugging at the simple garment he wore.

He complied, sitting up with her still in his lap to remove it. The movement pressed them together, skin to skin, and she couldn’t suppress a moan at the contact. His chest was a marvel of sculpted muscle and smooth skin, interrupted only by the occasional scar. She traced one with her fingertip, feeling him shudder beneath her touch.

“Every mark tells a story,” she murmured, leaning down to press her lips to a particularly vicious scar that crossed his collarbone. “Someday, I want to know them all.”

His hands skimmed up her sides, hesitating just below the curve of her breasts. She arched into his touch, encouraging him. When his thumbs finally brushed across her nipples, she gasped, her head falling back at the jolt of pleasure.

He took advantage of her exposed throat, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses along the sensitive skin. His tendrils wrapped around her waist, her arms, her thighs—holding her, supporting her, caressing her everywhere at once.

She rocked against him, the friction of their bodies stoking the fire building between her legs. She could feel herself growing wet, aching for more than just these teasing touches.

“Please,” she whispered.

In one fluid motion, he flipped their positions, laying her gently on her back among the soft bedding. He hovered above her, silver eyes burning with need as he looked down at her.

She reached for him, pulling him down for another kiss. His weight settled partially on top of her, one muscular thigh pressing between her legs. She ground against it

shamelessly, seeking relief for the ache building there.

His hands wandered lower, tugging at the waistband of her panties. She lifted her hips, helping him remove them so she lay completely bare beneath him.

For a moment, he simply looked at her, his expression one of awe and hunger. Then he lowered his head to her breast, taking a nipple into his mouth. The sensation of his tongue, slightly rougher than a human's, sent sparks of pleasure shooting through her body.

“Yes,” she gasped, arching into his touch. Her hands found his shoulders, his back, feeling the play of muscles beneath his skin as he moved.

He trailed kisses down her stomach, pausing at the scar on her thigh from her first night on the planet. The night he'd saved her. He pressed his lips to it reverently before continuing lower.

When his mouth found the heat between her thighs, she nearly came off the bed. Her hands flew to his head, fingers tangling in his sensory tendrils. They curled around her wrists in response, holding her gently as his tongue explored the sensitive folds.

The dual sensation—his mouth working between her legs, his tendrils wrapped around her wrists and arms—was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Pleasure built rapidly, coiling tighter and tighter until she thought she might shatter from it.

“Wait,” she gasped, tugging at him. “I want—I need?—”

He understood, moving back up her body to claim her mouth once more. She tasted herself on his lips, wild and primal. She fumbled at the strip of leather around his hips, desperate to feel all of him.

Together they removed the last barrier between them. She wrapped her hand around his length, feeling the ridges pulse against her palm. He positioned himself between her thighs, the broad flat head of his cock pressing against her entrance. But he hesitated, searching her face one last time.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

“I want this,” she assured him. “I want you.”

He pushed forward slowly, giving her time to adjust to his size, his shape. The stretch was intense but not painful, her body welcoming him with a slick heat that made them both groan.

When he was fully seated inside her, he stilled, his forehead pressed against hers. His tendrils wrapped around her, cradling her head, her shoulders, her waist—holding her as if she were something precious.

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She rolled her hips experimentally, and his control visibly frayed. His eyes flashed silver, a growl rumbling from deep in his chest.

“Move,” she urged, digging her heels into the small of his back. “Please.”

He did, withdrawing almost completely before driving back in with a controlled thrust that hit something perfect inside her, and she cried out, her nails scoring lines down his back.

He set a rhythm then—deep, measured strokes that had her gasping with each thrust. She met him move for move, her body arching to take him deeper.

The pleasure built relentlessly, her nerve endings singing with each drag of his textured length against her inner walls. His tendrils caressed her everywhere, finding sensitive spots she hadn’t known existed. One wrapped around her throat, not squeezing but simply resting there, the weight of it making her pulse race with aroused vulnerability.

“I’m close,” she warned, feeling the tension coiling tighter at the base of her spine. “So close.”

He shifted slightly, changing the angle of his thrusts to hit that perfect spot inside her with each stroke. One of his hands slid between their bodies, finding the sensitive bud at the apex of her thighs and circling it with gentle pressure.

The dual stimulation pushed her over the edge. She came with a cry that echoed off the cave walls, her body clenching around him in rhythmic pulses. The intensity of it

stole her breath, her vision narrowing to pinpricks of light before expanding again.

He continued to move through her climax, drawing out her pleasure until she was trembling and oversensitive. Only then did his rhythm falter, his thrusts becoming more erratic as he chased his own release.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. “Let go,” she whispered against his ear. “I’ve got you.”

With a final, powerful thrust, he buried himself to the hilt and shuddered against her. She felt the pulse of his release, hot and intense, as his tendrils tightened around her almost to the point of pain before gradually relaxing.

For several moments, they remained locked together, breathing heavily. His weight pressed her into the bedding, but she welcomed it, savoring the closeness.

Eventually, he shifted to the side, taking his weight off her but keeping her tucked against him. His tendrils remained wrapped around her, as if he couldn’t bear to let her go completely.

She traced idle patterns on his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath her palm. The fire had burned even lower, casting the cave in near darkness save for the faint glow of his bioluminescent markings and the silver shine of his eyes.

At the foot of the bed, the pups had formed a tight pile, all three curled together in sleep, undisturbed by the activities of their guardians.

“I’ve wanted that for so long,” she confessed quietly, pressing a kiss to his shoulder. “Wanted you.”

His arms tightened around her in response. One of his tendrils brushed her cheek, a

tender caress that said more than words could.

She yawned, the combination of physical exertion and emotional release finally catching up to her. Sleep tugged at the edges of her consciousness, but she fought it, wanting to savor this moment a little longer.

“Sleep,” he rumbled, the word so unexpected that she shook her head. “Now you talk.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in what might have been a smile. His tendril stroked her cheek again, a silent acknowledgment., and she settled back against his chest, more at peace than she had since arriving on this strange planet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Xenobeast trembled beneath her touch. Every muscle in his body coiled tight, fighting the primal urges that clawed at his mind. Her fingertips traced fire across his forearm, a gentle exploration that felt like lightning against his skin.

He should pull away. Should retreat to the safety of distance. Every time she got close like this, every time she touched him with those soft hands, the beast inside him—the one they’d created in those sterile labs—strained against its chains.

The fire crackled, painting her skin in amber light. The Graxlin pups slept soundly, piled together at the foot of their shared bed, their tiny bodies rising and falling with each breath. In the quiet of the cave, all he could hear was her breathing and the thunder of his own heart.

She shifted closer. The subtle movement released more of her scent—warm, intoxicating, uniquely hers. His sensory tendrils reached for her without conscious command, drawn to her like seekers to a beacon.

He was terrified—not of her, never of her—but of himself. Of what lived inside him. Of losing control and hurting her with hands designed to break and kill.

His body responded to her proximity with a fierce ache that bordered on pain. He started to pull away, to retreat to the cold safety of solitude.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice soft in the darkness. “Don’t go.”

The word froze him in place. Her hand slid up his arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake. His tendrils curled around her wrist, not restraining, but connecting.

“I know you feel it too,” she continued, her voice gaining strength. “This thing between us.”

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He did. Stars help him, he did. It burned in his blood like molten metal, this need for her that went beyond physical desire. It terrified him how much he wanted her—not just her body, but her smile, her laugh, her fierce intelligence. Her kindness.

She leaned closer, and his sensory tendrils brushed against her face, mapping the contours of her cheekbones, the softness of her lips. She shivered but didn't pull away.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said, her eyes reflecting the firelight. "I've never been afraid of you."

She should be. She should run from him, from the monster they made him to be. But instead, she moved closer still, until he could feel the warmth of her breath against his chest.

"Look at me," she commanded softly.

He did. Her eyes held no fear, only a hunger that mirrored his own.

Her hand came up to cup his face, her thumb tracing the edge of his jaw. "I want you," she whispered. "All of you. Even the parts you think are too dangerous to show me."

Something inside him fractured at her words. A wall he'd built long ago, brick by painful brick, began to crumble.

She leaned in, her lips brushing against his in a question. He remained still, afraid to

move, afraid to breathe. Then she pressed forward, deepening the contact into a true kiss.

The beast inside him roared to life.

His arms wrapped around her, pulling her against him with barely restrained strength. His mouth moved against hers, no longer passive but hungry, devouring. His tendrils wrapped around her, seeking skin, warmth, connection.

She made a small sound of surprise that quickly melted into a moan of pleasure. Her hands slid up his chest, over his shoulders, tangling in his tendrils in a way that sent sparks of sensation down his spine.

He growled low in his throat, the sound rumbling between them. She answered by nipping at his lower lip, a small act of defiance that made him want to both laugh and pin her beneath him.

“Yes,” she breathed against his mouth. “That’s it. Don’t hold back.”

But he had to. Even now, with desire clouding his mind and her soft body pressed against his, he maintained a thread of control. His hands trembled as they roamed her back, her sides, learning the curves of her through the thin fabric of her sleeping clothes.

She grew bolder, her hands exploring the ridges of muscle across his chest and abdomen. When her fingers dipped beneath the waistband of his pants, his breath caught.

“Xara,” he rasped, the sound of her name strange on his tongue after so long in silence.

She froze, her eyes widening. “You spoke.”

He nodded once, unable to find more words. It had been years since he’d used his voice for anything but growls and battle cries.

A smile bloomed across her face, radiant and joyful. “Say it again,” she urged. “My name.”

“Xara,” he repeated, the word feeling right in his mouth. Like it belonged there.

She rewarded him with another kiss, this one fierce and claiming. Her hands resumed their exploration, pushing his pants down over his hips. He helped her, kicking the fabric away before turning his attention to her clothes.

He removed them carefully, one piece at a time, revealing her skin to the firelight and his hungry gaze. Each new expanse of flesh made his pulse quicken, his control fray further.

When she was finally bare before him, he paused to simply look at her. She was beautiful—soft curves and warm skin, so different from his own hardened form. She didn’t hide from his gaze but met it boldly, her chin lifted in that stubborn way he’d come to adore.

His tendrils reached for her, stroking along her collarbone, down the valley between her breasts, across the soft plane of her stomach. She shivered, her eyes fluttering closed at the sensation.

“More,” she whispered, reaching for him.

He obeyed, lowering his body over hers carefully, bracing his weight on his forearms. The first touch of her bare skin against his sent a shock through his system. His

tendrils wrapped around her more firmly, securing her against him as if afraid she might vanish.

She arched up, pressing herself more fully against him. The heat of her core against his hardness nearly undid him. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, inhaling deeply, letting her scent fill his lungs and calm the storm inside him.

Her hands roamed his back, tracing the ridges of old scars, the map of his survival on this hostile world. There was no disgust in her touch, only reverence.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” she confessed, her voice a breathless whisper against his ear. “Wanted you.”

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The admission broke something in him—the last barrier holding back the flood. With a growl, he captured her mouth again, kissing her deeply as his hand slid between them, finding the slick heat at the apex of her thighs.

She gasped into his mouth as he touched her, her body arching into his hand. He explored her carefully, learning what made her breath catch, what made her moan. Each sound she made was a victory, a treasure.

His tendrils wrapped more securely around her thighs, holding her open for his exploration. She didn't fight the restraint but surrendered to it, her trust in him a gift he'd never expected to receive.

“Please,” she begged, her hips rocking against his hand. “I need you. Now.”

He positioned himself at her entrance, pausing to meet her gaze one last time. The beast inside him clawed for release, demanded he take, claim, possess. But the man he was becoming—the one she saw beneath the monster—needed to be sure.

“Yes,” she answered his unspoken question, her hands coming up to frame his face. “I’m sure. I want this. I want you.”

He pushed forward slowly, watching her face for any sign of pain or fear. Her eyes widened, her mouth forming a perfect ‘O’ of surprise as he filled her. He stilled once fully seated, giving her time to adjust to his size, fighting the urge to move, to claim.

Her hands slid to his shoulders, fingers digging into muscle. “Move,” she commanded softly. “Please.”

He obeyed, withdrawing almost completely before driving back in with a controlled thrust that made her gasp. He set a measured pace, each stroke deep and deliberate, watching her face for signs of discomfort.

Instead, he saw only pleasure. Her eyes were half-lidded, her lips parted, small sounds of approval escaping with each thrust. Her legs wrapped around his waist, urging him deeper.

His tendrils caressed every inch of her they could reach—her throat, her breasts, the sensitive skin behind her knees. She writhed beneath him, overwhelmed by the multiple points of contact.

“More,” she demanded, her nails scoring lines down his back. “Harder.”

The beast inside him surged at her words. His pace increased, his thrusts becoming more powerful. The careful control he’d maintained began to slip.

“Yes,” she encouraged, meeting each thrust with an arch of her hips. “Like that. Don’t hold back.”

But he had to. Even lost in pleasure, even with her urging him on, he couldn’t forget what he was—what they’d made him to be. He maintained that last thread of restraint, afraid of the consequences if he let go completely.

She sensed his hesitation. Her hands came up to frame his face again, forcing him to look at her. “I trust you,” she said, her voice steady despite the pleasure coursing through her body. “I’m not fragile. I won’t break.”

Her words shattered the final barrier. With a growl that was almost a roar, he gave in to the primal need that had been building since the moment he first saw her. His thrusts became harder, deeper, his tendrils tightening around her limbs, securing her

beneath him as he claimed her.

She cried out, but it wasn't in pain—it was in ecstasy. Her body tightened around him, inner walls clenching as she found her release. The sight of her coming undone beneath him, because of him, pushed him over the edge.

His climax hit him like a supernova, whiting out his vision and sending shockwaves of pleasure through every nerve ending. His tendrils tightened around her reflexively, holding her close as he spilled himself deep inside her.

For several heartbeats, neither moved. He remained braced above her, afraid to collapse his full weight onto her smaller frame. His tendrils slowly loosened their grip, sliding over her skin in soothing caresses.

She looked up at him, her face flushed, her eyes bright with satisfaction and something deeper. Something that made his chest ache in a way that had nothing to do with physical exertion.

“See?” she murmured, a smile curving her lips. “I’m still in one piece.”

He let out a sound that might have been a laugh—rusty and unpracticed, but genuine. Carefully, he shifted to the side, bringing her with him so she was tucked against his chest, their legs still tangled together.

His tendrils continued to stroke her skin, unable to stop touching her now that he'd started. She sighed contentedly, nestling closer.

“I knew you wouldn't hurt me,” she whispered against his chest.

He tightened his arms around her, overwhelmed by the trust she placed in him. No one had ever looked at him and seen anything but a weapon, a tool to be used and

discarded. No one until her.

“Xara,” he said again, just to feel her name on his tongue.

She lifted her head, looking up at him with soft eyes. “You have a beautiful voice,” she told him. “Will you tell me your name someday?”

He tensed slightly. His name had been taken from him so long ago, stripped away along with his identity, his purpose. But perhaps it was time to reclaim it—to become more than the monster they’d tried to make him.

“Ash,” he said after a moment, the syllables strange and familiar all at once. “My name was Ash.”

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Her smile was like sunrise after endless night. “Ash,” she repeated, testing the sound. “It suits you.”

She settled back against his chest, her breathing growing slower and deeper as sleep began to claim her. The Graxlin pups remained undisturbed at the foot of the bed, their tiny bodies glowing softly in the darkness.

Ash held her close, marveling at the peace that had settled over him. The beast inside him was quiet, sated by their joining, calmed by her presence. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he felt whole.

As she drifted off to sleep in his arms, he allowed himself to imagine a future—one where he was more than a weapon, more than a monster. One where he had a name, a mate, a family.

One where he was finally, truly free.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Xara woke to the gentle chirping of the Graxlin pups and Ash’s absence from their bed. She stretched languidly, her body pleasantly sore from the previous night’s activities. The memory brought heat to her cheeks and a smile to her lips. She’d never imagined finding something so profound on this alien world—not just survival, but connection. Love.

Dot tumbled over to her, her tiny bioluminescent patches glowing a contented blue-green. She climbed onto her stomach and chirped demandingly.

“Hungry, are you?” She gently stroked her feathery tendrils. “Well, I suppose we’d better find some breakfast for all of you.”

The other two pups perked up at the mention of food. Trouble burrowed deeper into the nest of blankets with a disgruntled squeak, while Soldier bounced excitedly at the edge of the bed.

Xara dressed quickly in the clothes Ash had salvaged from the wreckage and modified for her. She’d grown accustomed to the alien fabrics, lighter and more durable than anything she’d worn on Earth.

“Come on, little ones. Let’s see what we can find.”

She scooped up Dot, who immediately nestled into the crook of her arm, while Soldier and Trouble followed at her heels as she made her way through the cave system that had become home.

The morning air was crisp as she stepped outside, the crimson foliage no longer sinister but beautiful in its alienness. She knew which plants were safe now, which fruits the pups preferred, which areas to avoid. The knowledge gave her confidence as she moved through the jungle’s edge, gathering the sweet, pulpy orbs that grew in clusters along the lower branches.

Soldier darted ahead, her tiny claws digging into the soft earth as she sniffed out fallen fruit. Trouble stayed closer, occasionally butting his head against Xara’s ankle when she stopped too long in one place.

“Patience,” she told him, but couldn’t help smiling at his grumpy chirp in response.

The basket she’d woven from flexible vines was half-full when she spotted something glinting in the undergrowth about twenty yards away. She paused, squinting against

the dappled sunlight.

“What’s that?” she murmured, more to herself than the pups.

Curiosity drew her forward. As she approached, she realized it wasn’t part of the natural landscape. The object was metal, its surface unnaturally smooth and reflective among the organic textures of the jungle. About the size of her palm, it had a sleek, almost aerodynamic shape, with what looked like tiny sensors embedded along one edge.

Xara frowned, setting her basket down. The device looked... wrong. Not weathered or damaged like the technology scraps they’d found in the ruins. This was pristine. New.

“It hasn’t been here long,” she whispered, a chill running down her spine despite the morning warmth.

The pups sensed her unease. Dot squirmed in her arm while Soldier retreated to hide behind her legs. Trouble let out a low, warning chirp, his bioluminescent patches shifting to an anxious amber.

Xara hesitated, then carefully picked up the device, turning it over in her hand. There were no obvious buttons or interfaces, just the smooth metal surface and those tiny, ominous sensors. It was lightweight but solid, clearly designed for some purpose she couldn’t determine.

“We should show this to Ash,” she decided, tucking it into her pocket.

She gathered up her basket and the pups, suddenly eager to return to the safety of their cave. The jungle no longer felt welcoming but watchful, its shadows deeper, its sounds more threatening. She found herself hurrying, eyes scanning the trees for any sign of movement that didn’t belong.

Ash was just returning from his morning hunt when she reached the cave entrance, a large predator bird slung over one shoulder. His silver eyes brightened at the sight of her, but quickly narrowed when he caught her expression.

“I found something,” she said without preamble, setting down her basket and reaching into her pocket.

She held out the metal device. Ash went utterly still, the carcass slipping from his shoulder to the ground with a dull thud. The pups scattered at the sudden movement, chirping in alarm.

His reaction sent a jolt of fear through her. “What is it?”

He took the device from her hand, his movements careful, controlled. Too controlled. His silver eyes had gone cold, his posture rigid as he examined it, turning it over just as she had done.

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“Ash?” she prompted when he remained silent.

He looked up, and the expression on his face made her blood run cold. It wasn’t just anger or concern—it was a focused, lethal intensity she hadn’t seen since the day he’d saved her from the predator.

“Inside,” he ordered, his voice rough from disuse despite their night together. “Now.”

She didn’t argue, gathering the pups and hurrying into the cave. Ash followed, his movements swift and purposeful. He placed the device on a flat stone and began moving around their living space with deadly efficiency, pulling weapons from hidden caches she hadn’t even known existed.

“What’s happening?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. “What is that thing?”

“Tracker,” he said tersely, strapping a wicked-looking blade to his thigh. “Zarkari design.”

The name sent a chill through her. Zarkari—his creators. The ones who had engineered him as a weapon, then exiled him when he refused to slaughter innocents.

“They’re here? On the planet?” Her voice rose despite her efforts to stay calm.

Ash nodded once, pulling what looked like a modified pulse rifle from beneath a loose stone in the wall. He checked its power cell, his movements precise and practiced.

“Why? After all this time?—”

“Doesn’t matter,” he cut her off. “Stay in the cave. Deep in the back chamber. Take the pups.”

The pups were already distressed, their bioluminescent patches flickering between anxious amber and frightened red. Dot huddled against her ankle while Soldier and Trouble paced in tight circles, chirping agitatedly.

“I’m not hiding while you face them alone,” she argued, even as fear knotted her stomach.

His silver eyes flashed. “You will.”

“Ash—”

“They are hunters,” he growled, moving closer until he loomed over her. “Killers. And they will not hesitate.”

She swallowed hard but stood her ground. “All the more reason you shouldn’t face them alone.”

For a moment, something like pain flashed across his features. He reached out, one clawed hand cupping her cheek with impossible gentleness.

“I can’t fight if I’m worried about you,” he said, his voice softer now. “Please, Xara.”

The plea in his voice undid her. She nodded reluctantly, gathering the pups closer to her legs.

“How many?” she asked.

“Don’t know yet.” He turned back to his weapons, selecting several small, disc-shaped objects that she guessed were explosives or traps. “Tracker is recent. Scout team, maybe.”

“And they’re looking for you?”

He paused, considering. “Maybe. Or something else.”

The way he looked at her sent another chill down her spine. What if they weren’t here for Ash at all? What if they somehow knew about her—a human, far from Earth, with knowledge of alien biology?

“I’ll check the perimeter,” he said, moving toward the cave entrance. “Set defenses. Stay here.”

“Be careful,” she called after him, hating how inadequate the words felt.

He glanced back, his silver eyes softening for just a moment. Then he was gone, a shadow melting into the jungle.

Xara sank down onto their bed, the pups immediately climbing into her lap. Her mind raced with questions and fears. How had the Zarkari found this planet? What did they want? And most terrifying of all—what would happen if they caught Ash?

The memory of the data tablet’s fragments flashed through her mind: ‘Project: K-7... subject refused to execute target purge... deemed defective... exiled to planet.’ They had created him to be a weapon, then discarded him when he showed mercy. What would they do if they found him again?

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She shuddered, pulling the pups closer. They sensed her distress, their tiny bodies vibrating with answering anxiety. Dot nuzzled against her hand, his oversized eyes looking up at her trustingly.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered, not sure if she was reassuring them or herself. “Ash knows this planet better than anyone. He’ll protect us.”

But as the minutes stretched into an hour with no sign of him, her worry grew. The pups became increasingly agitated, their chirps more insistent. Even Trouble, usually so independent, refused to leave her side.

Finally, she couldn’t stand it anymore. She needed to know what was happening. Gathering the pups, she moved deeper into the cave system as Ash had instructed, finding the small chamber they sometimes used for storage. She settled the pups in a secure corner.

“Stay here,” she told them firmly. “I’ll be back soon.”

They chirped in protest, but she was already moving, retracing her steps through the winding passages. As she neared the main chamber, she heard movement—the heavy tread of Ash’s footsteps.

Relief flooded her, but it was short-lived. When she emerged into the main chamber, she found him gathering more weapons, his movements sharp with tension. Blood—not his own—spattered his chest and arms.

“What happened?” she gasped.

He whirled, eyes narrowing when he saw her. “Told you to stay hidden.”

“I was worried,” she said, moving closer. “Is that blood? Are you hurt?”

“Not mine.” His voice was clipped. “Found two scouts. Dead now.”

The casual way he said it should have horrified her, but all she felt was relief that he was unharmed.

“How many more?” she asked.

“Don’t know.” He strapped another blade to his forearm. “At least a squad. Maybe more.”

“A squad? How many is that?”

“Eight to twelve. Elite hunters.” His silver eyes locked with hers. “Trained to track and kill.”

The fear she’d been trying to suppress surged back. “What do they want?”

Ash’s expression darkened. “Found shuttle wreckage. Your scent.”

Understanding dawned, cold and terrible. “They’re looking for me? But why?”

“Human. Far from Earth. Valuable.” His tendrils writhed with agitation. “Resource to be exploited.”

The clinical assessment chilled her more than any emotional outburst could have. This wasn’t just about Ash’s past—it was about her future. The Zarkari wanted her as a specimen, a curiosity, maybe even a bargaining chip with Earth.

“What do we do?” she asked, forcing herself to focus past the fear.

“Fight,” he said simply, then hesitated. “Or you could surrender.”

“What?” she stared at him, incredulous.

“They want you alive.” His voice was flat, emotionless. “Might not hurt you.”

She understood then what he was offering—a chance for her safety, even if it meant their separation. The selflessness of it struck her to the core.

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m not leaving you. And I’m definitely not surrendering to people who would experiment on me or use me as leverage.”

Something like relief flickered in his silver eyes, quickly masked. “Then we fight.”

“Together,” she insisted.

He started to argue, then stopped, looking at her with a mixture of frustration and pride. Finally, he nodded once, reaching into his cache to pull out a smaller blade.

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“Take this,” he said, offering it to her hilt-first. “Last resort.”

She accepted it, the weight unfamiliar but reassuring in her hand. “I know how to use it if I have to.”

He nodded again, then returned to gathering supplies. “Need to move deeper. More defensible.”

“The pups are already in the back chamber,” she told him. “I’ll get our food and water.”

As she moved to gather their supplies, the cave suddenly echoed with a high-pitched, frantic chirping. The pups’ distress call.

Ash’s head snapped up, his tendrils flaring. Without a word, he bolted toward the sound, Xara right behind him.

They found the pups huddled together in the storage chamber, their patches flashing urgent red. Dot squealed when he saw them, pointing one tiny paw toward the far wall.

Xara frowned, not understanding until she saw the almost imperceptible seam in the rock—a hidden passage she’d never noticed before. And from beyond it came the faint sound of movement.

Ash pushed her behind him, weapons ready. “Take pups. Hide,” he hissed.

But it was too late. The wall panel slid open with a soft hiss, revealing a dark tunnel beyond—and the gleam of advanced armor as the first Zarkari soldier stepped through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The device felt wrong in his hands. Too sleek, too pristine—a gleaming intrusion in his world of salvage and survival. The Xenobeast turned it over, examining the polished metal surface with growing dread. Recognition crawled up his spine like ice.

He knew this design. The subtle hexagonal pattern etched into the casing, the matte black sensor array, the distinctive blue-tinted power cells. This was Zarkari military tech—high command issue. Not standard military. Not even special forces.

This was a command beacon. His claws traced the barely visible insignia stamped into the underside, and something ancient and violent stirred in his chest.

Vask D'ravak.

The name burned through his mind like acid. Commander Vask D'ravak—the Zarkari who had presided over his tribunal, who had pronounced him defective, who had ordered his exile to this death world. The one who had stripped him of his designation and branded him a failed experiment.

The beacon wasn't just a warning. It was a signature. A taunt.

He crushed it in his hand, metal crumpling under the force of his grip. Shards bit into his palm, drawing rivulets of dark blood that dripped to the cave floor. He barely felt it.

“What is it?” Xara asked, her voice pulling him back from the red haze of memory.

He turned to her, forcing his face to remain impassive despite the storm raging inside him. “Danger,” he said simply. “Hide. Deep cave.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t argue. She gathered the pups quickly, murmuring reassurances as they chirped anxiously, sensing his distress. She hesitated at the entrance to the deeper chambers, looking back at him.

“Be careful,” she said.

He nodded once, then turned away, already mentally cataloging weapons, escape routes, defensive positions. He couldn’t afford distraction. Couldn’t afford the weakness that came with wanting to touch her, to breathe in her scent one more time.

When she was gone, he moved with cold efficiency. First, he retrieved the cache of weapons he’d been maintaining since his exile—plasma blades, serrated hunting knives, projectile launchers cobbled together from salvaged tech. He strapped them to his body, the familiar weight both comforting and grim.

Why was Vask here? After all these years? The Xenobeast had been declared dead, erased from the records. A failed prototype. Unless...

Understanding hit him like a physical blow. Not him. Her.

Xara was human—a species rare in this sector. Valuable. And now she was on his world, in his territory. The Zarkari must have tracked her shuttle, followed its trajectory to this planet. They weren’t here for a rogue weapon they thought long dead. They were here for her.

The thought made his blood boil. He would not let them take her. Would not let Vask’s cold, calculating hands anywhere near her.

Moving swiftly, he exited the cave complex and scaled the nearest cliff face, claws digging into rock as he pulled himself up with inhuman strength. From this vantage point, he could see farther across the jungle. The beacon had been placed deliberately—a warning, a challenge. Vask was coming, but he wasn't here yet.

Good. Time to prepare.

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The Xenobeast descended and began a methodical circuit of the perimeter. He knew every inch of this territory—every cave entrance, every natural chokepoint, every deadly plant and predator. This had been his prison, but he had made it his domain.

First, he checked the northern approach—the most likely landing zone for a drop ship. He activated ancient traps buried beneath the forest floor, rigging them with new triggers. Pressure plates that would unleash clouds of toxic spores. Tripwires connected to spring-loaded spikes harvested from the jungle's deadliest predators.

At the eastern ravine, he loosened key support stones in the natural bridge. One well-placed shot would send the entire structure crashing down, taking any pursuers with it.

To the west, he cleared firing lines through the dense foliage, creating invisible kill zones where he could pick off intruders one by one.

All the while, he kept his distance from the cave. From her. He couldn't risk leading them back to her. Couldn't risk the distraction of her scent, her touch, the way she made him feel like more than the weapon they had created.

As darkness fell, he retrieved a buried cache of equipment—tech he had salvaged from his own drop pod years ago. Most of it was damaged beyond repair, but a few pieces still functioned. He found what he was looking for: a neural disruptor. It wouldn't kill a Zarkari soldier, but it would temporarily scramble their implants, rendering them vulnerable.

He worked through the night, his enhanced vision allowing him to see as clearly as in

daylight. By dawn, he had transformed the jungle into a killing field. Every approach to the cave system was trapped, every path rigged to funnel intruders exactly where he wanted them.

Still, a cold certainty settled in his gut. It wouldn't be enough. Not against Vask's elite forces. Not against the man who had helped create him, who knew his weaknesses, his design limitations.

The thought burned like poison. He had been built to serve, to kill on command. When he had refused to execute innocents, they had deemed him defective. A failure. They had thrown him away like a broken tool, expecting him to die on this hostile world.

Instead, he had survived. Adapted. Found something worth protecting.

Now Vask had returned to take that away too.

As the first light of dawn broke over the horizon, the Xenobeast caught movement at the edge of his vision—a flash of metal in the trees. He froze, every sense alert. There, half-hidden in the shadows: a scout drone, its optical sensors sweeping the forest floor.

He remained perfectly still, letting the drone pass overhead. They were searching, not attacking. Not yet. They didn't know exactly where to find her.

But they would. Soon.

He followed the drone at a distance, tracking its search pattern. It was methodical, thorough—typical Zarkari efficiency. When it paused to scan a clearing, he struck. One leap carried him onto its housing, claws digging into the metal shell. He ripped out its transmitter before it could send an alert, then crushed its processor core.

One down. There would be more.

He returned to the cave as the sun climbed higher, slipping inside through a hidden entrance. He needed to check the interior defenses, to make sure Xara and the pups were secure.

He found her in the main chamber, the pups clustered around her feet as she sorted through supplies. She looked up when he entered, relief washing over her face.

“You’re back,” she said, moving toward him.

He held up a hand, stopping her. “Stay back.”

Hurt flashed in her eyes, quickly replaced by understanding. “You don’t want to lead them to us.”

He nodded, impressed by her perception. “Scout drones. Searching.”

“For me?” she asked, her voice steady despite the fear he could smell on her.

“Yes.”

“Why? I’m nobody important.”

“Human. Rare. Valuable.” He hesitated, then added, “Mine.”

Her eyes softened at that last word, and he felt a dangerous warmth spread through his chest. He couldn’t afford that now. Couldn’t afford the distraction of wanting to touch her, to hold her, to lose himself in her warmth.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“Zarkari. High Command.” He struggled to find the words, to explain. “My... creators.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. “The ones who exiled you.”

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He nodded once, then turned away, moving to check the cave's secondary exits. He needed to make sure each was properly secured, properly trapped.

"The commander," he said after a long silence. "Vask D'ravak. He ordered my exile."

"And now he's here," she said, following his logic. "For me?"

"Yes." He paused, then forced himself to say what needed to be said. "Should leave you. Draw them away."

"No." Her response was immediate, fierce. "We stay together."

He turned to look at her, this small, fragile human who showed more courage than warriors twice her size. "Dangerous."

"I don't care." She stepped closer, defying his earlier command to keep her distance. "This is our home. We defend it together."

Our home. The words settled in his chest like a physical weight. He had never had a home before—only territory to defend, survival to secure. But she was right. This was their home now. Theirs to protect.

"Together," he agreed, the word feeling strange on his tongue.

She smiled, that fierce, determined smile that had first caught his attention. Then she grew serious again. "Tell me what to do. How to help."

He hesitated, torn between the need to keep her safe and the tactical advantage of having her assistance. Finally, practicality won out.

“Interior defenses,” he said. “Show you.”

For the next hour, he guided her through the cave system, showing her hidden passages, emergency exits, and defensive positions. She absorbed everything with remarkable speed, asking intelligent questions that sometimes surprised even him.

When they reached the deepest part of the cave, he showed her a narrow crevice hidden behind a fall of rock. “Last resort,” he explained. “Leads to underground river. Escape route.”

She nodded, memorizing its location. “And the pups?”

“Take them. If I fall.”

Pain flashed across her face at the thought, but she nodded again. “I will. But you won’t fall.”

Her confidence in him was both warming and terrifying. He was built for war, for killing—not for victory against impossible odds. Not for protecting those he... cared for.

As they made their way back to the main chamber, he caught a faint electronic signature—another drone, closer this time. Too close.

“Stay here,” he ordered, already moving toward the entrance.

“Be careful,” she called after him.

He paused at the threshold, looking back at her one last time. The urge to return to her, to hold her close, was almost overwhelming. Instead, he nodded once and slipped out into the jungle.

The drone was hovering just beyond the tree line, its sensors sweeping methodically across the terrain. It had found something—perhaps a trace of their scent, or a heat signature from the cave.

He circled behind it, moving with preternatural silence despite his size. When he was directly beneath it, he struck—leaping upward and catching it in mid-air. He crushed it in his hands before it could transmit, the metal crumpling like paper.

But the damage was done. They were getting closer. Narrowing their search grid.

Time was running out.

He returned to the cave entrance but didn't go inside. Instead, he scaled the cliff face above it, finding a hidden ledge with a clear view of the surrounding jungle. From here, he could see the first signs of the approaching force—subtle disturbances in the foliage, the unnatural stillness of wildlife.

They were coming. And at their head would be Vask D'ravak—the man who had created him, then tried to destroy him when he proved to be more than a mindless weapon.

The Xenobeast settled into position, weapons ready. Let them come. He had been built for war. Engineered for killing. They had made him a perfect weapon, then discarded him when he refused to be merely a tool.

Now they would face what they had created. And he would show no mercy.

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For Xara. For the pups. For the home they had built together.

For himself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Xara paced the length of the cave, pausing occasionally to peer through the narrow opening at the darkening sky. The air had grown heavy and charged, making her skin prickle with unease. The Xenobeast had been gone for hours, scouting the perimeter after destroying the drone.

The first fat raindrops struck the ground outside with audible thuds. Within minutes, the gentle patter transformed into a deafening roar as water cascaded down the mountainside. Lightning split the sky, illuminating the cave in stark white flashes.

One of the pups—the smallest one she'd nicknamed Wisp—scurried to her feet, trembling. She scooped him up, cradling him against her chest.

“It’s okay, little one,” she murmured. “Just a storm.”

But this was no ordinary storm. The wind howled like a living thing, a predator stalking the night. It found every crack and crevice in their shelter, whistling through the stone with eerie, mournful notes.

Another flash of lightning, and the remaining pups squealed in distress, their bioluminescent patches flaring bright with fear. They huddled together, eyes wide, tiny bodies vibrating with tension.

“He’ll be back soon,” she promised them, though uncertainty gnawed at her. What if something had happened to him? What if Vask had found him first?

She shook her head, refusing to entertain the thought. He was too clever, too strong to be caught unaware. Even in a storm like this.

As if summoned by her thoughts, a massive silhouette appeared at the cave entrance. The Xenobeast stepped inside, water streaming from his powerful form in rivulets. His silver skin gleamed in the dim light, and his sensory tendrils were pulled tight against his skull—a sign of discomfort she’d learned to recognize.

Relief flooded through her. “You’re back.”

He nodded once, shaking water from his body like a great cat. His eyes found hers, glowing softly in the darkness.

“Storm,” he said simply.

“I noticed.” She smiled, but it faded as another violent gust sent a spray of rain deep into the cave, soaking her. She gasped at the sudden chill, her thin clothing offering little protection.

The pups squeaked in protest as water dripped onto them from her hair. Wisp burrowed deeper against her, seeking warmth.

“Sorry, babies,” she murmured, setting them down in their nest—a hollow she’d lined with soft fibers and moss, safely away from the cave’s entrance.

Lightning struck somewhere nearby with a deafening crack. The cave trembled with the force of it, and a fresh torrent of water streamed down from a fissure in the ceiling, catching Xara squarely in its path.

She yelped as the cold water soaked through her clothes, plastering them to her skin. Her teeth began to chatter uncontrollably.

The Xenobeast moved toward her with swift, fluid grace. He caught her arm, drawing her deeper into the cave, away from the worst of the storm's reach. His touch was warm—almost hot—against her chilled skin.

“You’re cold,” he said, concern evident in his low voice.

“I’ll be fine.” But her body betrayed her, trembling visibly.

He guided her toward the fire pit he’d built in the center of their living space. The flames had dwindled to embers, but he quickly fed them with dried wood from their stockpile. The fire flared to life, casting golden light across the cave walls.

Xara stood before it gratefully, but her wet clothes clung to her like a second skin, negating any warmth the flames might have provided. Water dripped from her hair, running in cold trails down her spine.

She glanced at the Xenobeast, who had retreated to the shadows beyond the firelight. His eyes remained fixed on her, unreadable yet intense.

“I need to get out of these wet clothes,” she said, reaching for the hem of her sodden shirt.

He immediately turned away, giving her privacy. It wasn’t the first time she’d changed in his presence, but something about his rigid posture, the careful way he averted his gaze, struck her as different tonight.

She peeled off her shirt, letting it fall to the stone floor with a wet slap. Her pants followed, leaving her in only her undergarments, which were also soaked through.

After a moment's hesitation, she removed those as well.

The fire's heat caressed her bare skin, but it wasn't enough. She was still trembling, her muscles tight with cold.

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She looked at the Xenobeast's broad back, at the tension evident in his powerful shoulders. He'd been distant since finding the beacon, preparing for war, shutting her out of his thoughts. But tonight, with danger closing in and the storm raging outside, she couldn't bear the space between them.

She moved toward him, her bare feet silent on the stone floor. When she reached him, she gently caught his hand. His skin was warm—so warm—and she craved that heat like nothing she'd ever wanted before.

Slowly, deliberately, she placed his hand on her bare hip.

He stiffened, his fingers flexing against her skin, but he didn't pull away.

"Look at me," she whispered.

For a long moment, he remained frozen, his face turned from her. Then, with what seemed like tremendous effort, he turned.

His silver eyes widened as they swept over her naked form, lingering on the curve of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the flare of her hips. His pupils dilated until they nearly swallowed the silver, and his sensory tendrils unfurled from his skull, reaching toward her with tentative, questing movements.

The air between them thickened with heat, with possibility.

"Xara," he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips.

She stepped closer, pressing herself against the solid wall of his chest. His skin burned against hers, chasing away the chill that had settled in her bones.

“I need you,” she said simply.

Outside, the storm raged on. Inside, a different kind of storm was brewing—one of desire and need, of fear and hope intertwined.

With deliberate slowness, she straddled his lap, her thighs bracketing his powerful hips. His hands came up to steady her, large and careful against her skin.

Their mouths met in a kiss that left her dizzy, his taste wild and alien and perfect. His tendrils brushed against her cheeks, her neck, her shoulders—gentle, exploring touches that sent shivers of pleasure down her spine.

She pressed closer, her body soft against the hard planes of his. He groaned, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrated through her chest.

“Want you,” he murmured against her lips. “Need you.”

“I’m yours,” she whispered back.

His control shattered. With a fluid motion, he laid her down on their shared bed, his body covering hers like a living shield against the world. His hands and mouth explored her with reverent hunger, learning every curve, every sensitive spot that made her gasp and arch against him.

When he finally joined their bodies, it was with a gentleness that belied his tremendous strength. She clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as pleasure built within her, wave upon wave.

Their lovemaking was fierce and primal—a claiming, a promise, a defiance against the storm and the dangers that lurked beyond it. His tendrils wrapped around her, binding them closer still, his silver eyes never leaving her face as they moved together.

When release came, it crashed through her like lightning, brilliant and all-consuming. He followed moments later, his powerful body shuddering above hers, her name a broken sound on his lips.

Afterward, they lay tangled together, her head pillowed on his chest, his tendrils still curled protectively around her. The storm continued outside, but its fury seemed distant now, unimportant.

“You should stay hidden,” he said eventually, his voice a low rumble beneath her ear. “When they come.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “No.”

His brow furrowed. “Dangerous.”

“I know.” She traced the contours of his face with gentle fingers. “But this isn’t just your fight. It’s ours.”

He caught her hand, pressing it against his cheek. “Could lose you.”

The naked vulnerability in his eyes made her heart ache. This creature—this man—who had been built for war, who had survived alone for so long, was terrified not for himself but for her.

“You won’t lose me,” she promised. “We’ll face them together.”

His eyes searched hers, looking for doubt, for fear. He found neither.

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“Together,” he agreed finally, the word a vow between them.

She settled back against him, listening to the steady beat of his heart. The pups had quieted, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the rain and the knowledge that their protectors were near.

In the morning, they would continue their preparations. They would face whatever came for them with all the strength and cunning they possessed. But for now, in this moment, there was only the two of them, bound by something stronger than fear, deeper than desire.

Outside, the storm began to ease, the wind’s howl softening to a whisper. Inside, Xara closed her eyes, safe in the arms of her fierce, gentle warrior.

Whatever came next, they would face it as one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Xenobeast crouched at the entrance of their cave, watching dawn break over the jungle canopy. Crimson light filtered through violet clouds, casting everything in a strange, beautiful glow. Behind him, Xara slept, her breathing deep and even. The smallest Graxlin pup—the one she’d named Flicker—was curled against her neck, its tiny body rising and falling with each breath.

Hope.

The feeling sat uncomfortably in his chest, foreign and fragile. Hope was dangerous.

Hope meant having something to lose.

He turned back to the task at hand, carefully wrapping sharpened bone in vines soaked in paralytic sap. The trap would not kill—he wanted intruders alive for questioning—but it would immobilize. He had spent the night setting similar traps throughout the surrounding jungle while Xara slept.

“You should have woken me. I could have helped.”

He didn’t startle at her voice. He’d sensed her approach, the shift in air currents, the subtle change in the cave’s acoustics. He continued working, not looking up as she settled beside him.

“Need rest,” he said simply.

Her hand found his forearm, warm and small against his skin. “So do you.”

He glanced at her then, taking in the sleep-softened curves of her face, the determination in her eyes. His mate. The word still felt new, precious. Dangerous.

“Different,” he said. “Built for this.”

She snorted, a sound he’d come to recognize as amused disagreement. “You weren’t built to be a one-man army against an entire military force.”

No, he’d been built to lead that force. To command death on a scale that still haunted his dreams.

“Besides,” she continued, “we’re stronger together. You know that.”

He did know it. The knowledge terrified him.

Flicker chirped from the cave entrance, now awake and demanding attention. Xara smiled and reached for the pup, but the Xenobeast was faster, scooping the tiny creature into his palm. It immediately curled around his thumb, its bioluminescent patches glowing contentedly.

“He likes you better,” she said, but there was no jealousy in her voice, only warmth.

The Xenobeast felt that dangerous hope flare again. A mate who fought beside him. Young ones who trusted him. A home to defend.

A life he could build—if they survived.

“More traps,” he said, rising to his feet. “Need to scout.”

Xara nodded, taking the finished trap from him. “I’ll finish these and set them along the eastern approach. The pups can help me identify the best hiding spots.”

He hesitated, wanting to tell her to stay in the cave, to keep safe. But he’d seen her fight. Seen her stand her ground. She wasn’t fragile, despite her size.

“Be careful,” he said instead.

Her smile was quick, bright. “Always am.”

He didn’t believe that for a second.

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Before he could stop himself, he bent down and pressed his forehead against hers, a gesture of connection his people used between bonded pairs. Her scent filled his senses—warm skin, sleep-mussed hair, the lingering traces of their coupling. His.

“Go,” she whispered against his jaw. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

Another dangerous promise. Another reason to hope.

He pulled away reluctantly and whistled for Flicker. The pup immediately scrambled up his arm to perch on his shoulder, chirping excitedly.

“Extra eyes,” he explained when Xara raised an eyebrow.

“Smart,” she agreed. “They can sense things we can’t.”

He nodded once, then slipped into the jungle without another word.

The forest was alive with morning activity. Winged creatures darted through the canopy, iridescent scales flashing in the dappled light. Carnivorous vines unfurled, tracking heat signatures. Somewhere distant, a pack of six-legged predators howled.

Home. This deadly, beautiful place had been his prison, then his sanctuary. Now it was his territory to defend.

He moved silently, checking traps already set, adjusting triggers, refreshing poisons. Flicker remained quiet on his shoulder, occasionally tugging at his sensory tendrils when it wanted his attention.

They had covered nearly five miles when the pup suddenly stiffened, its bioluminescent patches flashing rapid warning patterns. The Xenobeast froze, every sense on high alert.

Nothing. No sound, no movement, no?—

There. A faint distortion in the air, almost imperceptible. A stealth field.

He dropped flat as a needle-thin projectile sliced through the space where his head had been. Flicker squealed and dove into a pouch at his waist.

A stealth drone. Zarkari make, latest generation. Smaller than his fist but armed with enough neurotoxin to drop a creature three times his size.

They were getting closer.

He rolled behind a massive root system as another projectile embedded itself in the soil. The drone was silent, its propulsion system dampened to near inaudibility. But he could feel the air displacement, track its movement through the subtle shifts in the jungle's background noise.

There. Three meters up, hovering near a tangle of vines.

He waited, muscles coiled, counting the seconds between firing sequences. The drone would have a pattern—everything Zarkari did was patterned, predictable.

Five seconds. Four. Three.

He launched himself upward, claws extended, catching the drone mid-firing cycle. It struggled in his grip, attempting to deploy secondary defenses, but he crushed it with brutal efficiency, metal and circuitry crumpling like paper.

Flicker poked its head out of the pouch, chirping questioningly.

“Good warning,” he told the pup, stroking its head with one finger. “Saved us.”

The drone’s presence confirmed his fears. This wasn’t a random patrol. This was targeted reconnaissance—mapping the terrain, identifying threats, establishing a perimeter.

The hunting party wouldn’t be far behind.

He needed to get back to the cave. To Xara.

The return journey was faster, less cautious. Speed mattered more than stealth now. When he burst into the clearing before their cave, he found Xara kneeling beside one of the larger traps, adjusting the trigger mechanism. The other two pups were nearby, playing with discarded scraps of tech.

She looked up at his approach, her smile fading as she read the tension in his stance.

“What happened?”

“Drone,” he said, holding up the crushed remains. “Stealth tech. Looking for us.”

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Her eyes widened, but she didn't panic. Instead, she rose to her feet, dusting off her hands with brisk efficiency.

"How close?"

"Too close. Need to accelerate preparations."

She nodded, already moving toward the cave entrance. "I've reinforced the inner chamber and set up a fallback position. If we can funnel them through the main passage, we can pick them off one by one."

Her tactical thinking surprised him, though it shouldn't have. She'd proven her adaptability time and again.

"Good," he said, following her inside. "But not enough."

The cave's interior had been transformed in the days since they'd discovered the beacon. The entrance was narrower, reinforced with salvaged metal plating. Inside, the main chamber had been divided into defensive zones, with makeshift barriers providing cover. The pups' sleeping area had been moved to the most protected corner, surrounded by the softest materials they could find.

It looked like a war camp. Because it was.

"I know it's not enough," she said, her voice tight. "But it's what we have."

He placed the dead drone on a flat rock they'd been using as a table. "Need more."

Need advantage.”

“What kind of advantage?”

He hesitated, considering their options. They were outnumbered, outgunned. The jungle would help—it was as much a weapon as any blade or blaster—but against a full Zarkari strike team, even that might not be enough.

“Tal’Shai,” she said suddenly. “Could they help us?”

He stiffened. The Tal’Shai were not warriors. They survived through avoidance, not confrontation.

“No,” he growled. “They don’t fight.”

“But they know this planet better than anyone,” she pressed. “They must have defenses, knowledge we could use.”

“They won’t help.”

“How do you know? Have you asked them?”

He hadn’t. In all his years of exile, he’d maintained a careful distance from the native inhabitants. They tolerated his presence because he respected their boundaries, never approaching their settlements, never interfering with their ways.

“They fear outsiders,” he said. “With reason.”

Xara’s expression softened. “They might fear outsiders, but they know you. You’ve lived alongside them for years without causing harm. That has to count for something.”

He shook his head. “Not enough.”

“It might be,” she insisted. “And what other choice do we have? Wait here to be slaughtered?”

The truth of her words stung. Their chances, already slim, would dwindle to nothing if they remained isolated.

“Please,” she said, stepping closer. “If not for us, then for them.” She gestured to the pups, now all three huddled together in their corner, sensing the tension. “They deserve a chance.”

He closed his eyes, wrestling with his instincts. Pride warred with practicality, stubbornness with survival.

And beneath it all, that dangerous, fragile hope.

A life they could build. If they survived.

“Dangerous,” he said finally. “For them. For us.”

“Everything about this situation is dangerous,” she countered. “But together, we might have a chance.”

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Together. The word echoed in his mind, warm and solid.

He opened his eyes to find her watching him, her gaze steady and certain. His mate. His partner in this fight.

“Will try,” he conceded. “No promises.”

Her smile was worth the risk. “That’s all I ask.”

He turned away, gathering weapons and supplies for the journey. The Tal’Shai village was half a day’s trek through difficult terrain—longer if they wanted to avoid detection.

“We leave at dusk,” he decided. “Safer in darkness.”

She nodded, already preparing a pack of her own. “I’ll get the pups ready.”

“No,” he said firmly. “Too dangerous for them.”

She paused, considering. “You’re right. But we can’t leave them alone either.”

He hadn’t thought of that. The pups were too young to defend themselves, too valuable to risk.

“Hidden chamber,” he said after a moment. “Behind waterfall. Safe place.”

Her relief was palpable. “Good. We’ll set them up there before we go.”

As she moved about the cave, gathering supplies and comforting the pups, he watched her with a mixture of pride and fear. She moved differently now—more confident, more aware of her surroundings. The soft academic he'd first encountered had been replaced by a survivor, a fighter.

His equal.

The thought should have troubled him. Instead, it filled him with that strange, persistent hope.

A future. A family. A life beyond mere survival.

If they lived through what was coming.

He checked his weapons one last time, then moved to help her prepare. The sun would set soon, and with darkness would come their chance to seek help.

He still didn't believe the Tal'Shai would fight for them. But for her—for the chance of a future with her—he would ask.

It was a risk. Everything about loving her was a risk.

But as she turned to him, determination blazing in her eyes, he knew it was a risk worth taking.

Together, they might just survive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Xara kept close to the Xenobeast as they moved through the jungle. Night had fallen hours ago, but rather than making the trek more dangerous, darkness seemed to reveal

new dimensions of the landscape. Bioluminescent fungi carpeted the forest floor in patches of soft blue light. Hanging vines pulsed with amber warmth. Even the predators that stalked the shadows announced themselves with glowing eyes or luminous patterns along their flanks.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, stepping carefully over a fallen log crawling with tiny phosphorescent insects. “Like walking through a living constellation.”

The Xenobeast grunted, his attention fixed on the path ahead. His tendrils swayed with each step, occasionally brushing against her shoulder or neck—a touch that once would have terrified her but now felt like reassurance.

“How much farther?” she asked.

“Close.” His silver eyes flicked to her face. “Stay behind me. Don’t touch anything without asking.”

She nodded, suppressing a smile at his protectiveness. Even now, with danger closing in from all sides, he worried about her brushing against the wrong plant.

The jungle thinned as they approached a series of stone formations that jutted from the earth like ancient fingers reaching for the stars. Xara recognized them as the same structures she’d glimpsed when she first arrived—what she’d mistaken for trees supporting fruit vines.

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As they drew closer, the formations revealed themselves as towers—not built, but grown. Living architecture that pulsed with the same bioluminescence as the jungle floor. Bridges of woven vines connected the towers, swaying gently in the night breeze.

“Is this...?” she began.

“Tal’Shai village,” he confirmed.

Xara stared in wonder. From a distance, the village had appeared primitive—just lights in the darkness. Up close, she saw the intricate network of living structures, the harmonious integration with the surrounding environment.

“It’s incredible,” she breathed.

The Xenobeast made a low sound in his throat—not quite agreement, not quite dismissal. “Different from your cities.”

“Very different,” she agreed. “But no less advanced.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he’d never considered the comparison.

As they approached the base of the nearest tower, movement caught Xara’s attention. A figure detached itself from the shadows—tall and slender, with long limbs and a sinuous grace that reminded her of a praying mantis. Its skin shifted colors in the darkness, iridescent scales rippling from deep blue to purple to green.

The Tal'Shai.

Xara's scientific mind cataloged details with hungry fascination. The being stood upright on two legs but looked equally comfortable on four. Its face featured large, multifaceted eyes that reflected the bioluminescent light in prismatic patterns. No visible mouth, but a complex array of breathing slits along what she assumed was its neck.

Most striking was how it communicated—not with sound, but with a rippling dance of color across its scales and subtle movements of its limbs.

The Xenobeast stepped forward, positioning himself slightly in front of her. To her surprise, he responded with his own set of gestures—economical and lacking the fluid grace of the Tal'Shai, but clearly understood.

The Tal'Shai's colors shifted rapidly, then it reached up to touch a band around its neck. A soft, mechanical voice emerged.

“The Solitary One returns. With company.” The translated voice held no inflection, but the being's colors pulsed with what Xara interpreted as curiosity. “This is unexpected.”

“Need to speak with elders,” the Xenobeast said. “Important.”

The Tal'Shai's eyes swiveled to study Xara. “The soft one from the fallen sky-shell. We have observed.”

Xara felt a chill. They'd been watching her all this time?

“I'm Xara,” she said, stepping forward despite the Xenobeast's protective stance. “I'm a scientist—a biologist—from Earth.”

The Tal'Shai's colors rippled again. "Names are given, not claimed." It tilted its head. "But you may be called Xara if you wish."

Before she could respond, the being turned and gestured toward one of the vine bridges. "The elders will receive you. Follow."

As they ascended into the canopy village, Xara struggled to take in everything at once. What had appeared to be simple towers from below revealed themselves as complex living structures—part plant, part fungal, part something else entirely. Rooms and chambers had been grown rather than built, their walls pulsing with the same gentle bioluminescence as the forest floor.

Tal'Shai moved throughout the village, their scales shifting in constant communication. Some worked with what appeared to be living tools—vines that responded to touch, bulbous growths that produced substances collected in woven baskets.

"This is incredible," she whispered to the Xenobeast. "They're not just living with nature—they're collaborating with it."

"Bioengineering," he replied, his voice low. "Advanced. Different approach than Zarkari."

"Different and better," she murmured. "This is sustainable. Harmonious."

He glanced at her, something like surprise flickering in his silver eyes.

Their guide led them to a large chamber near the crown of the tallest tower. Inside, three Tal'Shai waited—their scales more muted in color than the others, their movements more deliberate. Elders, Xara guessed.

The chamber itself was a marvel of living architecture. The walls pulsed with slow, rhythmic light. Furniture had been grown from the same material as the structure, seamlessly integrated. At the center, a pool of clear liquid reflected the bioluminescent ceiling.

The Xenobeast stepped forward and began a series of gestures. The elders responded in kind, their colors shifting in patterns too complex for Xara to interpret.

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After several minutes of silent communication, one of the elders touched its translation device.

“The Solitary One speaks of danger coming to our world. Metal-shells bringing death.” The elder’s colors darkened. “We have seen such before. Long ago.”

“They’re not here for you,” the Xenobeast said. “Here for me. And her.”

“Yet their presence threatens all,” another elder replied through its device. “The balance is disturbed.”

“We need help,” Xara said, stepping forward. All eyes turned to her—multifaceted orbs reflecting her image back at her in fractured pieces. “Not to fight. We wouldn’t ask that of you. But perhaps there are other ways you could assist us.”

The elders’ colors rippled in what she hoped was consideration rather than offense.

“The soft one speaks boldly,” the first elder said. “Why should we risk involvement?”

The Xenobeast tensed beside her, but Xara placed a gentle hand on his arm.

“Because we share this world,” she said simply. “Because what harms one part of an ecosystem eventually harms all of it. I’m a biologist—I study how living things interact and depend on each other. If these invaders come, they won’t stop with us.”

The elders conferred silently, their scales shifting in rapid patterns.

“What assistance do you seek?” the third elder finally asked.

The Xenobeast stepped forward again. “Warning systems. Toxins that won’t kill but will slow. Knowledge of terrain.”

“We do not provide weapons,” the first elder stated firmly.

“Not asking for weapons,” he replied. “Asking for protection. For all.”

Xara watched the exchange with growing fascination. There was history here—a relationship she hadn’t fully understood. The Xenobeast moved differently among the Tal’Shai than he did in the jungle. Less predatory. More... respectful.

And they responded in kind.

“The Solitary One has honored our boundaries for many cycles,” the second elder said, its colors shifting to a deep blue. “He has kept the balance. Warned us of dangers. Diverted threats.”

Xara glanced at the Xenobeast in surprise. He’d never mentioned this.

“We will provide what assistance we can,” the first elder decided. “Not for war. For protection.”

Relief washed through Xara. She hadn’t realized how tense she’d been until that moment.

The elders dispatched several younger Tal’Shai, who returned carrying woven baskets and pouches. One by one, they presented their offerings:

Vials of shimmering liquid that, when exposed to air, would create a thick fog to

obscure vision.

Seeds that, when crushed, released a paralytic agent that affected most warm-blooded creatures but dissipated quickly.

Living sensors—small, flat organisms that would change color in response to unfamiliar vibrations or heat signatures.

Maps grown into living tissue, showing hidden caves, unstable terrain, and the territories of the most dangerous predators.

As each item was explained, Xara marveled at the sophisticated bioengineering behind them. These weren't primitive tools—they were advanced biological technologies, developed through generations of careful observation and experimentation.

“This is incredible,” she said, examining a sensor organism that curled around her finger like a living ring. “Your understanding of biological systems must be extraordinary.”

The elder's colors shifted to what might have been pleasure. “We do not separate ourselves from the world. We are part of it. Knowledge flows both ways.”

“I would love to learn more,” Xara said earnestly. “If we survive this, of course.”

“Perhaps you will,” the elder replied. “The Solitary One has chosen well.”

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The Xenobeast made a sound that might have been embarrassment.

As they prepared to leave, laden with the Tal'Shai's gifts, the first elder approached them one last time.

"The Solitary One has walked alone for many cycles," it said, its colors pulsing gently. "We have respected his choice, as he has respected ours. But all things change. All things evolve."

The elder's multifaceted eyes turned to Xara. "You have brought change to him. Now change comes to us all."

With that cryptic statement, they were escorted back to the jungle floor.

As they made their way back through the darkened forest, Xara couldn't contain her excitement.

"That was amazing," she said, careful to keep her voice low. "Their whole society is built on symbiosis and mutual adaptation. The bioengineering alone is centuries beyond what we have on Earth."

The Xenobeast grunted, adjusting the pack of Tal'Shai gifts on his shoulder.

"And they clearly respect you," she continued. "You never told me you had a relationship with them."

He shrugged. "Not much to tell. Stay out of their way. They stay out of mine."

“It seemed like more than that,” she pressed. “The elder called you ‘The Solitary One.’ Like a title.”

He was silent for several steps. “They name things by their nature.”

“And your nature is to be alone?” She touched his arm. “Not anymore.”

His silver eyes met hers, luminous in the darkness. “No,” he agreed softly. “Not anymore.”

They walked in companionable silence for a while, the jungle’s nighttime chorus surrounding them. Xara’s mind raced with everything she’d seen and learned.

“Do you think it will be enough?” she finally asked. “What they gave us?”

“Not alone,” he admitted. “But combined with what we’ve prepared... maybe.”

“They called you a protector,” she said. “Said you warned them of dangers.”

He looked uncomfortable. “Just practical. Safer for everyone if predators stay away from their territory.”

Xara smiled to herself. Even now, he couldn’t admit to kindness.

“You know,” she said, “for someone engineered to be a weapon, you’ve done a remarkable job of finding other purposes.”

He stopped walking, his expression unreadable in the dim light.

“What?” she asked.

“Purpose,” he repeated, the word strange in his mouth. “Never had one before. Not one I chose.”

“And now?”

His tendrils reached out, brushing against her cheek with surprising gentleness. “Now I do.”

The simple declaration made her heart swell. She leaned into his touch, savoring the connection.

“We should hurry,” he said after a moment. “Need to check on pups.”

Xara nodded, though she was reluctant to break the moment. As they resumed their journey, she found herself thinking about the elder’s words.

All things change. All things evolve.

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They were facing terrible danger—enemies with advanced weapons and no moral compass. But they weren't facing it alone. They had each other. They had the pups. And now, they had allies.

For the first time since discovering the beacon, Xara felt something like hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Xenobeast crouched motionless on the cliff edge, his body melding with the crimson stone. Below, the wreckage of Xara's shuttle lay exposed in a small clearing, its twisted metal gleaming dully in the alien sunlight.

For three cycles he'd patrolled the perimeter, setting traps, planting the Tal'shai's living sensors, preparing for war. Now the waiting was over.

A sleek Zarkari drop-ship cut through the atmosphere, its engines barely audible—a testament to Dominion engineering. The vessel bore Vask's personal insignia: a black geometric pattern that resembled a shattered star. The Xenobeast's tendrils tightened against his skull, his body tensing with primal hatred.

Commander Vask Dravak. The man who'd ordered his creation, then his exile.

The ship settled beside the shuttle wreckage with practiced precision. Hydraulics hissed as the loading ramp extended, touching the blood-red soil with a soft thud. Six figures emerged—Suppressor Elite, their armor a deep obsidian that absorbed light rather than reflected it. They moved with lethal efficiency, spreading out to secure the perimeter.

The Xenobeast narrowed his eyes. Something was wrong. Their formation wasn't standard for hunting a rogue asset. They weren't looking for signs of him at all.

They were examining the shuttle. Scanning for traces.

Traces of Xara.

Cold realization washed through him. They hadn't come for the weapon they'd discarded. They'd come for her.

A seventh figure emerged from the ship—taller than the others, moving with the casual arrogance of command. Commander Vask Dravak. Even at this distance, the Xenobeast recognized the straight-backed posture, the deliberate movements. Vask's voice carried faintly on the wind as he barked orders at his team.

“Secure biological samples. Priority one is tracking the female.”

The Xenobeast's claws dug into the stone beneath him, carving deep furrows. His vision narrowed, pulsing red at the edges. The beast inside him—the thing they'd engineered to kill without question—roared to be unleashed.

But the cold, calculating part of him—the part he'd developed in defiance of his programming—held it in check. Rage was a weapon only when controlled.

He watched as one of the Suppressors retrieved something from the shuttle—a scrap of fabric. Xara's. They were tracking her scent.

A growl built in his chest. They would never reach her. Never touch her. Never take her from him.

He slipped backward from the cliff edge, moving with a silence that belied his size.

The jungle welcomed him, crimson foliage parting as he passed. The living sensors the Tal'shai had given them were already changing color, alerting him to the intruders' movements.

The Xenobeast circled wide, positioning himself between the Zarkari squad and the path to their cave. Xara was there with the pups, protected by the traps they'd laid together, but he would not let the fight reach their home.

He activated the first trap—a simple tripwire connected to a net of poisoned vines. Childish by Dominion standards, but effective when combined with the element of surprise.

Two Suppressors triggered it. The net dropped, enveloping them in toxic barbs. Their armor protected them from the worst, but the paralytic agent worked through the joints of their suits. They went down, not dead but immobilized.

Four remaining, plus Vask.

The Xenobeast melted deeper into the jungle. The remaining Suppressors moved more cautiously now, scanning for additional traps. They were good—the best the Dominion had to offer. But this was his jungle. His world.

And they threatened what was his.

He activated the second trap—a series of sonic emitters salvaged from the ruins near their cave. The devices produced a frequency that attracted Haxin swarms—tiny flying predators with razor-sharp mandibles that could strip flesh from bone in minutes.

The dark cloud descended on the Zarkari squad, forcing them to activate their energy shields. The shields would hold, but the power drain would weaken their weapons

systems.

Three of the Suppressors broke formation, moving deeper into the jungle—straight toward the killing ground he'd prepared. The fourth stayed with Vask, a personal guard.

Perfect.

The Xenobeast followed the three who'd separated, silent as death. They were moving in a standard sweep pattern, but their unfamiliarity with the terrain made them vulnerable. He let them proceed just far enough to be out of visual contact with Vask.

Then he struck.

He dropped from above, landing on the rearmost Suppressor with bone-crushing force. Before the others could turn, he'd driven his claws through the weak point at the base of the soldier's skull, severing the neural link to his combat implants.

The other two spun, weapons raised, but he was already moving—a blur of silver and shadow. He caught the second Suppressor's arm, twisting until the reinforced bone snapped. The soldier's scream was cut short as the Xenobeast slammed him into a stone pillar with enough force to crack his helmet.

The third got off a shot—a pulse of energy that grazed the Xenobeast's shoulder, burning a furrow across his skin. The pain only fed his rage. He charged, ducking under a second shot, and drove his fist into the Suppressor's chest plate. The armor cracked but held.

The soldier was good—he countered with a strike to the Xenobeast's wounded shoulder, following with a kick that would have shattered a normal being's knee. But the Xenobeast wasn't normal. He was engineered to withstand punishment that would kill most species.

He caught the Suppressor's leg and twisted, using the soldier's momentum to slam him into the ground. Before the Zarkari could recover, the Xenobeast pinned him with one massive hand around his throat.

“The female,” he growled, his voice rough from disuse. “Why does Vask want her?”

The Suppressor struggled, but the Xenobeast tightened his grip.

“Genetic anomaly,” the soldier gasped. “Compatibility with Dominion biotech. Rare. Valuable.”

Cold fury washed through him. They wanted to use her—experiment on her. Turn her into a resource, just as they had done to him.

He snapped the Suppressor’s neck with a single twist.

Three down. Two to go.

The Xenobeast moved back toward Vask’s position, no longer bothering with stealth. The commander would know his squad was under attack. The element of surprise was gone.

Now it was time for terror.

He activated the final trap—a series of explosive charges set in the trees surrounding the clearing. Not powerful enough to kill, but enough to create chaos.

The charges detonated in sequence, sending shrapnel and burning fragments raining down. The remaining Suppressor shielded Vask with his body, scanning for threats.

The Xenobeast stepped from the jungle’s edge, fully visible for the first time. Blood—both his and the Suppressors’—streaked his silver skin. His tendrils writhed with aggression. His eyes burned with silver fire.

Vask’s expression didn’t change, but the Xenobeast caught the momentary widening of his eyes—the first flicker of fear.

“Asset K-7,” Vask said, his voice cold and precise. “Functional after all these cycles. Impressive.”

“Not K-7,” the Xenobeast growled. “Not yours.”

Vask’s lips thinned. “You were engineered to serve the Dominion. Everything you are belongs to us.”

“Nothing belongs to you here.”

The commander’s eyes narrowed. “The female is valuable. Her genetic structure is uniquely compatible with our biotech. She will serve a greater purpose.”

The beast inside him roared, straining against his control. His tendrils lashed the air, his claws extending to their full, lethal length.

“She is not yours to take.”

Vask signaled to his remaining guard. “Neutralize the asset.”

The Suppressor raised his weapon—a neural disruptor designed specifically to incapacitate beings like him. The Xenobeast had been trained to fear those weapons, conditioned to submit when faced with them.

But that was before Xara. Before the pups. Before he had something worth fighting for.

He charged, moving faster than the Suppressor could track. The disruptor fired, the energy pulse missing him by inches. He slammed into the soldier with the full force of his rage, driving him backward into a tree trunk with enough force to splinter the wood.

The Suppressor fought back with augmented strength, landing blows that would have crippled any other opponent. But the Xenobeast barely felt them. He was beyond pain, beyond fear. He tore through the soldier's armor with his claws, ripping away the protective plating to expose the vulnerable flesh beneath.

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The Suppressor managed one final, desperate strike—driving a vibro-blade into the Xenobeast’s side. The blade sank deep, sending waves of agony through his body. But he didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

With a roar that shook the trees, he tore the Suppressor’s head from his shoulders.

Silence fell over the clearing. The Xenobeast turned, blood dripping from his claws, to face Vask.

The commander stood alone, outwardly calm despite the carnage surrounding him. He drew a sidearm—a sleek, deadly pulse pistol.

“You were our greatest achievement,” Vask said, his voice steady. “And our greatest failure.”

The Xenobeast stalked forward, ignoring the weapon aimed at his chest. “Your failure was thinking you owned me.”

Vask fired. The energy pulse struck the Xenobeast square in the chest, burning through muscle and tissue. He staggered but didn’t fall.

“Your failure,” he continued, still advancing, “was coming back.”

Vask fired again. And again. Each shot tore through the Xenobeast’s body, leaving smoking wounds that would have killed any normal being. But he wasn’t normal. He was engineered to endure. To survive.

To win.

He reached Vask, knocking the weapon from his hand with a casual swipe. The commander didn't flinch, didn't beg. His cold eyes met the Xenobeast's without wavering.

"She belongs to the Dominion," Vask said. "As do you. Others will come."

The Xenobeast seized him by the throat, lifting him until his feet dangled above the ground. His tendrils wrapped around Vask's face, tasting his fear beneath the facade of control.

"Let them come," he growled. "I'll kill them all."

He could snap Vask's neck. End it now. The beast inside him screamed for it—for vengeance, for blood. But the part of him that had defied his programming, the part that had chosen mercy once before, held back.

Not out of compassion. Out of strategy.

He dragged Vask to the edge of the clearing, where the ground dropped away into a deep river canyon. The commander struggled now, finally showing fear as he realized what was coming.

"The Dominion doesn't know she's here," the Xenobeast said. "Only you do. Your ship. Your squad."

Understanding dawned in Vask's eyes. "You'll never be free of us."

"I already am."

With a final surge of strength, the Xenobeast hurled Vask over the edge. The commander's scream echoed briefly before being swallowed by the roar of the river below.

The Xenobeast stood at the cliff edge, watching as Vask's body was swept away by the current. His wounds throbbed, blood flowing freely from multiple pulse burns and the vibro-blade still embedded in his side.

But he felt no pain. Only a cold, savage satisfaction.

He turned back to the clearing, surveying the battlefield. Five dead Suppressors. Two paralyzed but alive. The drop-ship, still powered and intact.

He would deal with the survivors and the ship later. For now, he needed to return to Xara. To make sure she was safe.

As he moved back into the jungle, his steps were no longer those of prey evading hunters. He was the predator now. The hunter.

This world was his territory. Xara was his mate. The pups were their family.

And he would destroy anyone who threatened them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Xara paced the inner chamber of the cave, checking her makeshift defenses for the fifth time. The heat stones from the thermal springs lined the entrance—superheated to the point where touching them would sear flesh. She'd positioned them carefully, creating a narrow path that only she knew was safe to traverse.

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The Graxlin pups huddled in the back alcove where she'd told them to stay, their bioluminescent markings dimmed to barely visible pulses. The smallest one—the one she'd named Dot—kept trying to peek out, curious despite the danger.

“Stay back,” she whispered, her voice firm but gentle. “Remember what we practiced.”

The pup chirped softly and retreated.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. The Xenobeast had been gone too long. The plan was for him to engage the Zarkari forces in the jungle, using the traps they'd set together, while she defended their home. But with each passing minute, fear gnawed at her resolve.

What if he didn't come back?

She pushed the thought away. He would return. He always did.

A faint click from the outer tunnel snapped her to attention. Not the heavy, deliberate tread of the Xenobeast. Something lighter. Cautious.

Someone was inside their perimeter.

Xara grabbed the makeshift spear they'd crafted from salvaged metal and indigenous wood. The Tal'shai had treated the tip with a paralytic toxin—not lethal, but effective. She positioned herself between the tunnel entrance and the alcove where the pups hid.

“Stay silent,” she breathed to the pups. “No matter what.”

The footsteps grew closer. A shadow moved across the wall of the tunnel—humanoid but wrong somehow, bulkier around the shoulders and head. Armor, she realized. One of the Zarkari soldiers.

The figure emerged into the dim light of the inner chamber. The trooper was encased in sleek black armor, face hidden behind a reflective visor. A weapon that looked like a cross between a rifle and a harpoon was clutched in gloved hands.

“Target acquired,” the trooper said, voice mechanical through the helmet’s filter. “Civilian female. Indigenous fauna present.”

Xara’s grip tightened on her spear. “You’re trespassing.”

The trooper tilted their head, as if surprised she’d spoken. “Surrender peacefully. Commander Vask requires your presence.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

The trooper raised their weapon. “Compliance is not optional.”

Xara’s mind raced. The heat stones were behind the trooper now, useless. The spear would be ineffective against that armor. But she had one advantage—she knew this cave. Every unstable ledge, every loose rock.

“You know what he is, don’t you?” she said, taking a careful step to her left. “The one you call the Xenobeast.”

The trooper followed her movement. “A failed weapon. A defective asset.”

“He’s more than that.” Another step. The trooper matched it. Good. “He chose to be more.”

“Irrelevant. You will come with me now.”

Xara took one more step, positioning herself directly beneath a section of ceiling where mineral deposits had weakened the stone. The trooper stood exactly where she needed them—beneath the most unstable part.

“I don’t think so.”

She hurled her spear—not at the trooper, but at the ceiling above them. The metal tip struck with a sharp crack, dislodging a cascade of rocks. The trooper fired reflexively, the shot going wide as the first rocks struck their helmet.

Xara dove for cover as more of the ceiling gave way. A cloud of dust filled the chamber, and the trooper’s startled cry was cut short by the impact of falling stone.

When the dust settled, the trooper lay half-buried under rubble, their weapon pinned beneath a boulder. They were still moving, struggling to free themselves.

Xara didn’t waste time. She grabbed one of the heat stones with a protective cloth and approached. The trooper managed to free one arm and reached for a sidearm at their hip.

She slammed the heat stone against the exposed joint between helmet and chest plate. The superheated rock sizzled through the protective fabric, and the trooper screamed—a sound that was all too human despite the mechanical filter.

With a violent jerk, the trooper dislodged enough rubble to free their torso. They lunged for Xara, catching her ankle and pulling her down. She fell hard, the breath

knocked from her lungs.

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The trooper crawled over her, one hand closing around her throat. With the other, they reached up and released the seal on their helmet, pulling it off to reveal a face that was almost human—pale skin, sharp features, eyes that glowed an unnatural blue.

“You think you understand what he is?” the trooper hissed, blood trickling from a gash on their forehead. “He’s a killing machine. That’s all he was ever meant to be.”

Xara struggled for breath, her fingers scrabbling against the trooper’s armored wrist. “He’s... whatever he chooses to be.”

The trooper’s grip tightened. “And you? What are you besides a primitive who stumbled onto something she doesn’t understand?”

From the alcove came a high-pitched shriek. Dot darted out, followed by the other pups. They swarmed the trooper, their tiny claws finding gaps in the armor, their teeth surprisingly sharp as they bit at exposed skin.

The trooper released Xara to bat at the pups, cursing as one latched onto their face. Xara rolled away, gasping for breath. Her hand closed around a jagged piece of fallen rock, and she didn’t hesitate.

She drove it into the back of the trooper’s neck, where the armor didn’t quite meet. Not deep enough to kill, but enough to incapacitate. The trooper went rigid, then collapsed.

Xara scrambled to her feet, gathering the pups to her chest. They chirped and nuzzled

against her, their markings pulsing with agitation.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, checking each one for injuries. “You’re safe. We’re all safe.”

A shadow fell across the cave entrance. Xara whirled, rock still clutched in her bloody hand—then froze.

The Xenobeast stood there, silhouetted against the dim light from outside. Blood—some his, some not—covered his torso in dark streaks. A deep gash ran across his chest, and one of his sensory tendrils hung limply. But he was alive. Standing. Victorious.

His silver eyes took in the scene: the fallen trooper, the collapsed ceiling, the heat stones positioned strategically around the entrance. And finally, Xara—bloodied, disheveled, a weapon still gripped in her hand, the pups clustered protectively around her legs.

Something shifted in his gaze. A new awareness. A different kind of respect.

He stepped into the cave, moving with the fluid grace that belied his massive size. He circled the fallen trooper, nudging the body with one clawed foot to ensure they were truly incapacitated.

Then he looked at Xara again, his head tilted slightly. His tendrils reached toward her, brushing against her cheek, her throat where bruises were already forming, then down to the pups who chirped excitedly at his touch.

The look in his eyes wasn’t the possessive pride she’d seen before. It wasn’t even the heated desire that had become familiar. It was something new—a recognition. As if he was seeing her clearly for the first time.

He reached out one massive hand and gently took the rock from her grip, tossing it aside. Then he pulled her against him, careful of his wounds and hers, his tendrils wrapping around them both in a protective embrace.

“You fought,” he said, his voice a low rumble against her ear. It was the first time he’d spoken aloud to her.

Xara nodded against his chest. “Of course I did.”

He pulled back just enough to look at her, his silver eyes intense. “Not for yourself.”

“For them,” she said, glancing down at the pups. “For you. For us.”

His gaze moved to the fallen trooper, then back to her. There was something new in his expression—a mix of awe and wariness, as if he’d discovered something unexpected and powerful.

“They underestimated you,” he said.

“Everyone does.” She reached up to touch his face, her fingers gentle against a fresh cut on his cheek. “Are there more?”

A savage smile curved his mouth. “Not anymore.”

Relief flooded through her, making her knees weak. The Xenobeast caught her, lifting her effortlessly. The pups scrambled up his legs, finding perches on his shoulders and back as he carried Xara to their bed.

He laid her down carefully, then turned to secure the fallen trooper. Xara watched as he bound the soldier with strips of their own armor, his movements efficient and practiced. When he finished, he returned to her side, lowering himself to sit on the

edge of the bed.

“You’re hurt,” she said, reaching for the gash on his chest.

He caught her hand, his grip gentle but firm. “So are you.”

The pups settled around them, chirping softly as they nestled into the furs. One by one, their glow markings dimmed as they drifted to sleep, exhausted by the ordeal.

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The Xenobeast's eyes never left Xara's face. He looked at her differently now—not as something fragile to be protected, but as something formidable to be reckoned with. Something dangerous in her own right.

“What?” she asked, unsettled by his scrutiny.

His tendrils brushed against her throat, her arms, her hands—cataloging her injuries, her strength, her resilience. “I was created to be a weapon,” he said finally. “Trained to recognize threats.”

“Am I a threat now?” There was a hint of challenge in her voice.

His silver eyes gleamed. “Yes.”

Before she could respond, he leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers, his tendrils curling around her face in a gesture that felt reverent.

“But not to me,” he whispered. “Never to me.”

The pups stirred in their sleep, shifting closer to the warmth of their protectors. Outside, the jungle hummed with life, oblivious to the battle that had been fought. Inside, in the quiet of their cave, something fundamental had changed.

She wasn't just his to protect anymore. They were protectors together.

And anything that threatened what they'd built would face not one monster, but two.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Xenobeast moved through the jungle like a shadow, every sense heightened, every muscle primed. The captive trooper had revealed nothing useful under questioning, but it didn't matter. He knew who was coming.

Dravak.

The name alone ignited a cold fury in his chest. Commander Vask Dravak—the architect of his exile, the man who had labeled him defective for refusing to slaughter innocents. The man who had stripped away his name and identity, leaving only the beast.

His tendrils twitched, sensing a change in the air currents. Something was moving through his territory—something that didn't belong. He melted deeper into the foliage, becoming one with the shadows as he tracked the intruder.

The scent hit him first. Antiseptic. Synthetic fabric. The unmistakable tang of Zarkari tech. Memories flooded back—sterile labs, white-walled training facilities, the burn of neural implants being activated.

Then he saw him.

Dravak moved through the jungle like he owned it, flanked by two remaining elite guards. The commander looked exactly as he remembered—tall and lean, with angular features and cold, calculating eyes. His uniform was pristine despite the hostile environment, not a speck of dirt marring its sleek lines. His silver hair was cropped short in military precision, and his posture was ramrod straight.

The Xenobeast's lip curled. Even here, surrounded by death and danger, Dravak maintained his façade of perfect control.

He circled silently, tracking their movements. They were heading directly toward the cave—toward Xara and the pups. His tendrils flared with protective rage, but he forced himself to remain hidden. Patience. Strategy. These were weapons too.

The guards moved with practiced efficiency, scanning the perimeter with high-tech sensors. But they were looking for heat signatures, motion patterns—not for a predator who had spent years learning to become one with this deadly world.

Dravak paused, holding up a hand to halt his escort. “He’s close,” he said, his voice as cold and precise as the Xenobeast remembered. “I can feel it.”

The commander turned in a slow circle, his gaze sweeping the jungle. For a moment, his eyes seemed to lock directly on the Xenobeast’s hiding place.

“Project K-7,” Dravak called out, his voice carrying through the trees. “I know you’re watching. Show yourself.”

The Xenobeast remained perfectly still. He would not dance to Dravak’s commands. Not anymore.

“Very well,” Dravak continued after a moment. “Perhaps you need motivation.” He nodded to one of the guards, who produced a small device from his belt. “We’ve located your cave. Your... pets. One signal from me, and my team converges on that position.”

Ice flooded the Xenobeast’s veins. Xara. The pups.

“That’s right,” Dravak smiled thinly. “You’ve become predictable, Seven. Forming attachments. It’s disappointing, really. You were designed for greater things.”

The Xenobeast weighed his options. Dravak was lying—the cave was too well

hidden, protected by Tal'shai illusions and his own careful concealment. But he couldn't take the risk. Not with Xara.

He dropped silently from the trees, landing in a crouch twenty feet from Dravak and his guards. The guards immediately raised their weapons, but Dravak waved them down with a casual flick of his wrist.

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“There you are.” Dravak’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Still impressive, I see. The years haven’t dulled your edge.”

The Xenobeast straightened to his full height, towering over the Zarkari commander. He said nothing, but his silver eyes blazed with cold fury.

“Silent as ever,” Dravak noted. “Some things don’t change.” He clasped his hands behind his back, adopting the stance of a superior addressing a subordinate. “You’ve caused quite a problem for us, Seven. We thought you dead—hoped you were, actually. It would have been cleaner.”

The Xenobeast remained motionless, assessing. The guards were nervous—he could smell their fear, hear the elevated rate of their hearts. But Dravak was calm. Too calm.

“Then a research vessel goes missing,” Dravak continued. “A valuable cargo disappears. And the tracking beacon leads us here—to a quarantined death world. To you.” He tilted his head. “Quite the coincidence.”

The Xenobeast’s tendrils twitched. Research vessel? Cargo? Xara.

“She wasn’t meant for you,” Dravak said softly, reading his reaction. “The female. She’s a resource, nothing more. Valuable genetic material. We’ve been studying her species for some time now.”

The beast within him snarled, straining against its leash.

“You’ve been playing house,” Dravak continued, his tone mocking. “Playing at being something you’re not. You were engineered for war, Seven. Not domesticity.”

“My name,” the Xenobeast growled, his voice rusty from disuse, “is not Seven.”

Surprise flickered across Dravak’s face—quickly masked. “It speaks. How novel.” He took a step closer. “You don’t have a name. You have a designation. A purpose. One you failed to fulfill.”

“I chose differently.”

“You malfunctioned,” Dravak corrected sharply. “And now you’ve taken something that doesn’t belong to you.”

The Xenobeast’s claws extended, his tendrils flaring with bioluminescence. “She is not yours.”

“No?” Dravak raised an eyebrow. “She’s a specimen, Seven. A test subject. Valuable, certainly, but ultimately replaceable. We’ll do better controlling her genetic potential than letting a failed weapon breed with her.”

Something snapped inside him. The careful control, the strategic patience—all of it vanished in a red haze of fury. With a roar that shook the trees, the Xenobeast lunged.

The guards fired, but he was already moving—a blur of lethal speed. He caught the first guard across the throat, ripping through armor and flesh in one savage swipe. The second managed to get off another shot before the Xenobeast seized him by the neck and slammed him into a tree with enough force to snap his spine.

Dravak had retreated, drawing his own weapon—a neural disruptor designed specifically to incapacitate Zarkari bioweapons. The blast hit the Xenobeast square in

the chest, sending lightning pain through his nervous system.

He staggered, dropped to one knee. The pain was familiar—training exercises, punishment protocols. His body remembered, even as his mind rejected it.

“Still responding to basic commands, I see,” Dravak noted clinically, adjusting the settings on his weapon. “Some programming runs too deep to override.”

The Xenobeast fought through the pain, forcing himself back to his feet. His tendrils whipped forward, knocking the weapon from Dravak’s hand.

Surprise registered on the commander’s face, followed by a flicker of fear. “Impossible. The neural override?—”

“Doesn’t work anymore.” The Xenobeast advanced, his silver eyes glowing with cold rage. “I am not your weapon.”

Dravak backed away, reaching for a secondary weapon at his belt. “You are exactly what we made you to be. Nothing more.”

“You’re wrong.” The Xenobeast lunged again, faster than Dravak could track.

The commander fired wildly, the shots going wide as the Xenobeast seized him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. Dravak kicked, struggling against the iron grip, his face contorting with effort.

“You can’t kill me,” he gasped. “The Dominion will send others. They’ll find her. Take her. Study her.”

The Xenobeast tightened his grip. “No one will find us.”

“She doesn’t belong here,” Dravak wheezed, his face purpling. “With you. You’re an aberration. A mistake.”

“The only mistake,” the Xenobeast growled, “was thinking you could control me.”

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With a powerful heave, he threw Dravak across the clearing. The commander crashed through the underbrush, tumbling down the steep slope toward the river canyon below. He caught himself on an outcropping, dangling precariously over the churning waters.

The Xenobeast stalked to the edge, looking down at his former commander. Dravak's pristine uniform was torn and muddynow, his perfect composure shattered. For the first time, real fear showed in his eyes.

"Seven," he gasped, his fingers slipping on the wet rock. "Help me. That's an order."

The Xenobeast crouched at the edge of the cliff, his silver eyes cold and unforgiving. "My name," he said quietly, "is Ash."

The name felt right on his tongue—a fragment of memory, of identity, reclaimed from the darkness of his past. Something Xara had awakened in him, piece by piece.

Dravak's eyes widened in recognition. "Ash? That designation was erased. You were reset."

"Not erased," Ash corrected. "Just buried. Like me." He watched dispassionately as Dravak's fingers slipped further. "You exiled me to die. Left me here to rot."

"I can fix this," Dravak's voice took on a desperate edge. "Return with me. Bring the female. You'll be reinstated. Rewarded."

Ash tilted his head, studying the commander like a curious specimen. "You still don't

understand. I'm not coming back." He rose to his full height, looking down at the man who had once controlled his existence. "And neither are you."

With deliberate precision, he stepped on Dravak's fingers. The commander screamed, his grip failing. For a moment, he hung suspended in the air, his eyes locked with Ash's in a final look of disbelief.

Then he fell, his scream echoing off the canyon walls until it was swallowed by the roar of the river below.

Ash watched until the churning waters closed over Dravak's body, carrying it away like so much debris. The commander who had defined his existence for so long, who had stripped him of identity and purpose, was gone—broken, discarded, and finally irrelevant.

He stood at the cliff edge for a long moment, the jungle sounds gradually returning around him. The weight of his past seemed to fall away with Dravak, carried downstream and out of his life.

He had a new name now. A new purpose. A mate who saw him as more than a weapon. Pups who trusted him. A home to protect.

He turned away from the canyon and headed back through the jungle toward the cave. Toward Xara. His steps were lighter, his posture different—no longer the prowling of a predator, but the stride of someone returning home.

As he neared the cave, he caught Xara's scent on the breeze. Warm, familiar, beloved. She was waiting for him, worry and relief mingling in her scent signature. The pups would be there too, chirping their excitement at his return.

For the first time since his creation, he felt something like peace settle in his chest.

Dravak was gone. The threat was eliminated. And the future—once a meaningless concept for a weapon with no purpose beyond destruction—stretched before him, full of possibility.

He quickened his pace, eager to return to the ones who had given him back his name, his choice, his life.

He was no longer the Xenobeast.

He was Ash.

And he was going home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Xara paced at the cave entrance, her heart hammering against her ribs. Every shadow in the jungle seemed to stretch toward her, every rustle of leaves made her flinch. The pups sensed her anxiety, their bioluminescent patches pulsing with agitated light as they huddled together on the bed.

“He’s coming back,” she whispered to them. “He has to.”

Hours had passed since he’d gone to confront Vask. The Zarkari commander’s threats still rang in her ears—cold, clinical words that reduced her to a specimen, a resource to be harvested. She’d seen the change in Ash’s eyes when Vask spoke of her that way, watched something ancient and terrible awaken in his silver gaze.

A flicker of movement at the jungle’s edge caught her attention. She grabbed the makeshift spear she’d fashioned, her knuckles white around its shaft.

Then she saw him—his massive silhouette emerging from the crimson foliage,

moving with purpose despite the obvious pain in his gait. Blood streaked his torso, some of it his own, some not.

“Ash,” she breathed.

He looked up at her voice, those silver eyes finding hers across the distance.

She dropped the spear and ran to him, ignoring the ache in her own bruised body from her earlier fight. When she reached him, her hands moved instinctively to the worst of his wounds—a deep gash across his shoulder, another along his ribs.

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“You’re hurt,” she said, gently guiding him toward the cave.

His tendrils brushed her face, a soft, questioning touch. “Dravak?”

“Gone,” he rumbled, the word vibrating through his chest. “Won’t return.”

The simple statement carried the weight of liberation. She felt tears spring to her eyes, unexpected but impossible to hold back. She pressed her forehead against his chest, feeling his heartbeat—strong, steady, alive.

“Let me take care of you,” she whispered.

Inside the cave, the pups greeted them with excited chirps, rushing to climb Ash’s legs despite his injuries. He allowed it, his expression softening as Dot nuzzled against his palm.

She gathered her supplies: the healing moss that grew near the thermal spring, clean water, strips of fiber she’d salvaged from the trees. She carefully cleaned each wound, frowning at the damage.

“Some of these need binding,” she murmured. “The moss will help, but it’s not enough.”

He watched her work, his eyes never leaving her face. There was something different in his gaze now—a clarity, a presence that hadn’t been there before. As if in confronting Vask, he’d confronted the last of his ghosts.

“You fought well,” he said quietly as she pressed a moss poultice to his shoulder, and she smiled

“I had a good teacher.”

His hand caught hers, stilling her movements. “You were already strong.”

The simple statement warmed her more than any elaborate praise could have. She leaned forward, pressing her lips to his—a gentle kiss, an affirmation of life.

A soft chiming sound interrupted them. She pulled back, startled, as three figures appeared at the cave entrance—Tal’shai, their slender bodies glowing with subtle bioluminescence, their eyes reflective in the dim light.

“They’ve come,” he said, making no move to rise despite his wounds.

The tallest of the Tal’shai stepped forward, carrying a woven basket. Their movements were fluid, almost musical, as they approached and knelt before them. The basket contained what looked like ribbons—iridescent, semi-transparent strands that caught the firelight.

“What are those?” she asked.

“Resin bindings,” he explained, his voice low. “A recognition.”

The Tal’shai spoke then, their language a melodic series of clicks and chimes that Xara couldn’t understand. But she recognized the reverence in their gestures, the way they presented the bindings with both hands extended.

Ash translated haltingly. “They say... the forest has witnessed our bond. That we fought as one against those who would harm this place.” He paused, something like

wonder crossing his face. “They accept us as mates.”

The word ‘mates’ sent a shiver through her. It felt primal, ancient—and absolutely right.

The Tal’shai continued, and his eyes widened slightly. “They wish to share knowledge with you. They say you have... the heart of a healer. That you should know their ways.”

She looked at the delicate beings, then back at Ash. “Tell them I would be honored.”

As he translated, the Tal’shai’s bioluminescent patterns brightened with what she interpreted as pleasure. The tallest one approached, taking one of the resin bindings from the basket. With ceremonial precision, they wrapped it around her wrist, then Ash’s, binding them together.

The resin was warm against her skin, almost alive. As it settled, it seemed to mold itself to her, becoming a perfect fit—neither too tight nor too loose.

The Tal’shai spoke again, and this time, she thought she caught fragments of meaning—protection, unity, growth.

“What did they say?” she whispered.

His voice was rough with emotion. “That we are now part of their protection. That they will watch over us, as we watched over each other.”

The Tal’shai completed the ritual by placing small pouches of what looked like seeds or spores near the fire, then bowed deeply before retreating. Their departure was as silent as their arrival, leaving only the faint echo of chimes in the air.

She examined the binding on her wrist, marveling at how it caught the light. “It’s beautiful.”

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“It’s a living resin,” he explained, his fingers tracing the pattern. “It grows with the wearer, strengthens over time. The Tal’shai consider it sacred—they rarely offer it to outsiders.”

“Yet they gave it to us.”

“To you,” he corrected. “They saw what I saw from the beginning—your strength, your compassion.” His hand moved to cup her face. “Your light.”

The pups had settled on their bed, watching them with curious eyes. Soldier yawned, his tiny fangs glinting in the firelight.

She finished tending his wounds, binding the deeper ones with strips of fiber. Her touch lingered on each scar, each mark that told the story of his survival. When she was done, she pressed her lips to the largest scar—the one that ran across his chest, old and dark against his silver skin.

“We’re safe now,” she whispered.

His arms encircled her, pulling her against him. The resin binding on her wrist pulsed gently, as if responding to her quickening heartbeat.

“Safe,” he agreed, his voice a rumble against her ear.

They moved together to their bed, careful not to disturb the sleeping pups. His tendrils curled around her, stroking her skin with exquisite gentleness. His silver eyes glowed in the dim light, watching her with hunger and reverence.

She undressed slowly, her movements deliberate. There was no need to rush now—no danger lurking beyond their walls, no enemy hunting them through the jungle. Just this moment, this connection.

Ash's hands traced the curves of her body, his touch both worshipful and possessive. When his mouth found hers, she felt the last of her tension melt away, replaced by a building heat that coursed through her veins.

They made love with a new kind of freedom—unhurried, exploratory. His strength contained, channeled into pleasure rather than survival. Her fear transformed into trust, into surrender. The resin bindings on their wrists glowed softly in the darkness, pulsing in time with their joined rhythm.

Afterward, they lay tangled together, her head resting on his chest, his tendrils wrapped protectively around her. The pups had migrated to curl against their legs, their soft chirps blending with the ambient sounds of the jungle beyond.

She traced lazy patterns on his skin, watching the bioluminescent markings that rippled in response to her touch. The cave that had once seemed so alien, so temporary, now felt different. The bed they'd built together, the fire that never fully went out, the small treasures they'd collected—bits of crystal, interesting shells, tools they'd crafted.

The realization settled over her like a warm blanket: this was home.

Not the sterile laboratory she'd left behind on Earth, with its fluorescent lights and white walls. Not the crowded apartment where she'd lived alone among thousands. This place—wild, dangerous, beautiful—had become her sanctuary. With him. With them.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, his voice soft in the darkness.

She smiled, nestling closer. “I’m thinking that I never expected to find home on an alien planet.”

His arms tightened around her. “You miss your world.”

It wasn’t quite a question, but she answered anyway. “I miss certain things. Books. Coffee.” She laughed softly. “Indoor plumbing.”

His chest rumbled with amusement. “I can build better facilities.”

“I know you can.” She propped herself up on one elbow to look at him. “But I don’t miss my old life. Not really. It was... empty. I had my work, my research, but nothing else.” Her fingers traced the line of his jaw. “Nothing like this.”

Dot crawled up between them, demanding attention with insistent chirps. He gently scooped her up, cradling her against his chest where she promptly fell back asleep.

“The Tal’shai will teach you,” he said. “Their knowledge of this world’s biology is vast. You can continue your work here.”

The thought filled her with unexpected excitement. “A whole new ecosystem to study. New species, new adaptations.” She grinned. “I might need to start keeping notes.”

“I’ll find you materials,” he promised.

She settled back against him, watching the firelight dance across the cave walls. Outside, the jungle hummed with life—dangerous, yes, but also vibrant, complex, fascinating. Inside, wrapped in his arms with the pups nestled against them, she felt a sense of belonging she’d never experienced before.

This wasn't just survival anymore. This was living.

As sleep began to claim her, her thoughts drifted to the future they might build here—expanding their home, learning from the Tal'shai, raising the pups, perhaps even...

She placed her hand over his where it rested on her stomach, imagining possibilities she'd never considered before. The resin binding on her wrist pulsed gently, as if in agreement.

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Home, she thought again as her eyes closed. Not where I was born, but where I belong.

In the last moments before sleep took her, she felt his tendrils curl more securely around her, his heartbeat strong and steady beneath her cheek. Safe. Protected. Loved.

Home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ash waited until Xara's breathing deepened into the steady rhythm of sleep. The pups were nestled against her, their small bodies pulsing with bioluminescence in time with their dreams. He watched them for a long moment, memorizing the sight—his family, safe in the home they'd built together.

The resin binding on his wrist glowed softly in the darkness, and he traced his finger over it, feeling the connection it represented. Not a chain, but a choice—his choice. Hers.

He slipped from the bed with the silence that had once made him the perfect weapon. Now he used that stealth for a different purpose—to protect what was his without disturbing their rest.

The jungle welcomed him as he stepped outside, its familiar dangers no match for his heightened senses. He moved through the darkness with purpose, following the scent trail of the Zarkari soldiers back to their ship. Their blood still stained the forest floor

in places, but the jungle was already beginning to reclaim those spots, vines creeping over darkened patches, luminescent fungi sprouting from enriched soil.

Nature was efficient here. Within days, there would be no trace of the battle.

But the ship remained—a gleaming intrusion of polished metal and harsh angles among the wild beauty of the forest. It stood where Xara's shuttle had once crashed, its landing gear deep in the soft earth, and he approached cautiously, his muscles tensed for any sign of automated defenses. The Zarkari were nothing if not thorough, but the ship's systems remained dormant. Vask had been arrogant to the end, never imagining his prize weapon might actually defeat him.

The entry ramp was still extended, spattered with mud and blood. He paused at its base as memories flooded over him.

He'd been on ships like this countless times. He'd been transported in them, deployed from them, and returned to them covered in the blood of enemies who never stood a chance. Each mission followed by decontamination, debriefing, reconditioning.

His tendrils coiled tightly against his skull, but he forced them to relax, reminding himself that those days were over. Vask was dead and the Zarkari believed this planet uninhabitable. There was no reason for them to return—unless they came looking for their missing commander.

He climbed the ramp, his claws clicking softly against the metal. Inside, the ship was all clean lines and utilitarian design with nothing wasted, and nothing unnecessary.

The bridge was small but efficiently arranged, familiar. He settled into the pilot's chair, his big body barely fitting a space designed for more typical Zarkari. His hands hovered over the controls, the memories returning with shocking ease.

The console lit up at his touch, recognizing the genetic markers they'd never bothered to remove from their database. Why would they? He was supposed to be dead, after all.

[IDENTITY CONFIRMED: K-7]

The text flashed across the screen, and a cold weight settled in his stomach. He wanted to forget that designation had ever existed.

He wasn't K-7 anymore. He was Ash now.

But K-7 still possessed some useful knowledge and he quickly accessed the ship's navigation systems. The Zarkari language came back to him easily, despite years without seeing it. Some things, it seemed, were burned too deeply to forget.

He set the coordinates carefully—a path that would take the ship far from their planet, deep into the empty space between star systems. No planets to crash into, no ships to encounter—just an endless void.

Next, he accessed the ship's databanks to find out how much Vask had recorded. His claws extended involuntarily, scratching the surface of the console as he uncovered the details of Vask's transaction with an Alnuk trader—a private transaction.

His tendrils whipped through the air as he delved deeper into the ship's systems, searching for any transmission logs. Had Vask already sent information back to the Dominion about her planet?

[COMMUNICATION LOG: EMPTY]

Relief flooded through him. Vask had been waiting to secure his prize before reporting back. Typical. The commander had always hoarded credit, presenting only

complete victories to his superiors.

That arrogance would now protect Xara's world—and theirs.

He quickly set to work, programming the ship's self-destruct sequence. It was simple enough; all Zarkari vessels were equipped with such measures to prevent their technology from falling into enemy hands.

He set the timer for twelve hours—enough time for the ship to reach deep space, far from any inhabited worlds. Then he systematically erased all records of the mission, of Earth's coordinates, of Xara's existence.

As far as the Zarkari Dominion would know, Commander Vask and his team had simply disappeared on a routine patrol. A regrettable loss, but not one worth extensive investigation—not with a war still raging across three star systems. A war they were trying very hard to conceal from the rest of the Kaisarian Empire. He briefly considered sending a message to the Royal Fleet, then just as quickly discarded the idea. While it would no doubt be satisfying to bring the wrath of the Empire down on the Dominion, there was no guarantee they would stop there and he had no wish to attract their attention.

His finger hovered over the final activation sequence. Once initiated, the ship would seal itself, lift off, and follow its programmed course to destruction. There would be no stopping it.

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He hesitated as a new thought occurred to him. The ship contained supplies, weapons, medical equipment—things that could make their life easier. Things that could help protect Xara and the pups.

But the ship also contained risks—tracking devices and automated distress protocols that might activate despite his programming. The Zarkari were nothing if not thorough in their contingency planning.

No. The safest option was total destruction.

He pressed the sequence, watching as the ship's systems locked into their final protocol. The entry ramp began to retract even as he leapt from it, landing easily on the forest floor.

The engines hummed to life, a low vibration that sent nearby creatures scurrying for cover, and he stepped back, watching as the vessel rose slowly into the night sky, its sleek form briefly silhouetted against the largest moon.

He tracked its ascent until it was nothing more than a pinpoint of light among thousands, indistinguishable from the stars themselves. Then he turned and began the journey home.

The jungle felt different now. Still dangerous, still wild, but no longer hostile. This was his territory, his world. The place where he had found something he'd never expected to find—peace.

As he moved through the darkness, his thoughts turned to Xara. To the life they were

building together. To the future that now stretched before them, unmarked by the shadows of his past.

The Tal'shai had recognized their bond immediately, offering the sacred resin bindings without hesitation. They had seen what he was only beginning to understand—that he and Xara were meant to find each other. That together, they were something neither could be alone.

The cave came into view, its entrance framed by the bioluminescent vines that she was carefully training into a welcoming curtain. She'd started methodically cataloging the planet's flora, applying her scientific knowledge to their survival with a passion that both amused and impressed him.

Inside, everything was as he'd left it. The fire burned low, casting a warm glow over their home. The pups had migrated in his absence, now curled in a tight pile against her stomach as she slept peacefully, one hand outstretched across the space where he had been.

He slipped silently into their bed, settling carefully beside her. She stirred slightly, her hand finding his arm even in sleep, and a small smile curved her lips.

"You came back," she murmured, not fully awake.

He covered her hand with his own, his tendrils gently brushing her cheek.

"Always," he promised, his voice a low rumble in the darkness.

She nestled against him, already drifting back to sleep, trusting and content. The pups shifted, sensing his return, but didn't wake.

He gazed down at them—his family, his home, his future. Everything he'd never

dared to want, never believed he deserved. Yet here they were, trusting him. Loving him.

Somewhere high above, beyond the atmosphere, the Zarkari ship continued its journey into the void. Soon it would be gone, the last physical link to his past destroyed in the vacuum of space.

That life was over.

He was no longer K-7, the perfect weapon, the failed experiment. He was Ash now. Mate. Protector. Father to the pups. And perhaps, someday, to children of his own.

The thought filled him with wonder and terror in equal measure. Could he and Xara even reproduce? Their species were so different. But the Tal'shai had hinted it might be possible, with their help. Their bioengineering skills were subtle but profound.

It was a question for another day. For now, it was enough to hold her close, to feel her heartbeat against his skin, to know that they were safe.

He closed his eyes as his tendrils curled protectively around Xara and the pups. For the first time since he could remember, there was no tension in his muscles, no alertness for danger in his mind.

Just peace. Just home.

And for the first time in his long existence, that was enough.

EPILOGUE

Xara carefully secured the living sample case, watching as the modified plant tissue sealed itself around the glass containment field. Another successful adaptation of

Tal'Shai biotechnology. She'd spent weeks perfecting this particular strain—a luminescent moss that absorbed toxins from the air while providing soft, ambient light.

“The germination cycle should complete within three Dotr phases,” Tavi'Sha explained, her scales shifting through patterns of blue-green that Xara had come to recognize as excitement. “The neural pathways will strengthen with each growth cycle.”

“I still can't believe you can literally grow technology,” she said, securing the case to her belt. “On Earth, we were still figuring out how to make biodegradable plastics.”

Tavi'Sha's multifaceted eyes blinked in sequence—the Tal'Shai equivalent of laughter. “Your methods were... separate. You built machines. We grow partnerships.”

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A philosophical difference that had fascinated Xara from the moment she'd begun working with the Tal'Shai. Their entire civilization was based on symbiotic relationships rather than exploitation. They didn't conquer their environment—they collaborated with it.

“Will you return when the binding ceremony begins?” Tavi'Sha asked, her neck translator producing the slightly mechanical words that she'd grown accustomed to.

“I wouldn't miss it,” she promised, placing her hand over her heart in the gesture of respect she'd learned. “The hybridization project is too important.”

The Tal'Shai elder's scales rippled with approval. “Your understanding grows quickly.”

A familiar chirping sound drew her attention to the jungle's edge. Three distinct patterns of bioluminescent flashes announced the arrival of her family before they emerged from the dense foliage.

The Graxlin pups—no longer babies, but not quite adults—bounded toward her, their elongated limbs carrying them in graceful arcs across the clearing. Behind them, moving with predatory silence despite his size, came Ash.

Even now, the sight of him made her breath catch. Power and grace contained in a form that had once terrified her, now filled her with warmth and safety. His silver eyes found hers immediately, and the corner of his mouth lifted in that almost-smile she'd come to treasure.

“Look who’s here,” she called to the pups as they circled her legs, chirping excitedly. “Did you behave for your father?”

Trouble flashed his patches in a pattern that could only be described as mischievous. Soldier and Dot, the other two, maintained more dignified postures, though their excited chirps gave them away.

“They found something,” Ash said, his deep voice still a rarity that made her smile whenever he chose to use it. “Show her.”

Dot proudly extended a delicate limb, uncurling it to reveal a small, perfectly formed crystal that pulsed with inner light.

“Heart stone,” she breathed, recognizing the rare mineral formation. “Where did you find it?”

The pups chirped in unison, their patches flashing in a complex pattern that told her the story of their discovery near the underground river.

“Clever hunters,” she praised, and they preened under her attention.

Tavi’Sha made a graceful gesture of farewell, her scales shifting to the formal departure pattern. “Until the new moon,” she said, then turned and melted back into the living structures of the village.

Ash stepped closer, his sensory tendrils reaching for her in a gesture that had become as natural as breathing. They brushed her cheek, her neck, then settled with a gentle pressure against her shoulder.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice for her alone.

She nodded, and they began the journey home.

The jungle that had once seemed so alien and hostile now felt like an extension of their territory. She recognized the warning signs of the carnivorous vines, knew which fruits were safe to touch, could identify the distant calls of predators and prey alike.

They moved at an easy pace, Ash occasionally lifting her over particularly rough terrain despite her protests that she wasn't fragile. The pups ranged ahead and around them, practicing their hunting skills on small, harmless creatures that darted through the underbrush.

"Trouble's getting faster," she observed as the largest pup successfully caught a flutter-bug, his patches glowing with pride.

"Soldier is more precise," he countered, pointing to where the middle pup was carefully stalking a camouflaged leaf-jumper.

"And Dot is still Dot," she laughed as the smallest pup abandoned the hunt entirely to investigate a patch of color-changing fungi.

Their home came into view as they crested the final ridge—no longer just a cave, but a complex that blended seamlessly with the surrounding landscape. The entrance was now framed by living archways of bioluminescent vines. To one side, a carefully tended garden of medicinal plants thrived. On the other, a series of terraced pools collected rainwater, filtered it through natural stone, and delivered it to their living space.

Inside, the transformation was even more dramatic. What had once been a single chamber was now a network of rooms, some carved from stone, others grown from Tal'Shai biotech. Light filtered through translucent panels of living tissue that

adjusted their opacity with the sun's movement.

The central living area featured a hearth surrounded by comfortable seating made from a combination of salvaged materials and grown substrates. The pups had their own sleeping nook, though they still preferred to pile together with their adoptive parents most nights.

She immediately set to preparing their evening meal while he secured the perimeter—a ritual neither of them had abandoned despite the relative peace of recent months. The pups helped in their own way, bringing her ingredients and chittering excitedly about their day's adventures.

As she worked, she felt his eyes on her, and she glanced up to find him watching her with an intensity that still made her stomach flutter. But there was something else in his gaze tonight—a shadow of concern.

She didn't press him. After months together, she'd learned that he spoke when ready, not before. Instead, she continued preparing their meal, humming softly to herself as she worked.

The pups eventually tired of helping and curled together in their nook, patches pulsing in the synchronized pattern that indicated they were sharing dreams—a phenomenon she was still documenting in her ongoing study of their biology.

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When the meal was ready, they sat together near the fire, eating in comfortable silence. His tendrils occasionally brushed against her skin—a habit that had evolved from cautious exploration to affectionate gesture.

“The Tal’Shai sent a message,” he finally said, setting his plate aside. “A trading vessel will enter orbit within the week.”

She nodded slowly. “I know. Tavi’Sha mentioned it today.”

His silver eyes studied her face. “It could take you back. To your world.”

The directness of his statement surprised her. “Is that what’s been bothering you?”

He didn’t deny it, which was answer enough. His tendrils coiled tightly—a sign of distress he couldn’t otherwise express.

“Do you think about it?” he asked, his voice carefully neutral. “Going home?”

She set her own plate down and moved closer to him, taking his large hand between both of hers. His skin was warm, the texture like fine leather over steel.

“I am home,” she said simply.

His eyes searched hers, looking for doubt, for hesitation. Finding none, his tendrils relaxed slightly.

“You had a life before. People who must miss you.”

She thought of her old existence—the endless grant applications, the departmental politics, the lonely apartment. She'd had colleagues, not friends. Professional respect, not love.

“I had a job before,” she corrected gently. “I have a life now.”

To emphasize her point, she took his hand and placed it against her abdomen, where the slightest curve had begun to show.

“Especially now,” she added with a smile.

His eyes widened, tendrils suddenly alert and questing. “You’re certain?”

“The Tal’Shai confirmed it last week. The genetic modifications they helped with are working. Our baby is growing perfectly.”

A sound escaped him—half growl, half something else entirely. His tendrils wrapped protectively around her waist, and he pulled her against his chest.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded, though there was no anger in his voice—only wonder.

“I wanted to be sure,” she admitted. “And I wanted to find the right moment.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, a gesture of intimacy that had become their own. “A child,” he breathed. “Our child.”

She nodded, tears of happiness pricking her eyes. “The first of its kind, according to Tavi’Sha. Human and... whatever magnificent thing you are.”

His laugh was a rare, beautiful sound. “I am yours,” he said simply. “As you are mine.”

The pups, sensing the emotional shift, stirred from their nook and bounded over, chirping questions. When Xara explained in simple terms, they became even more excited, patches flashing in patterns of joy as they pressed their small forms against her stomach.

“They’ll be protective siblings,” Ash observed, watching the pups’ display with obvious pride.

“God help any predator that comes near this child,” she agreed, laughing as Spark performed what could only be described as a victory dance.

Later, as they lay together in their bed, the pups curled at their feet, Ash’s tendrils traced gentle patterns across her skin. His hand rested protectively over the slight swell of her stomach.

“I never thought I would have this,” he confessed in the darkness. “A mate. A family. A future.”

She turned in his arms to face him, tracing the sharp angle of his jaw. “Neither did I. Not really.”

“Are you sure you won’t regret staying?” he asked, the last shadow of doubt in his voice.

She smiled and pressed her lips to his. “The only thing I would regret is leaving. This is where I belong—with you, with our children. This is our world now.”

His arms tightened around her, and his tendrils wrapped them both in a protective cocoon. Outside, the jungle pulsed with life—dangerous and beautiful, just like their love. But inside their home, there was only safety, warmth, and the promise of tomorrow.

As she drifted towards sleep, she felt the baby move—just the slightest flutter, like the beat of a butterfly’s wing. A new life, born of two worlds, growing strong within her.

She had crashed on this planet a prisoner, become a survivor, then a mate, and now she would be a mother. Each transformation had brought her closer to who she was meant to be.

Not Dr. Xara Reyes, isolated academic.

Just Xara. Beloved. Protected. Home.