



A Monster's Light (Kadrixan Mates #5)

Author: *Lynnea Lee*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Two years ago, my best friend vanished without a trace, and I've been looking for her ever since. The terrifying alien warrior before me holds the key to finding her, but I'll have to give up everything I've ever known to help him break out of a high-security prison.

And there's a catch. It's spring, and everyone knows the fearsome alien warriors turn into mindless beasts when their rutting season hits.

As we make our daring escape through the wilds of Vokira, dodging every murder bot and robohound our enemies throw our way, I start seeing the brave and hyper-protective Kadrixan in a very different light. It's too late by the time I realize the biggest danger isn't to my body but to my heart.

What will happen to us when the rut is over? Will Gnnar return to looking for his fated mate and leave me forever? And will we even make it back to his stronghold alive?

A Monster's Light is a sci-fi alien romance with a growly hero, lots of action, and an HEA, guaranteed. This series has dystopian themes. Best enjoyed as part of a series.

Total Pages (Source): 25

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 11:07 am

I fidgeted with the hem of my top as I waited nervously in the stark, white room. Security had patted me down thoroughly, taken any recording devices I had, and shoved them into a locked box behind the counter. The only electronic device I was allowed to keep was my temporary in-ear translator, something required to do my job.

Omnia Pictures, my employer, even had to prove that it didn't have recording abilities, which was a good thing, both for them and for me. I didn't want our conversation recorded at all. I had ulterior motives for my trip today.

Behind that heavily armored metal door was a Kadrixan warrior. The demon-looking aliens lived on another continent here on Vokira, the one with the large mountain range. They'd arrived only about five or six years ago, and Nova Vita had started trading with them. The colony would provide women for their yearly rut, and they would give us the ore they mined from the mountains. That treaty had ended about two years ago, just around the time my best friend, Julie, went missing.

She'd disappeared right after successfully fighting off a kidney infection. She'd been MIA for over a week when I got the message that she was finally being released from the hospital and that she'd call me when she got home. But she never did. And she never replied back either.

Julie and I met during a memorial service commemorating those who'd been lost to the Big Tsunami. We'd both been teenagers then, but since our parents had left us both sizable sums, they'd considered us fully independent adults. On Nova Vita, majority status was determined not by your age but by your ability to support yourself. Lost and with no one else, we'd moved in together. Since then, we'd

traversed life as sisters from different misters.

We'd lived together until I got hired officially at Omnia Pictures after three years of unpaid internship. Just in time too, because the nest egg Mom had left for me was starting to run out. One of the criteria for working there was that we had to live in company-approved housing in a company-approved neighborhood with no housemates, because of the sensitive nature of our work.

When Julie had gotten that infection and went to the hospital, all communications stopped. I figured it was because she couldn't take calls in the hospital. When she continued to ignore me after the single message saying she was going home, I'd shown up at her place to find it empty. And by empty, I meant completely cleaned out.

I'd immediately gone to the nearest enforcement station to make a missing person's report. They'd waved me off and told me she'd gone to the Utopia Project because of medical bills. One of the officers had boasted about arresting her himself for non-payment, and it had taken all my willpower not to punch him in the balls and end up being arrested as well.

I didn't completely believe them though. There was no way she would've chosen the Project, not with what I'd told her about it.

The whole thing was a lie. At the time, we didn't have proof, but the entire colony knew about it now. The Utopia Project wasn't the perfect society where the government gave you everything you needed to live like it was advertised, but a thinly veiled excuse to strip rights from poor colonists so they could be used for anything the colony-owned corporations desired. A lifetime of free food and board in exchange for releasing your right to property and autonomy was just slavery repackaged, no matter how many catchy slogans they slapped on it.

The door opened and a guard stepped out, a frown plastered to his face. “They have the monster sedated just enough to see you now.”

“Why does he need to be sedated?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be hard for me to interview him if he’s all drugged up?”

The man shrugged and said, “It’s spring.”

It took me a moment to realize what that meant. Springtime meant the rut.

“Wait, he’s not...”

“No, not yet,” the guard said quickly. “I don’t think. It’s just a precaution because you’re a woman. But don’t worry. I’ll be right there if he goes feral.” He tapped the energy weapon strapped across his chest. “I won’t let the monster hurt you.”

“I see.” I followed the guard nervously through the hallway, hoping that I’d actually get some time alone with the Kadrixan warrior so I could ask the real questions and not the silly, useless ones on my clipboard.

As we went through several more locked doors, each corridor featureless and identical, I touched the top button of my blouse, rolling it nervously between my fingers. I still couldn’t believe they’d overlooked the signal jammer completely during their search.

The guard stopped in front of another metal door, this one with a window just above my head, clearly designed for someone taller—proof that we were still in a man’s world no matter how we spun it. I got up on my tiptoes, trying to look through, but I was still too short. The guard opened not one but three locks before reaching for the door handle.

I frowned. “Isn’t that a little excessive?”

“No. The Kadrixans are beasts.”

I swallowed the retort that animals weren’t usually kept in super-secret detention facilities behind four metal doors and multiple locks and just nodded.

“Don’t cross the red line on the floor.”

“Why? Is it going to shock me?” I looked warily down at my left wrist, where they’d installed my identity chip when I was born. Law enforcement didn’t need bars to hold Nova Vitans when they could just deliver a debilitating shock to any prisoners who tried to leave their cells. They’d also used this tactic to quell protests.

The fact that this Kadrixan was locked up must mean that they hadn’t installed any chips in him yet, or perhaps the chips didn’t work on them. Was that even possible?

“No, nothing like that,” said the guard. “The red line is how far the monster can reach, even strapped to the wall. I’m not actually allowed to kill him because he’s too important of an asset. So don’t step past the red line.”

So much for his previous proclamation that he wouldn’t let the monster hurt me.

“Okay, stay behind the red line. Got it.”

The door swung open, and I gasped at the sight of the alien warrior chained up against the wall. I’d seen them in videos before. Hell, I’d been the one who’d written the article about the meeting between our officials and their leader. But I’d thought maybe they’d doctored the videos to make them look more like old-Earth-style demons—we did that a lot to prove our point at Omnia Pictures—but now I knew they hadn’t.

The one before me had dark red leathery skin and the telltale horns and wings that made them so demonic-looking. I knew that if he stuck out his tongue, it would be forked. But unlike the one that had met with our leaders, this one wasn't wearing a human-styled suit. Instead, he had on a shredded pair of leather pants and nothing else. The lower half of his pants had been ripped off, showing their backward-looking, satyr-like knees. I knew from my research that their knees weren't actually backward. They just looked that way because what we thought of as their knees were actually their ankles. But faced with it in real life, it was hard to distinguish the difference.

But I didn't have much time to focus on his knees because what really shocked me was how thin and gaunt he was. The ones I'd seen had been big, burly specimens, extremely masculine and clearly in their prime. Wearing human-style suits, I'd even venture to say they were devilishly attractive, though I'd never say that out loud. This one had been starved. His muscles, while still present, were sinewy at best now. And his once chiseled cheekbones were hollow, and his jawline too sharp.

How had that happened so fast? According to my sources, he had only been captured a day and a half ago. It matched the timing of the videos and images that had come out from citizens of a transport crash at the edge of the colony. There was a long, red, angry line even brighter than his skin running across his chest, and patches of his leathery skin were lighter than others.

"Was this from the transport fire?" I asked, taking a few steps forward. I wasn't expecting a response, but I got one anyway.

"Yes," the guard said from behind me.

I eyed the tubes attached to his arm. "Is he being given healing drugs?" I'd heard about a special drug made by Exotech Pharmaceuticals that can speed healing up and make scars a thing of the past.

“Him? Hell no. We don’t waste expensive drugs on prisoners. That’s all-natural. Can you believe all that was second and third-degree burns just yesterday?”

“He healed this much in one day?”

“Yeah, they weren’t kidding when they said the monsters can... shit...” The guard shook his head. “What clearance do you have?”

“Everyone knows they have crazy regenerative powers,” I said, brushing off his concern and trying my damndest to look nonchalant and totally not freaking out at what I’d just learned. “That’s not story-worthy. Trust me, I know. That’s like saying the sun is bright.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

My gaze fell on the Kadrixan again. He hadn’t moved or shown any signs that he knew I was here. He just hung there.

“He’s passed out. I can’t interview him if he’s unresponsive.”

“Trust me, lady, you don’t want him awake.”

“Then why have me here at all? I can’t leave without my story. You know Omnia Pictures has the exclusive on this one, and we have to make it count. There are already rumors floating around claiming that Nova Vita is kidnapping Kadrixans and trying to start a war. The people are scared and angry. That’s why I’m here: to calm their worries and put a stop to all the fake news.”

That was rich, coming from the woman tasked to write the ultimate fake news meant to make the colony look like the good guys. But I didn’t care about that. If things went according to plan, I’d be long gone before they realized I didn’t plan on writing

anything. I needed the Kadrixan to be awake and functioning. The truth about where Julie had gone was so close I could taste it.

I'd learned early in my career that my life as a journalist was a farce. Sure, I could go find the truth, but I'd never be allowed to publish it. Omnia Pictures was elbow-deep in every single media outlet in our colony. Just like their namesake implied, they literally owned them all. Any new companies that popped up were inevitably absorbed by the state-owned media giant.

I'd been in the industry long enough to know that my "research" was done just to find enough truth to make the lies believable. My real job was to write pro-colony pieces and keep the public of Nova Vita under control by feeding them what the big bosses wanted them to hear.

I hated my job. But I didn't dare say that out loud, especially when I was so close to finding out the truth of what had happened to Julie. It had taken me years to get my bosses at Omnia Pictures to trust me so I'd get the juiciest pieces. That was the reason why I was here in this top-secret detention facility to begin with.

I was one hundred and ten percent sure that Julie had gone to the Kadrixans for the rut and not to Utopia. It didn't matter to her that the Kadrixans looked like demons of old Earth; she was more frightened of the colony and the fact that no one ever came back from the Utopia Project.

The guard sighed. "They have it all wrong. We didn't attack the Kadrixans at all."

I put a hand on the guard's forearm. "I know, and I'm here to clear it all up. People have to trust their media, or else things will go sideways. At Omnia Pictures, we understand that."

I tried not to let the sour taste of the lies show; Omnia Pictures didn't care about

anything other than views and profit.

My shpiel worked because the guard said, “The doctor left for his office, but I’ll call him and see what I can do.”

I pulled the chair that was leaning against the side of the Kadrixan’s small cell to the red line, but instead sitting on it, I sat down on the ground to get a better look at his face, wanting to study him as the guard made the call just outside the door. As my eyes traveled from his chest to his head, I noticed his lashes flutter. With his head bowed, it hadn’t been obvious, but from my lowered position, it was.

The demon warrior wasn’t passed out at all. He was awake and alert. And he had his eyes on me.

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I knew the moment the little human female realized I was awake. Her heart sped up, and her posture straightened. I wondered if she was going to call out for help. The guard was right there, his eyes on his device.

But instead of alerting the guard, she continued to stare up at me from where she sat cross-legged on the ground. From her lower vantage point, our eyes met without me having to lift my head. Her eyes were the green of springtime leaves, and I wanted to reach out and touch her.

I almost did too. I barely stopped myself before the cameras aimed at me caught the movement.

She was the most beautiful female I'd ever seen.

She wore her golden brown hair in a knot at the top of her head, held up with a stick. Several wisps of hair fell forward to frame her face. Instead of fear, there was curiosity there. There was no doubt that she knew I was awake now.

"Why are you on the ground?" asked the guard, breaking the silence.

The female yelped, her hand going to her chest. "You scared me."

"I didn't mean to. Just surprised that you're on the ground."

I kept my eyes half-closed, peering through my lashes.

"I'm trying to feel more grounded," she lied. "I do that when I'm nervous." She got

back up and sat on the chair.

The guard seemed to believe her. “Right, grounding. My legally bound partner talks about that. She says it helps her feel connected to the planet. Doc said he adjusted the dose remotely, and he should be waking up soon. The dose will go back up in ten minutes.”

Sure enough, I started feeling a little stronger. Would it be enough to break out of these chains? I stopped the thought. Even if I did, there were still three solid doors and several guards with tranquilizer guns between me and the open skies. I was weak too; the weakest I’d ever been. Now was not the time to attempt to break out. It would only give away the fact that my body had developed a tolerance for the drug they’d been using to sedate me.

I lolled my head to the side before lifting it slowly and blinking exaggeratedly as if struggling to wake.

“See, he’s waking now.” The guard’s hand went to his weapon.

I made him nervous. Good. He should be. If I wanted to, I could break out of these chains now and tear him apart. But as satisfying as that would be, it wouldn’t help me escape. I did, however, rattle my chains a little to make him nervous.

My action managed to put the guard on edge as expected, but not the female.

The room seemed to brighten as the female turned her gaze at me and grinned. “Hi, my name is Dana. And I’m here for Omnia Pictures, Nova Vita’s most trusted news source.” The line was clearly rehearsed, and by the slight eye roll, which was well hidden from the camera behind her, I had a feeling she didn’t quite believe it. Interesting.

Her eyes darted quickly to the side where the guard stood leaning against the door to my cell, and she frowned. “Can you guard me from outside in the hallway? There’s no way I’m going to get any decent information out of him with you glaring at him like you’re going to shoot him for replying.”

The guard frowned. “I can’t leave you alone in here with him.”

“The guy’s chained up. And It’s bad enough that I couldn’t have my recording devices inside and have to write everything down by hand. Come on. Work with me here. Do you think I want to be here any longer than I have to?” She stood from her chair and took the guard gently by the arm. “I’ll scream if I need help. You look so strong and capable in that uniform. I can trust you to keep me safe, right?”

“Of course I can keep you safe.” The guard stood a little taller, preening at her compliment.

“Great. Then stand just outside. I only have ten minutes, remember? We already wasted three.”

“Fine. But don’t go past the red line.”

“You don’t need to tell me again. I’m not suicidal.”

The guard stepped outside, and the heavy door slammed shut behind him.

“Now, where were we?” The female pulled out the stick that held her hair in a bun, and her tresses tumbled down in waves around her shoulders, showing lighter golden pieces that looked bleached from the sun. The scent of her shampoo filled my nostrils, reminiscent of summer fruits. Why did human women enjoy putting food scents in their hair?

Was it to distract us? Because it was working. The added scent highlighted her natural perfume, reminding me it was spring and the rut was near. I forced myself to focus.

She placed the tip of the stick on the clipboard, and I realized it was a writing instrument.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Why are you here?” I asked back, not answering her question.

The humans never let females near us unless they were the ones they’d sent us for the rut, back when the treaty was still valid, but it was clear the colony thought of them as disposable. Many of them arrived cowering and crying, believing they’d been sent to their doom.

This female was not crying or cowering. She looked directly at me, analyzing me from head to toe. I could feel her gaze like a touch as it skated down my body, and I cursed the fact that I was at my weakest. I wanted her to admire my virility; I did not want her pity.

Our eyes met again when she looked back up at my face, but I saw no pity there, only interest.

Who was she? And why was she here?

Touch her. Free yourself and touch her.

I ignored the ridiculous demand. Now was not the time to test for compatibility. I didn’t even know who she was, only that she was supposed to interview me. Was that a euphemism for an interrogation?

Instead of answering, she looked me straight in the eye, then reached up to fidget with a button on her top. Then she turned to look behind her, and as she did, her posture changed.

“We have only a few minutes before the camera starts recording again,” she whispered.

I looked up at the camera in the corner of the room, and sure enough, the tiny blue light was off.

“Tell me how I can help you get out of here.” She put her hand up in a universal sign of surrender. “I know you don’t trust me, but I need your help to find my friend Julie. They told me she was sent to Utopia, but I believe she joined the last rut two years ago.”

Interesting. This wasn’t at all what I’d expected. I tried to recall if I remembered such a name, but all the female names blur together for me. They all sounded so strange.

“Please,” she said, barely audible.

She stood from the chair and stepped toward me, going right past the red line. If I wanted to, I could pull on my chains, reach for her, and use her as a hostage. But what if they considered her expendable and shoot right through her to get to me?

“Tell me how, and I’ll try my best to free you,” she continued, glancing back worriedly at the door. “We can help each other. Please. We don’t have much time. She disappeared two years ago, right before your rutting season. I know she didn’t go to Utopia.”

Something inside told me to trust her. Maybe it was because I could sense her panic growing by the second. It wasn’t at me but at the possibility of getting caught. Unless

she was a consummate actor, she was putting her life on the line to find her friend. That was admirable. Perhaps we could help each other.

“Contact Penelope. She publishes her books through your online shopping service. Shop U? Shop E?” I regret not taking the time to memorize the false name Vostak’s mate published her work under.

“EshopU. Do you mean the books about your ruts that they can’t remove? I know about them. I co-wrote an article on them once.”

“Not about the ruts. The books are about our matings.”

She frowned, clearly not understanding the difference. She would if she’d read the stories.

“Her contact is in every book. Tell her that Gnnar is here and needs extraction.”

“Okay. Is that your name?”

“Affirmative. Gnnar.”

She nodded as she flipped to the back of her clipboard and jotted something down.

“What if she doesn’t believe me? I could be anyone contacting her.”

“If they ask for proof, tell them east of the third peak, marked with my family’s crest.”

She wrote it down but did not ask for details, which was for the best. It was the location of the nest I was building here on Vokira. With it, they would be able to confirm that this female was telling the truth.

“And my friend?”

“I will help find her once I am free,” I promised quietly.

“Thank you.”

Then she flipped back to the first page of her notepad, and her hand went to her top button again. A little bit more loudly and in an extremely professional voice, she said, “Now that we’ve got the introduction out of the way, let’s get to the real reason behind the transport crash. We value the truth and report the news from all sides. I have a few questions, so let’s get started.”

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Re: Time Sensitive! Gnnar needs to have his story written. NOW!

Hi Penny

I was wondering when you are going to write Gnnar's story. When you do, please message me; I'd like to be written into the story as well.

A New Reader

I reread the message for the fifth time. I was scared to give too much away because, surely, Nova Vita was monitoring the contact. I knew how upset many of the colony officials and the owner of EshopU were about these books. I worried that just downloading one would get my name on a list.

That was what we'd told the masses when Omnia Pictures ran an article on them. I didn't know if it was actually true or not, but the article had to include that little caveat; the whole point was to convince people not to download them.

Luckily for me, Omnia Pictures had a copy, and I'd sent it over to myself so I could pull some details from it while writing the article. We had to put just enough truth in our stories so the public couldn't tell it was all just state-run propaganda. I'd wanted to read it, but then all the sordid details of the Utopia Project were leaked, and that had kept me super busy. It had also confirmed what I already knew: that Julie hadn't gone there.

I dug the file back out and transferred it to my phone. Just as Gunnar—that was the closest I could get to pronouncing his name—had said, Penny Wrights' contact info

was at the back of the book. It looked like any other Nova Vita ID number. Here on Nova Vita, we were given a number that was tied to the chip installed at birth. It served as our bank and contact number as well. My entire life was in that chip.

I took a deep breath and pressed the send button. I didn't know what I was expecting, but the chip in my arm did not explode, and no sirens went off in my apartment. Now for the wait.

I stuffed my phone into my pocket and crawled out of my blankets, reminding myself not to look up at the lights. That was another myth I'd had been sent out to debunk: that the colony watches their citizens not just through their phones and devices but cameras built into their dwellings. Unfortunately, instead of debunking the myth, I found irrefutable evidence that my light was actually a recording device.

Still, I had to write a politically correct, colony-friendly article. You know, the whole it's silly to think the colony can watch everyone all the time, and besides, you won't care if you don't have anything to hide, right? shtick. Thing was, they didn't need to watch everyone all the time when there was a record they could check on as needed. And not everybody had these cameras. Julie's place had been a camera-free zone, and that was why we used to hang out there instead of at my place.

So I'd written the article they wanted but added at the end that they could always wrap some tin foil over their lights to be sure. Wink, wink. It was just tongue-in-cheek enough to get past edits. They thought I was making fun of the conspiracy theorists; little did they know that I'd secretly joined the "crazies."

That was the way of my entire career. I'd be told to write an article about something, find out the truth, and then have to write the original article of lies anyway. I had so much on Nova Vita and our corrupt system that I could write a novel. Hell, I could write an entire series.

How my coworkers still believed the very lies they told was shocking. But then, maybe they didn't. Maybe they were all like me, too afraid and powerless to do anything about it. It was a terrible feeling. I wanted to expose them all, but I'd seen what happened to those who tried.

Not only did their words fall on deaf ears, but most of the time, their messages never even reached the masses. Then, they'd disappear forever. But if Penny Wrights could publish her stories from the safety of the Kadrixan's stronghold, maybe I too could finally tell the world everything I knew. That was another reason why I didn't simply want to find Julie but to join the stronghold as well.

I was pretty sure that after my visit with the Kadrixan, those cameras in my apartment were on right now. I had a signal jammer, the one I'd used for the interview, but using it would give me away. Also, I needed to save the battery on it for the next part of my plan. I was too paranoid to plug it in at home or at work.

I still couldn't believe they'd let me walk right out of the secret facility and into a guarded, windowless transport that took me straight to my office. So it must mean they hadn't noticed that for five whole-ass minutes, their surveillance video had been looped. I hoped that by the time someone went through the feed and found the anomaly, I'd be well on my way out of the colony.

My phone vibrated, and I dove right back under the blankets to check the screen. Penny Wrights. Holy crap. She was calling me! I'd expected her to message me back. I picked the call up even as I questioned how I could keep the conversation muted.

"Hello," I whispered.

"Who are you, and what do you know about Gnnar?" asked a female voice.

She was going straight for the kill. I hesitated, knowing that my response was

probably being recorded. I wasn't sure whispering worked.

"The lights in my room are too bright," I said carefully. "Let me get to a better location." I rolled my eyes at how ridiculous I sounded. I'd gone full tin-foil hat.

"What? Oh... oh I see. Alright, answer what you can while you do that."

Did that mean she understood what I meant? I got out from under the blanket, quickly threw on my jacket, and grabbed the pack I'd prepacked before walking out into the hallway and heading straight for the stairs.

"Okay, I'm walking."

"Great. I'm Penny. And according to your contact information, you work for Omnia Pictures?"

"Yes, I do, but this isn't... they have nothing to do with this. This is for me... and uh... him." Argh! This was so awkward. I had no idea if she understood what I meant or if she thought I was a total loon. I did feel a little crazy right now as I stepped outside into the chilly, early evening air.

"I see. Well, Nova Vita can't listen in to our calls or read our messages. So once you get somewhere safe, tell me everything I need to know."

Well, that was convenient. I jogged down the street, around the corner, and into an alleyway I knew was devoid of any cameras. Still, I covered my mouth and whispered, just in case.

I told her everything that had happened. About looking for my friend and about meeting Gnnar—she said the spelling was closer to the proper Kadrixan pronunciation, but I honestly couldn't hear the difference. I explained how I'd asked

him to help me find my friend, and that he directed me to contact her. I even told her about the signal jammer.

“And he said to tell you, and I quote ‘east of the third peak, marked with my family’s crest’ in case you don’t believe me.”

“Huh, so that’s where he built his nest.”

“Nest?”

“Yeah, you know, for his future mate.”

I didn’t know because I hadn’t actually read her books. I really had to get on that when I had the chance. Some Kadrixan smut sounded interesting now that I’d met Gnnar.

“What about my friend Julie?”

“Do you mean a Julie that arrived during the last exchange two years ago. Big brown doe eyes and blonde hair?”

“Yes! She was sick before she disappeared.”

There was a pause, and then an image of Julie in a bikini hanging out by an outdoor swimming pond, the kind the rich colonists got installed in their yards, showed up on the screen. But instead of a fancy, inner colony estate and a pool boy, there were several other women and a whole slew of hunky, red-skinned, be-horned Kadrixan warriors in the background.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I heaved a sigh of relief. I’d found her! She was safe. And happy, judging by her smile.

“I’ve been looking for her nonstop for two years. Tell her I’m on my way.”

“So you’re going to join us?” Penny let out a squeal loud enough to make me wince and hold my phone away from my ear. “Yes! My first convert. I knew those books were worth writing!”

Oops. I didn’t want to admit that I hadn’t actually read her books.

Suddenly my phone beeped loudly, and a message appeared on my screen stating that my ID number and credit account had been temporarily disabled and that I should immediately head to the closest enforcement station.

“Oh shit! Penny? You still there?”

To my relief, her voice came from the speaker. “I’m still here. What happened?”

“They either just found out about this call, or they figured out that there is about a five-minute chunk missing from today’s recording in Gnnar’s cell. According to the message, my device and account have been disabled.”

“Shit. Okay. Well, surprise! We’re not on Nova Vita’s network.”

There was a masculine clearing of a throat, and a low, rumble voice said something. It took me a moment to realize it was a Kadrixan voice.

“What did he say? I returned my translator to the office.”

“That’s Vostak, my mate. He says they’re already planning a rescue mission.”

“Wow! That’s fast.”

“If you can stay out of a cell, they can pick you up when they go grab Gnnar. They can track your device location.”

“Really? Great. Staying out of a cell was my plan anyway. But the moment I hang up, this device is going inside a Faraday pouch, and you won’t be able to reach me.”

“A what now?”

“It’s something that blocks the signal. It’s old technology. I made it myself. I tested it, and it works. There’s a route out of the colony going through all the surveillance blind spots. It goes through parks in the wealthy areas and alleyways in the outskirts. I’ll be exiting the colony at the southeastern side, near the industrial zones.”

I was totally blabbering now from how nervous I was. It was one thing to plan, but now that my plan had been set into action, everything felt out of control.

“We’ll contact Ellaston. They’ll know of it. We’ll look for you along this route.”

Ellaston was the new human settlement that had popped up by the Kadrixan stronghold. It was supposedly full of rebels who’d left the colony—the very ones who’d revealed the truth about the Utopia Project. I was excited to meet them. Now that was real journalism!

“Tell them I’m using the Snakes and Ladders Path; they’ll know what I mean.”

“Gotcha. But you don’t have to put your phone in that pouch. Let me send you a program that will disable your phone’s connection to Nova Vita’s network. They won’t be able to track you through it. But they’ll still be able to track you through your chip. I’m sorry I can’t help you with that.”

“You’ve already helped plenty. I have a signal jammer that’s supposed to block the

chip on my arm, but it only works until the battery runs out. Which means I plan to haul ass the second I turn it on.”

To be honest, I was surprised I’d met so little resistance from her, and a part of me worried that this was too good to be true. Was it risky? Hell yes. But the chance to get out of this colony and see Julie again in one fell swoop was worth it.

And then there was Gnnar. I remembered the golden fire of his eyes and the wiry muscles over his tall, broad frame. Even chained up and looking half-starved, he oozed power and dominance. I hadn’t missed the way the guard flinched at his every movement like he’d expected Gnnar to break out of his bonds at any second. If that was Gnnar at his worst, what would he be like at his best?

Penny wished me good luck and hung up, and I got to work preparing for my exodus from the only home I ever knew.

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I'd made it most of the way across town when I ran into my first problem. The route I was following was called Snakes and Ladders because it went through a series of unmonitored parks and alleyways. Of course, we didn't have Earth style snakes here on Vokira—our version of elongated reptiles had tiny little legs—but it still worked. But there was a newly built surveillance tower right in front of the alleyway I was supposed to traverse. It must have been put there after they'd made the map I'd found.

It was an iffy section of the colony; one plagued not just with crimes but with secret talks of uprising and revolution. An exposé on a rebel group last year found that several of the members had come from this sector. It made sense that the colony had put extra surveillance in the area.

Ducking inside a recessed entryway, I dug out my hand-drawn map of the Snakes and Ladders Path. Too paranoid to download the map, I'd done it the old-fashioned way, copying it down the best I could by hand. It wasn't so much a single path but a vast series of unmonitored routes spanning across the colony. I'd only copied the routes I believed most useful to me.

Now I wished I'd saved the image on my phone. But then again, I hadn't known I'd have a functioning phone with me.

I tested Penny's program after I downloaded it. And sure enough, my phone could no longer access any of the colony's networks.

If I backtracked, there was another route I could take. It would take longer and have me trekking right behind one of the colony's enforcement buildings. But surely, not

every enforcement officer was looking for me, were they? I'd just act normal and walk right on by. That was the pro of looking like everyone else.

I made my way back the way I came, speed-walking it since I wanted to be out of this sector before it got dark. The colony had installed curfews during the riots when the truth about Utopia had come out. But they'd never removed them in the outer colony. In some sectors, it was easier to sneak around after hours, but not this one. If they'd added extra monitoring towers, then I was damned sure they'd increased nighttime patrols as well.

But the loop around took much longer than I'd thought, and the streetlights changed from white to bluish-purple, which was the universal signal that curfew had started. It was much too early for that.

What was going on? My question was answered when the loudspeakers came on announcing an emergency early curfew for everyone since they'd detected nearby activity from the native Vokiren tribes in the area. This was a bald-faced lie because all Vokirens in the area had been driven out of their homes years ago.

Could they be looking for me? It had been much longer than an hour since I'd gotten that message, and I most definitely hadn't made my way to an enforcement station.

I continued along my new path, almost at jog now, even though that would make me look more suspicious. I just had to make it to the industrial zone, where I knew of several abandoned factories I could stay in. But my impromptu run was cut short when I noticed movement in my peripheral vision. I turned toward the purple glow of the streetlamp, but whatever had been there was gone. I didn't need to see it to know what it was though; they'd released the surveillance drones.

Shit!

I had to stop and hide now. I stepped into a residential building. Unlike the ones in the nicer inner and mid-colony neighborhoods, this one didn't have a concierge. It also didn't have any amenities or special facilities I could hide out in. And where the hell were the elevators? Despite the lack of amenities, it still required a face scan to get past the first floor.

It did have a laundry room though, one of those pay-per-use ones, on the first floor. There was no one in it, and a quick visual sweep showed no cameras either. I'd hit the jackpot!

While the drones predominantly used visual detection and movement, they also relied on detecting our ID chips and devices. Here was the big test to see if this signal jammer I'd strapped over the chip in my forearm and Penny's program were really working.

I pulled out the rusted metal and plastic chair and sat down at the only table in the room. With nothing left to do, I dug my phone out of my bag and pulled up Penny's book. The cover image was a stylized drawing of a Kadrixan warrior, complete with horns, wings, and tail, carrying a blonde in his arms.

His face was partially hidden, and my brain automatically filled it in with Gnnar's features. The illustration was stylized enough that the woman could be me. I mean, was it so bad to fantasize about the alien warrior?

And there, in the dimly lit room, surrounded by peeling paint and laundry machines that really should've been decommissioned long before I was born, I started to read.

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Dana's scent lingered in my cell, making me think of her and those bright green eyes so full of grit and determination. I wondered if she'd read Penny's books yet and what she felt about them. I hadn't read the books myself, but from what I'd gathered, they were stories about Kadrixan warriors finding human mates. And Penelope described everything in detail, even what went on inside our nests during ruts.

At first, I'd wondered if that would frighten potential human females away, but she'd assured me that the ones who would be scared off by her writing wouldn't be the ones we wanted to be sent to us anyway. She insisted that human females loved a good romance, and it would convince the right ones to volunteer for the rut. Too bad the agreement between our stronghold and Nova Vita to exchange ore for willing participants had ended only after three years.

Even if her writing changed how potential females thought of us, there was no way for them to reach us. At least not yet.

We had a new agreement with the small human settlement at the base of our mountain, but there weren't many females there. I'd met as many as I could and tested compatibility by shaking their hands. My mate was not among them.

We were supposed to know our mates by touch. Some warriors fell to their knees at first touch, so stricken by the mate bond that they could no longer stand on their own two feet. For others, it was more subtle. During the rutting season, our bodies produced chemicals and hormones to soothe and woo females of our species. The final way to form a mate bond was to slowly build one throughout a rutting season, or several, with a chosen female.

Outside of the rutting season, our bodies only produced these chemicals for true mates. These hormones worked on humans, too, since we were biologically compatible.

But I sometimes wondered how I'd know from just touch alone whether I was producing these chemicals or not. Because of this, I doubted that this method of testing compatibility was effective. What if I'd already met my mate and even touched her but simply hadn't recognized the bond?

And that had me thinking about Dana again.

These idiots were taking me out of the colony, and it wouldn't be difficult for me to escape on my own now. Perhaps I'd even find my sneaky little journalist before they did. Would she be excited to see me? Would she agree to spend the rut with me?

I didn't need to wonder if she'd kept her promise and contacted Vostak through his mate Penelope because the entire facility was full of nervous energy today. Every guard was so anxious I could feel it in the air. Not only that, but I just learned that they were transferring me to a new location immediately.

This meant I'd be in a transport. No walls, no metal doors, no fences, and no army to hunt me down. Just a small team and a preprogrammed vehicle. Perhaps I wouldn't need a rescue after all.

I was currently strapped to a gurney, with tubes coming out of my arms, pretending to be sedated. Guards marched on either side of me as they rolled me out to the vehicle.

By the position of the sun in the sky, it was well past midday. And the chatter I'd managed to pick up confirmed that they were transporting me outside of the colony to someone they called Dr. Noble.

Humans were strange in that calling someone a doctor did not necessarily mean they were medics. This Dr. Noble could be a “doctor” in anything.

Security had found an anomaly in the recording from when Dana had been in my cell yesterday, and they were looking for her for questioning. They hadn’t found her though, that much I was certain of, based on how irritated they’d sounded speaking about her.

I continued pretending to be knocked out until we were at the gates of the colony, grateful that the humans didn’t know enough about our biology to realize that we could trick them by slowing down our heart rate and mimicking the vital signs they were looking for. Humans didn’t have that ability. Even the few times I’d been sure I’d given myself away, the guards and technicians checked the screen and relaxed.

It was almost too easy, but it wouldn’t last long. Spring was here, and that meant the rut would be upon me soon. It was the one time of the year that male Kadrixans had little control over our bodies. Having Dana in my cell and breathing her feminine scent had set something in motion inside me. Even now, my skin was starting to feel too tight for my body and I was fighting the growing heat threatening to take over.

The rut was coming fast.

Only youngsters were excited for the rut. After several years of it, most grown male Kadrixans saw it as a chore. For a warship filled with soldiers with no females around, it could also be a death sentence.

That had been the expected outcome when our entire military outfit consisting of warriors from six warships was exiled from Kadri for refusing to carry out orders from the Empress to massacre dissenters on a tiny moon. Instead of trained fighters, we’d been met with children and families using farming equipment as weapons. All they’d wanted was the right to continue living their lives. Their only crime? Settling

on a moon with resources the Empress coveted.

That hadn't been our first heartless and barbaric mission, but it had been our last. We'd refused to fight, and in a fit of rage, the Empress had exiled us. All of us. A massive error, considering we still had the warships under our control.

The first rut on our own had been disastrous. There was only room for two things on a rutting male Kadrixan's mind: fight or fuck. We'd fought, the heat turning lifelong friends into temporary foes.

I'd lost my blood brother to that rut. Luckily, I hadn't been the instrument of his demise. If I had, I would've followed him. And I still might have if we hadn't discovered Vokira and the human colony on it. We knew human females were compatible, not just for rutting, but as mates and biologically as well.

Ragnar would never have wanted me to follow him into oblivion. He'd want me to find someone special to fill the void, something to live for.

We'd known humans were compatible because this was not the first time our species had mixed. Long ago, a stranded Kadrixan ship had landed on "Earth." They'd claimed human females for their ruts, and then they'd brought these females, who were so similar to our own, back home to Kadri. The genetic markers of these past unions were still present in us today, much like the way Kadrixans had been written indelibly into human folklore.

It was surprising to see us depicted in their religious texts. Demons. And perhaps to them, we were. But to us, they were our saviors, as much now as they were then. Without them, the punishment of exile would've destroyed us all.

To my disappointment, the armored transport carrying me stopped at the border, and a message instructed them to wait for a second prisoner bound for the same facility. I

wondered who else had the misfortune of joining me on this transport. Would he be Kadrixan-friendly? And more importantly, would he help or hinder my escape? Either way, freeing him would mean they'd have two prisoners to look for and not just one.

I wasn't dumb enough to attempt an escape here. What humans lacked in robustness of form, they made up for with technology. We'd come into contact with their robohounds, modified super soldiers, and Harbingers before.

The human rebels over at Ellaston had managed to reprogram robohounds for their own purpose and even had a modified soldier named Igor living with them. But Harbingers were dangerous. Originally created as a weapon against their own kind, Harbingers were flying machines that carried small exploding drones. They had one job: to kill swiftly and effectively.

One killbot to the head was all a human skull could handle. If Kadrixans were lucky and it hit our horns instead, we might survive, but it would still rattle loose more than its share of brain cells. It would be a long recovery. I didn't know if Nova Vita had these machines protecting its perimeter, but I wasn't going to take the risk, not when I was still so weak.

We didn't need to wait long, because soon they were opening the transport door to let the new prisoner in. Her familiar scent filled my lungs as they shoved her into the back of the transport with me, and my body recognized her before my brain did.

Dana!

She was here. I didn't even need to look for her. It must be my lucky day. This was even better than another male prisoner to act as a distraction. But her scent was further triggering the rut. As the heat grew, I forced myself to focus to prevent my heart rate from increasing from her nearness.

“Sit there next to the monster and shut up,” ordered one of the guards.

Dana made a sharp yelp that almost had me breaking my ruse.

“Hey! You don’t have to be an ass to her,” said one of the other guards.

From their scents and voices, I knew there were at least three of them escorting me, two here in the back, and one up front. Kadrixans had a decent sense of smell, better than that of humans, but our species originally hunted by sight, diving down on our prey and enemies by wing. I could only rely on my nose so much, but I was sure there were only three.

“They say she messed with the cameras when she interviewed him yesterday.”

“Yeah. I was there when you read the report, smartass. They tore apart her home, looking for proof, and couldn’t find anything that could’ve done that. All she had on her when they found her this morning were her clothes.” He grumbled unhappily. “And why the hell are we imprisoning a Kadrixan anyway? They’re going to start a war.”

He was probably correct, and I wondered if perhaps that was the point. Nova Vita needed the ore under our mountain. They’d had their eyes on it since before we arrived, and when our treaty ended, we’d cut them off completely.

“Shut up, you’re going to get us both written up. If it’s not her, then who was it?”

“It could’ve been her. Or it maybe someone fucked up setting up the cameras and didn’t want to admit it. Or it could be Omnia Pictures trying to get more information than they were supposed to and they used her to get in.”

“If she’s innocent, then why did she run?”

“What would you do if they suddenly disabled your ID chip and blamed you for a crime?”

“I’d go in and explain that it wasn’t me.”

The second guard guffawed and snorted. “I guess I know who to blame if I need a scapegoat.”

“Fuck off. You know what, you stay here with the monster and the chit. I’m going up front.” The first guard shoved a small form into the seat next to my gurney before squeezing through the narrow gap to the front of the transport.

Dana was so close I could feel the cool, slick fabric of her jacket against my upper arm, which would be falling off the platform if it wasn’t strapped onto it. I ordered my body to calm even as an overwhelming rush of need and lust invaded my consciousness. Her presence sent the upcoming rut hammering at the portal, demanding to be let out. It wasn’t just the rut though; I felt an inexplicable need to protect her. My body was readying itself to fight.

Soon. Soon, I’d have her in my arms and in my nest.

I shoved the errant thought away. She was not my mate, and only my mate would see my nest. The rut must be closer than I’d thought. It was already messing with my head.

I tried to ignore the scent of her fear as I struggled to keep my heart rate down and my breathing steady. But every inhalation made it more difficult as the transport started up again, and we continued to our destination.

We’d gone some distance before the vehicle lurched, hitting a bump in the road. Dana let out a small yelp and reached out with her hand to stop herself from falling.

The knowledge hit me like a shuttle blast the moment her fingers touched my skin.

She was my mate!

If I hadn't been already lying down, I knew that I'd have dropped to my knees. The concern I had earlier that I might not recognize my mate when I found her seemed ludicrous.

I was completely engrossed in her. Her scent. Her presence. Her closeness. I opened my eyes and was immediately lost in hers. I saw my entire future in them. It must have affected her too because she was frozen in place, a look of wonder on her face. She kept her hand on me, her fingers tightening around my bicep.

It wasn't until one of the guards swore loudly that I heard the loud beeping coming from the monitoring screen.

"Fuck! His vitals are all over the place," said the guard who'd stayed in the back, his hands moving automatically to his weapon. "What did you do?"

"I didn't... Oh... It's the rut." Dana's softly spoken words pierced through the chaos.

"Shit! You're probably right." The anger he'd had originally directed at Dana faded. "Come here, girl. We'll protect you."

"Fuck that," said the male who'd first brought her in. "I'm not risking my neck. Dr. Noble paid big bucks for the monster. The bitch is just a journalist they want to sil—" He paused as he squeezed back through the divide from the front, his eyes landing on her hand, which was still on my arm. He stomped over to Dana and grabbed her, yanking her away from me and making her whimper. "The bitch is touching him. This is her fault." He shook her violently. "What the fuck did you do?"

The action had me seeing red. How dare he touch what was mine! I was going to rip his head from his body.

With a loud roar, I flexed and broke through the straps holding me down. I stood to my full height, towering over everyone else and filling the transport.

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Holy shit on a stick! Gnnar was terrifying when he was angry.

The moment Gnnar had broken out of his straps, Smartass—my mental name for the mean guard who'd shoved me in the beginning—had opened the transport door in a blind panic to get away from him, and the vehicle had stopped. We were outside now on a dirt road with sparse, low brush on one side and the desert on the other.

Gnnar wasted no time tearing Smartass apart. I had no idea what his terrifying growls meant, but I knew it had something to do with me. Smartass, being dumb as he was, had tried to use me like a shield, which was probably the worst thing he could've done. The angry Kadrixan tossed him so hard against the side of the transport that he was now nothing more than a smear. Since Smartass had been a jerkwad to me the entire time and had totally felt me up when they first handed me off to him, I didn't even feel bad cheering his demise.

The guard that had been up front the whole time stepped out of the vehicle and raised his weapon, aiming it at Gnnar. He hadn't managed to get a shot off at all. Gnnar picked him up and tossed him so far out into the desert that when he landed, he didn't get back up.

But now, the last guard, the one that wasn't a total asshat, had decided to play hero. He stood between Gnnar and me, trying to protect me. The fool was going to get himself killed. I knew that most people did what they had to do to survive. There were usually one or two jobs you qualified for, and just like how I'd written lies and propaganda for Nova Vita, he was forced to be their muscle. He didn't deserve to die just because he had the misfortune of showing up to work today.

“Stop!” I yelled, stepping in between the two of them. “Don’t fight. Please.” I turned to the guard. “You’re right. This is going to start a war.” I wanted to appeal to his logical side. “Just let me go with him. It’s okay. I’m a journalist, and I’ve been behind enemy lines.” I hadn’t. “I’ll help defuse the conflict. I’ll be fine.”

He eyed the transport and the smear that was left of his coworker as he weighed his choices. When his eyes landed on Gnnar again, the Kadrixan growled low and stepped menacingly toward him.

Shit! I reached out to touch him, and the moment I did, he seemed to calm ever so slightly. It calmed me too, just like it had when we first touched. It made thinking in this stressful situation easier.

The guard put his hands up. “I don’t have anything against you or the Kadrixans.” Then in a softer voice and a quick look over to the transport, he said, “You don’t want to go where they want me to take you anyway. Dr. Noble is a monster.” His face turned resolute. “You may be better off with him.”

A loud beeping coming from the transport had the guard’s eyes opening wide.

“Shit, it’s going to self-destruct. They programmed all the transports to do that now so the rebels couldn’t take them.”

Gnnar growled something urgently.

“What did he say?” asked the guard.

“I don’t know. Omnia Pictures took back the translator I used for the interview.”

Gnnar moved, grabbing the guard by the shirt and shoving him at the still-beeping transport. “No!” he yelled in Nova Vitan English.

“I think he wants you to stop the self-destruct sequence,” I said, searching Gnnar’s face for a clue that I was correct.

The guard backed away from the transport, almost trying to dig through Gnnar to get away. “I can’t. It takes all three of our codes to cancel the process. If you want my advice, run now.” He looked Gnnar in the face. “Go. Take her. I don’t believe you’re a monster like they say. Don’t prove me wrong.” Then he ducked under Gnnar’s arm and beelined it through the brush like he was being chased by a swarm of sandwarts.

Gnnar was left holding the man’s uniform jacket.

“I think we need to leave,” I said, turning to run.

The Kadrixan warrior moved fast. One moment I was scrambling with two left feet away from the transport, and the next I was in his arms. I watched in awe and amazement as his wings unfurled behind him. It was like something out of a nightmare but also infinitely sexy. Moments later, we were airborne.

I let out a decidedly un-ladylike shriek and threw my arms around his neck.

He murmured something next to my ear, and even though I couldn’t understand a word he said, I calmed. His touch soothed me, and everything felt right.

I knew what was happening. I’d spent much of yesterday evening engrossed in Penelope’s story, even though I really should’ve been resting so I’d be ready to leave my laundromat hideout the second the curfew lifted.

I hadn’t been sure what to expect. Maybe pure smut? But by a few chapters into the story, I was fully invested, and I couldn’t wait for the Kadrixan warrior to finally show the main female lead his nest.

I wondered what Gnnar's nest looked like. Would it be filled with jewels and priceless stones? Or tech and other useful items? I'd probably never know because he'd only show it to his one and only, his fated mate.

And because of what I'd read, I knew that Gnnar was producing pheromones and chemicals for me. According to the story, the Kadrixans did this for any physically compatible female during the rut, regardless of whether they were mates or not.

Sure, I understood that it was a work of fiction, and I doubted Penny would give away any of the Kadrixans' secrets, but this was something Nova Vita had suspected already. Except most colonists believed that the aliens could somehow mind-control human women. Which must be why all of Gnnar's guards had been men.

But now I knew the truth. The warriors had no control over the pheromone and hormone production, just like I had no control over my reaction to them. I just hadn't realized when I was reading it that I was going to experience it the very next day.

But right now, at this very moment, soaring high above the desert in Gnnar's arms, I appreciated the effect because I'd totally be freaking out otherwise. There wasn't a single shuttle door, harness, or safety buckle keeping me from tumbling to my death.

And while I trusted that Gnnar wouldn't drop me if he could help it, he was tiring. I felt a certain closeness to him, but even without that, I could tell that he was struggling to continue flying with me in his arms. He seemed even thinner than when I'd first seen him just yesterday, and moments earlier he'd been under the influence of a nasty combination of sedatives and drugs.

"Gnnar," I said softly, choosing my words carefully. "I contacted Penny, and her mate says they've sent out a rescue team already. We should land so they can find us." Then, because it seemed important to let him know: "I'm coming with you. Julie is there."

He grunted, his hand that was supporting my hips gave me a squeeze, and he continued flying even though his wing beats were clearly weakening. Still, I marveled at the fact that those black leathery wings could not only carry himself but me as well.

And that had me thinking of the mating flight mentioned in Penny's book, as well as what happened between the couple afterward. Except my brain replaced the characters with Gnnar and me. Heat ignited in my core. It was as if his body read mine without any words. The chemicals it produced for me changed, and the relaxing hum disappeared and was instead replaced by a sudden need that bulldozed into me so hard that I could barely breathe.

Every place we touched seemed to burst into flames, burning right through the layers of clothes between us. The mental image of him fucking me in the air like the main character had done in Penny's book made it a million times worse.

Gnnar groaned as if he'd seen right into my head. We dropped a few feet in the air. I gasped, and my arms tightened around him. He murmured soothing words in that low, sexy voice of his as he corrected his form. He was taking us lower toward the ground now, and I could see where he was aiming to land. I focused on that instead of my body's tawdry, salacious demands.

I recognized the abandoned research station from the images I'd seen in the news articles. It had been attacked by the natives who lived in the area about a decade ago. I'd still been in school then and hadn't started my internship at Omnia Pictures, so I didn't know what really happened and never thought to look into it.

They'd sent a rescue team to evacuate everyone working there and save all the vital research data before abandoning it, cutting it from Nova Vita's energy supply and network. Like many of the colony's research stations and outposts outside of the main colony, there weren't any signs labeling it as such on the outside. But there'd been

images of it from the air during the rescue mission, and I recognized it.

The moment we landed, Gnnar stumbled away from me. That was probably for the best since we weren't out of danger yet. For one, we were still relatively close to Nova Vita, and they were probably looking for us now. And I still had my chip. That had been the reason I was captured.

The jammer had run out of battery about twenty minutes after the curfew had lifted this morning. If it hadn't been for that curfew, I'd have made it out with time to spare. That didn't mean the colony couldn't still find me in the wilderness though. I'd managed to throw my bag and my phone into one of the washing machines before they caught me with them.

Gnnar went straight for the door. The power, and therefore the security, was cut off, meaning the entire research station was open to us. He moved through the complex deliberately, looking for something, and I followed behind, squinting in the darkness. The only light came from the occasional sunroofs that dotted the ceilings. It was just enough to see.

The irrational fear of something jumping out at me from the darkness had me reaching for him. The second my bare fingers touched his arm, the overwhelming need returned, nearly landing me on my ass.

Gnnar made a sound that had to be a curse in his language and stepped away. Right. No touching. Got it. Escape first; we can figure out whatever the hell this was between us after.

We ended up in the research station's cafeteria-breakroom combo. There were three rows of tables and chairs at the center of the large room and lockers lining one side. One of the walls had a large screen that was now broken. There was a buffet-style counter on the other side. He kept walking toward the back, which I assumed was the

kitchen. He must be looking for food and water. When was the last time they fed him?

“I’m going to look through the lockers,” I said, breaking the silence.

He gave a curt nod as he disappeared into the kitchen, and I hurried over to the lockers to see what goodies I could find.

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Damn my body for being so weak. And damn the rut for messing with my brain. I could barely walk, and my instincts were demanding I bring my mate to my nest right now and fuck her until she was mine.

But we were nowhere near my nest; we weren't even on the right continent. It was a miracle I'd even landed safely. I'd almost fallen out of the sky with Dana in my arms. The thought of losing my mate from such a stupid error when I'd only just found her was unacceptable.

I forced myself to focus on survival. Our bodies had an amazing ability to heal from even the most traumatic injuries, but they required energy to do so. I needed food and water. I'd been deprived of both since being captured, and I'd used all my reserves to heal after the crash.

This abandoned outpost had to have some form of nutrition in it. I was acutely aware of Dana as she went through the metal lockers in the other room. If danger appeared, I'd be there in an instant to protect her.

Any food that was perishable was long gone, but as I'd expected, this human outpost had many processed foodstuffs still in their packaging. I pulled several off the shelf and opened them.

I took a bite and was disappointed when I only tasted carbohydrates and low-quality processed oils. This was garbage. I could not regain my strength on this. I couldn't believe that so many of Nova Vita's colonists lived off of them.

The next few were the same. When I finally found one with protein in it, it wasn't the

kind our species used best. Kadrixans were descended from carnivores, though we'd since evolved to supplement our diet with plant matter. We valued plants for their chemical compounds, building our large pharmacopeia from the flora found on Kadri and on every planet we discovered. We did not rely on them as our main source of calories.

The last food package was more of the same. Prey food.

I let out an angry growl and threw the package against the wall harder than I should. A feminine gasp had me turning around. Fuck. Dana had witnessed my outburst. I didn't want her to fear me.

But instead of backing away, she approached. "What's wrong?" She picked up one of the packages from the shelf and grimaced. Even frowning, she was adorable.

"Yeah. I don't like simulated meat and sweet crackers either. They're supposed to have everything we need to survive, but I highly doubt it. I mean, it's possible to survive on the fake stuff, but just because you can doesn't mean you should. I did a piece on it once. Apparently, years ago, back on Earth, they used to tell people to take all sorts of supplements if eating vegan for long periods."

My translator hiccupped on the new word. It clearly wasn't used in everyday Nova Vitan English anymore. She must've seen my confusion.

"Vee-gaan," she said again, splitting the word into two long syllables. "It means not consuming or using any animal products. It was all the rage when only people from rich nations on Earth ate that way. The word fell out of favor on Nova Vita since it's not cool anymore when poor folk do it out of necessity. They say the new stuff is better but..." She shrugged. "I think the only thing 'better' about it are the profit margins. Anyway, I'm babbling. I'll help you find the good stuff." She opened several more cabinets, eyeing the words on the packages inside. "I guess your

translator doesn't do written words."

"It does. But not very well," I said, even though I knew she couldn't understand me. Several of the packages I tried clearly had the word "meat" on them despite not having any at all. That should be illegal.

She wrinkled her nose at the packages, clearly discouraged by what she saw.

"Why don't we try to find the director's quarters? I bet there's good stuff there."

I grunted and gestured for her to lead the way. She did, but not before stuffing a backpack she'd found in the lockers full of pouches of water. I ripped open one of the pouches and poured the whole thing into my mouth before following her out of the mess hall.

Every sway of her hips drew my eyes to her ass, and by the time we found the director's quarters, she had me fully hypnotized. As Dana had surmised, the director had their own stash of food. Like the others, the meals were prepackaged, but these had real meat in them.

"Oh yeah! That's the good stuff, alright. Reconstituted steak and taters!"

Taters must be from the tatertot plants the females at the stronghold loved so much. They weren't my favorite, but I'd eat them.

Dana held a package up victoriously. "Meatballs and gravy! The director was eating well."

I pointed to the jumble of smaller words on the package, hoping it was a list of the ingredients, and Dana started reading them to me. It was. Except there was still a large amount of filler in the "meatballs." I opted for the steak and taters.

“Ha! Like I was going to let you have the meatballs anyway.” She hugged the package to her chest like it was something precious.

Once rehydrated and heated in the cooking pouch it came with, the meals weren’t bad at all despite being a good decade past their consume-by date. I ate as many as I could fit into my stomach while ignoring Dana’s little reactions as she savored hers.

She peppered her meal with moans of appreciation and even wiggled in her seat. It was utterly adorable and it drove me insane. I wanted to pull her into my lap and feed her, let her eat from my hands as was our tradition. But that would surely throw me into the pit of a rut, and we were still in enemy territory.

When she licked the inside of the pouch, which had opened up and hardened into a serving vessel, I groaned.

She turned to me, her eyes scanning the table at all the empty packages. “Wow! You sure can put away a lot of food. Where the hell did all that go?” She glanced down at my belly.

It was a little distended because of how much I ate, but my body would use that to rebuild my muscles soon and fast. With the right nutrition, our bodies recovered to baseline quickly. I just needed to make it to our continent.

Then, I could finally tell Dana she was my mate and fly her to our stronghold. I’d do that the moment she was outfitted with a proper translator. Her friend was already living there, so I didn’t need to convince her to return with me.

That was if my rut didn’t mess things up first. I was still in control, but I wouldn’t be for long.

That was why I was keeping my distance. We weren’t out of danger yet, and I had to

keep my wits about me. Also, Dana deserved so much more than I could give her right now. She deserved a real bed with all the comforts of my nest. Our first time should be surrounded by treasures, not in an abandoned outpost.

“We go,” I said in her language, hoping I was using the right words.

“Wait! Not yet. Have to get this chip out of my arm, or else they’ll know where we are.”

She was correct, of course.

“There’s an infirmary on the station. It should have everything we need.” She tossed the bag, now filled with extra food, water, and a small lantern she had found in the room, over her shoulder, then started out the door and down the hall again.

We followed blue markings on the floor to the station’s infirmary. She continued straight to the large medical machine taking up much of the room. Her face fell.

“Crap. I forgot about the power.” She smacked her forehead lightly with the palm of her hand. “Duh! I think we have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

She went to the drawers and started pulling out supplies.

“I have removed identity chips before for the females in our stronghold. Let me do it.”

She frowned. “I have no idea what you just said.”

I gestured for her to sit in the patient’s chair and place her arm on the table.

“I’m guessing you’re offering to do it?”

“Yes.” That word I knew was correct.

“And you’ve done this before?”

“Yes.”

She blew out a breath. “That makes one of us. You’re probably my best bet.”

“Yes.”

She grinned at my reply.

I pulled up another chair and sat down. It was too small and made for human legs, but it would have to do. I pointed to the words on the various bottles, and she read the labels for me until I found a disinfectant that was safe for my claws and her skin. She furrowed her brows, clearly confused about what I was doing, until I extended my smallest fingers.

She inhaled sharply. “Your claws! Of course. I totally forgot you had them.”

She reached for my hand, inquisitive about our differences, and I let her sate her curiosity.

“Only the pinky is sharp. No wonder I didn’t feel them earlier when you were carrying me.”

I wanted to tell her that Kadrixan males only kept the smallest claws sharp to make day-to-day activities easier and that we learned young to hold things with the pads of our fingers unless we wanted them destroyed. But that would have to wait for the translator. I disinfected my claw and bent over her arm. She was tense, expecting the pain of having it removed, so I pulled her into my lap.

“You know, I could get used to these pheromones,” she said, leaning back against my bare chest.

“They are all yours, my mate. From now until forever.”

“I have no idea what you just said, Gnnar. But keep talking. It’s a nice distraction.”

I did, telling her about the compound and how we combined our warships with the mountains. The pheromones and chemicals must be working well on her because she barely flinched when I went through the practiced motions of removing her identification and tracking chip.

I’d done this for many of the females living with us before we programmed our medical devices to work on human bodies, though never ever with them in my lap. This time, it felt different. I was freeing my mate from another’s grasp so that she could be free to choose me.

By the time I dropped the tiny chip onto the table, she was dozing off against my chest.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m falling asleep on you.” She eyed the tiny device still stained with her blood, then at her bandaged arm. “That was... ” She took a shaky breath. “My entire life is in that little chip. Years of working and saving credits. All of my achievements. It’s all in there, and now... it’s gone.”

I reckoned she felt much as I had when I was first exiled from Kadri. It was terrifying, but once we found the human colony, it was also freeing; we would no longer be forced to destroy innocent lives for the usurper queen.

“You are not alone. There are many like you at our compound and many more still at the new human settlement.”

She reached out to cup my face in her shaky hands. “Thank you. Thank you for helping me start a new life. I know it won’t be easy, but I’m ready for this.”

Then she pulled my face down to hers and kissed me.

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I'd meant to give him a thank you kiss, a peck on the cheek to show him how much I appreciated his help, but the second my lips touched his cheek, everything changed. Fireworks exploded, and I no longer wanted to stop with just a peck. I wanted to do all the forbidden, sexy, dirty things with him.

Gnnar must have thought the same because he shifted us and covered my mouth with his hungrily, even as a soft growl rumbled from his throat. Butterflies had me clenching my belly at the sensual sound. Damn! His growls did things to me.

I adjusted my legs so that I straddled him and slid my hands higher to his broad shoulders, pulling myself tighter against him. The moment his lips left mine, a forked tongue darted out to swipe over the seam of my lips, begging entry. I parted my lips as his tongue slid in, claiming me with the kind of passion that was only written about in romance novels. I felt like I was going to melt into a puddle of need and desire.

I wonder what else he could do with that tongue.

His hands joined the exploration of my body, gliding over my waist to my ass and hips. Firm hands gripped my ass and pulled me tight to him. I pressed us together, and even with my bra and tank top between us, my nipples tightened from the friction of rubbing against his chest. I could feel something hard straining against the front of his leather pants.

A needy moan I could barely recognize as my own escaped my lips. That had his hands tightening on my ass, reminding me that Gnnar did, indeed, have claws. He moved us, the motion the same as if we were fucking. It had the hard ridge of his cock bumping against my pussy.

I didn't know when I started rocking against him, but I was. Frantically. I was on fire.

I wanted him so much that it hurt. But that was crazy talk. Utter insanity.

Fuck! Was this the rut?

If I didn't stop this now, we were going to end up doing it right here, in the infirmary of an abandoned colony research station. But try as I might, I couldn't stop. The runaway train had already left the station.

It was Gnnar who pulled away and with great effort. He held me at arm's length, a pained look on his face.

"No." He said a few more words I couldn't understand, but I got the message loud and clear. He didn't want this. Heat rose to my face. I was practically throwing myself at the guy, Literally climbing him like a tree.

Was it because we were still in danger? Or was it because Gnnar wasn't really interested in me and was only reacting to a biological function he couldn't control? Just because it was the springtime rut didn't mean he'd want the first and only woman available. A sudden intrusive thought had me cringing. What if Gnnar already had someone back at the stronghold? Was I inadvertently trying to wreck a home?

He'd stumbled away when we'd landed too, like he couldn't get away from me fast enough. I'd thought it was just so he could keep his head clear while we were still escaping, but if he already had someone back home, that would also make sense. I couldn't be that unlucky, could I?

My musings were rudely interrupted by a mechanical whirring. Where had I heard that sound before?

Gnnar reacted instantly, suddenly on high alert. He said one word in Nova Vitan English, “Harbinger.”

The icy-cold dread that filled me was so visceral that it felt like a stab in the stomach. I’d never seen or heard one of those surgical strike machines in real life before, but Gnnar said it with such conviction that I knew it was true. Of course they would send a Harbinger after us.

Enhanced with augmented facial recognition and heat detection, the flying machine would release a bunch of suicide drones the moment it saw me, drones programmed to fly at my head and explode. The machines were designed so that they could be used both to focus on a single target in a crowded room or to kill indiscriminately.

Was this one after me or Gnnar?

According to what the guard had said back at the transport, Gnnar was worth a lot alive to some doctor. The name had sounded familiar when he’d said it, but I couldn’t recall it right now, not with the sound of the Harbinger drawing nearer. Meanwhile, I was someone they wanted to silence.

“My chip! It’s tracking my chip.”

Gnnar grabbed the chip and placed it on the operating chair before reclining it all the way to a lying down position. Then, he opened up a cupboard and tossed whatever he could find on top of it before draping a sheet and then the jacket that I’d taken off so he could work on my arm over the whole thing.

It looked nothing like a person, but I wondered if it was enough to trick the Harbinger into wasting its drones on that instead. From what I knew, which wasn’t much, the Harbinger drones were not controlled by anyone but instead used artificial intelligence to acquire and lock onto their target. That was the whole selling point;

they didn't need to pay or trust anyone to carry out the orders. Every human component cost credits and was a potential point of failure. AI couldn't refuse to kill innocent people or sympathize with rebels.

But artificial intelligence did have its foibles. The vaguely humanoid form and the fact that the chair was still warm from when I sat in it, plus the presence of my chip, could fool it for at least long enough to waste a drone or two. It would give us time to escape and get a head start. Without the chip, it would be easier to avoid our pursuers as long as we reached the dark forests or maybe the badlands soon. Those locations would provide plenty of hiding spots, and both landscapes would block the Harbinger's sensors.

He took me by the hand and together we ran down the corridor. We saw it as we rounded the corner. Gnnar skidded to a halt, tucking me behind him and spreading his wings to block the Harbinger's view of me just in time. He swooped me up into his arms and ran down the corridor, going back the way we came, but instead of the infirmary, he continued looping around the circular research station back to the front door.

I knew I must be imagining it, but I could swear that he felt stronger and more muscular than he had just an hour ago, almost like some of his muscles had filled out from all the food he'd just recently eaten. But that was impossible. He was warmer too, and it was a welcome reprieve in the chilled air of the unpowered research station, especially now that my jacket was acting decoy.

I wasn't sure it would work, but we were just passing the hallway leading to the cafeteria when several loud explosions rattled the station. The drones must've found their target. Three explosions meant three fewer murder bots to contend with. If we were really lucky, the Harbinger would return to base, its mission complete, but I wouldn't bet on it.

The sun was already starting to set when Gnnar stepped out into the desert landscape. No wonder they'd found us; we'd taken longer than expected.

Seconds later, we were in the air again. It couldn't be my imagination because Gnnar was flying stronger too. All it had taken was some food, water, and rest; granted, it was a shit ton of food. He ate more in one sitting than I could eat in a week. No wonder some mad scientist doctor wanted to get their hands on him!

But it wasn't long before I saw the Harbinger zooming out from the research center. Instead of flying back to the colony or wherever it had come from, it oriented on us.

"The Harbinger," I said. "It's still after us."

To my surprise, Gnnar landed. But instead of releasing its drones, the killer machine fired several darts at him. He dodged them, moving faster than anything living had the right to. That was new. I hadn't known they also shot darts.

Grabbing a rock, Gnnar flung it at the machine. It hit its mark, and the machine exploded in mid-air, launching fiery projectiles, remnants of the murder bots, in all directions.

My Kadrixan warrior dove for me, covering my body with his and protecting me from the blast. Heart pounding, I trembled in the cocoon of his body as the world quaked and rumbled around us.

"Gnnar?" I asked after the dust settled and the thundering sound faded into a ringing in my ears, and he still didn't move. "Gnnar?"

He was still alive because I could hear his heart beating, and his body was still trying to produce calming chemicals for me. But he was unresponsive. A cursory look around found the reason: a piece of shrapnel had hit him on the head. One of his

horns was singed, as was the long, wiry hair on that side of his head. The smell of burnt protein stung my nose.

I tried to crawl out from under him, but he was too heavy, and I was trapped. I thought of those videos I'd seen of people showing how to lift and carry someone heavier than yourself out of burning buildings or other situations, then laughed nervously at how utterly useless that information was to me now. There was no way I could roll him into the right position and get my feet under me. I did manage to free my arms and hands.

I cupped his face in my palms. "Gnnar, wake up. Please. We have to go."

I didn't know how long we had until they sent a retrieval team, or maybe another Harbinger or one of those robohounds. We needed to get as far away as we could before they arrived.

After a whole lot of begging and pleading, his eyelids finally flickered and his golden eyes opened, meeting mine. He was dazed and more than a little confused.

"Gnnar. We need to go. They're going to send people after us."

He blinked back at me like he couldn't understand what I was saying. Had the blow to his head knocked something loose?

"Gnnar?"

He tilted his head and growled something.

Okay, so he recognized his name. That was a good sign.

"We just escaped the research station. You protected me from the exploding

Harbinger. But we have to go now.”

He murmured something back in a soft, growly tone, tenderly brushing a strand of hair off my face before planting a kiss on my forehead. Something changed, and I felt that familiar aching between my legs again, right before I felt his erection pressing the leather of his pants to the inside of my legs.

The desire that flooded my system was overwhelming. I wanted whatever this was, wanted him more than anything in the world. He ground his hips against me, rubbing the large bump in his pants against my clit. I made the most scandalous moan, unable to stop myself.

Now? Of all times? Fuck this! We weren't home free yet.

“No!”

I shoved against him as hard as I could, then gestured wildly at the carnage around us. Parts of the Harbinger were still on fire and sizzling. I could hear it now that the ringing in my ears had lessened.

Gnnar looked around as if he'd only just noticed the world around us. He made a noise that sounded very much like cursing, then struggled up to his feet, pulling me up with him.

Oh good. Hero Gnnar was back. I'd take a raincheck on Loverboy Gnnar, please, and thank you.

He did a quick check, looking me over for injuries. I was banged up, with more scrapes and bruises than I could count, but I was alive. I'd be fine if we got out of Dodge and fast.

“I’m okay. Nothing major. I’ll heal. Not as fast as you. But I’ll heal.”

He frowned at me, concern wrinkling his brows. He tapped at the side of his head by his ear.

Oh! His translator? Was it malfunctioning?

The rest of him looked no worse for wear, all things considered. If anything, he looked even better than he had earlier.

Gnnar moved suddenly, his hand grabbing hold of a nearby rock and flinging it at the sky even as he turned. His aim was immaculate, and a metallic clanging had me peering around him to see a surveillance drone.

Oh no! Nova Vita was already here!

Unlike the Harbinger, the drone didn’t explode. They had marketed the drones as nearly invincible, able to take several blaster shots and still function. Gnnar grabbed a bigger rock, more like a boulder, and launched it at the drone. Then another and another until the drone was trapped under a deluge of thrown rocks. It might still be functioning, but if it wanted to follow us, it’d have to get itself free first.

Gnnar wasted no time wrapping his arms around me and leaping into the air.

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Now that I'd had plenty of calories and protein, I was feeling much better despite the singed horn. The increase in energy had an unintended side effect, however. My body didn't have to worry about feeding itself for the recovery, so it focused on other needs. I wasn't fighting the rut anymore. It was too late for that.

The rut was here, and it was hitting me hard.

It didn't help that my mate was right here in my arms, her own need adding to the effect. She'd wrapped her legs around my hips, and every movement brought us together as we flew. My cock threatened to break free from my pants, and I had to remind myself that this was not a real mating flight; we were on the run.

I couldn't stop myself from sneaking my tail between us so I could press the flat tip of it over her crotch. She let out a surprised sound that dissolved into a moan when my tail started to tease her. Then she was rolling her hips, rubbing herself against me. The heat was hitting her just as bad as it had me.

Fuck! I needed her now.

There was no way for us to reach the safety of our continent, and getting her to my nest was impossible. I needed to land before the rut consumed us and we fucked in the air, perfect prey to Nova Vita's Harbingers.

I scanned the ground below. The endless desert sand had given way to an intricate maze of severely eroded sedimentary rocks. What was left were steep slopes, forming a labyrinth of ravines and gullies. The exposed layers of rocks shone with different colors in the setting sun.

It was a perfect place to hide. There were thousands of tiny caves and crevices here, and the topography blocked heat signals well. We could probably get lost here for days if we needed to. It would also be difficult for Vostak's rescue crew to find us, but there was no other choice. I had to land.

At first glance, the landscape seemed devoid of life, but I knew better. There were plenty of animals that called this place home and many of them were good eating. The most difficult thing would be water, but Dana had thrown as many pouches of water as she could into her bag. If we ran out, there were streams that cut through these rocks, though often the water was more like sludge than water. I'd survived in worse conditions before. I'd gladly distill water for my mate if I needed to.

I swooped down into a canyon near one of these streams and started searching for a good place to camp. We were near a colony of suracets; I recognized the disturbances in the sand where the creatures sunbathed earlier in the day. The scaly, fat-tailed beasts were best eaten in the fall when they had a thick layer of fat but were still good eating this time of the year. Judging by the many disturbances in the sand, this was a large colony.

By the time we were squeezing through the narrow crevice that opened up into a cavern about the size of my quarters back at the stronghold, Dana was panting as she rubbed against the front of my pants and planting little kisses all over my neck and jaw and anything she could reach.

I didn't remember how I managed to get her pack off and one of the blankets she'd stuffed in there laid out on the ground, but I did.

She spoke in that fluid, melodious human language, but my translator refused to work. I was never good at learning new tongues, and I found the human language particularly difficult. Their words all blended together into one another; I could never tell where one word began and another ended.

But I didn't need to understand her words to know exactly what she wanted. Lust poured from her, erasing my ability to think.

I stripped her, kissing and worshipping every inch as each layer exposed more of her to me. The cavern was dim, with light streaming in from the tall, narrow crack we'd squeezed through, as well as from several small openings above us. It was just enough to highlight her form.

As I removed and tossed aside my own leg coverings, I wondered how she'd react.

She glanced down at my cock and gasped before reaching for it, wonder on her face. My cock looked massive in her hands. And I groaned as she explored every twisting vertical ridge with her fingertips, her pale skin such a contrast to mine. I knew we were different from their kind, but she showed no disgust, just genuine curiosity.

Every pass of her hands up and down the spiraled length and over the thick, flared head had me growing harder and harder. I clenched my hands in fists, forcing myself to stay still so she could explore to her heart's content, but I wasn't ready when she bent her head and licked the drop of liquid glistening on the tip.

"Fuck!" I snarled, sliding my fingers into the mess of her hair. "Mine!"

My outburst didn't scare her. It did the opposite, filling the space between us with desire so thick I could barely breathe.

I hadn't expected her to pleasure me with her mouth. I stood there, mouth open and eyes closed, while she took the wide head of my cock into her mouth. Fuck! The wet sounds of her mouth were so fucking hot. I found myself moving her up and down my cock, my hand still tangled in her hair.

My little mate looked so good with her pretty pink lips wrapped around my cock. She

gazed up at me through heavy lids, her eyes twinkling like the stars. When I pulled her off, it was with a soft, wet, plopping sound.

“Fuck, Starlight. I need you.”

“Yes,” she panted. “Please.”

We might not understand each other’s words, but we communicated just fine. She needed relief just as much as I did, and it was my job to provide it. I pushed her gently down onto the blanket, regretful that this wasn’t the big round bed in my nest or even my quarters in the stronghold. But I could still lavish her with all the kisses she deserved, so I did, starting at her face and throat and making my way down her body.

When I got to her breasts, I cupped each one possessively, the tips of my claws pressing light indentations on her skin. She arched and thrust her bosom up on display, and I caught a tight nipple in my mouth and suckled it before letting my forked tongue play with the little nub, circling and pinching it, a little teaser of what I wanted to do a bit lower.

I craved her like the desert craved the life-bringing waters. Her every movement, every sound, every reaction had me hanging on bated breath. I didn’t know which was the rut or which was our mate connection. All I knew was that if I didn’t have her right fucking now, I would die.

When I slid my tail up her legs, she gasped and looked down like she’d forgotten I had a tail, even though I’d used it on our flight over.

I gripped her chin, forcing her to look at me as I slid the tip of my tail over the silky soft skin at the inside of her thighs. Her gorgeous green eyes were half-closed, like she was overcome with need. They popped fully open when my tail found the seam

of her pussy. I dragged the tip through it, loving that she was already wet for me, before flattening the tip out in a triangle over her clit.

“Ahmigod,” she gasped. “It’s vibrating.”

I grinned, guessing her words, then covered her mouth with mine again, needing to taste her. While our tongues tangled, I moved my tail in slow circles until her hips were rolling against me, bumping against my cock. When I rolled the tip of my tail up into a bullet shape and slid down to her soaking-wet entrance, she whimpered.

The sound ended in a shriek which was promptly muffled by my mouth when I plunged into her depths and started fucking her with my tail.

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I muffled another scream as Gnnar continued to fuck me with his vibrating tail. Seriously, a vibrating tail? These Kadrixan warriors needed to come with a warning.

I wasn't complaining. Hell no! Not when it felt this fucking good.

I'd learned from Penny's story that the Kadrixans needed their females to orgasm in order to trigger ovulation. Since the rut was all about reproduction and continuation of species, their heat only abated after they both peaked. It was so different from what I'd thought it was.

With the way Gnnar was working my body, we'd have no problem with that at all. He kissed his way down my body, this time moving quickly past my throat, chest, and belly. Needing something to hold onto, I slipped my fingers into the dark, wiry strands of his hair but somehow ended up with my hands wrapped around his horns.

But I didn't have time to wonder if his horns were erogenous zones because his tongue was already there, licking and flicking my clit. The bifurcation wasn't just visual, he could actually control each side of his tongue separately, and that meant he was currently rolling my clit between the fork. My whole body was alight with pleasure. I tossed my head back and closed my eyes, trying my best not to scream.

But that was in vain because his tail curled, finding a new spot inside me, and suddenly, I wasn't climbing anymore. I was at the very edge, tumbling into oblivion.

I was still sobbing with my release when Gnnar crawled up to cage my body with his.

My eyes went wide when the thick head of his cock spread me open. His tail was

thick, but not this thick. It also didn't have the vertical ridges that spiraled down its length. And wow! He felt impossibly big.

He cupped my cheek tenderly in one hand and said something that sounded infinitely important before pressing a kiss to my forehead, and I knew that whatever happened now, he would take care of me. His body took over, producing more of the pheromones that made me need and crave him.

When he thrust again, his cock slid in more, and the ridges rubbed up against my inner walls.

He growled something again, sounding super sexy.

Despite feeling like I couldn't take anymore, he sank into me a little farther with each movement until I was so utterly and completely filled that it felt like there was more of him in me than me. There was so much pressure, and I had to move. The little hip roll was all that was needed to push him over the edge.

With a feral snarl, he started to fuck me. Blinding pleasure exploded from where we were joined, moving down to my fingers and toes. It was like his ridges had been built just for me, leaving nothing inside me untouched. My fingers tightened on his biceps, my nails digging into the muscles harder with every thrust.

He growled something again, and I replied with an ecstatic, "Yes!"

He was rutting into me, just like the name suggested, wild and animalistic, thrusting deep with every movement. His wings draped over us as he pounded into me, claiming me, and I was more than happy to submit to him and give him every part of me.

Then I was cresting again, but this time it felt like I was completely connected to him,

and my orgasm pulled him along. It was just him and me as the sensations took over. He snarled as he came, filling me not just with his seed but with the knowledge that something had started between us and we could never go back.

I stayed in the protective cocoon of his arms and wings until the chill of the evening seeped in.

It was dark in the cavern, and I struggled to find my clothes until Gnnar turned on the lantern I'd strapped to my pack.

I looked around the cave, really seeing it for the first time. I gasped at the sight of the sparkling layers of rock that made up the walls. Up close, the striations were clear and defined, with slightly different shades of red, orange, and yellow near the top of the cave that faded to brown, with an occasional streak of purple stone here and there. Every layer glittered in the artificial light almost like they were infused with diamond dust.

"It's so pretty." I reached out to touch one of the layers and it felt like polished marble, cold, hard, and smooth.

I was never into rocks or crystals, or shiny objects in general, but this had the potential to make me a believer.

The only entrance large enough for someone to come through was the single large crack in the stone we'd had to squeeze through to get here. There were smaller cracks above us, and a light breeze moved air through the cavern.

We were in the badlands. I remembered learning about this place in school and marveling at the ridges, spires, and hoodoos built and carved by wind, water, and sand. I never thought I'd see it with my own eyes. I had, and from a bird's eye view too, while being carried in Gnnar's arms. This place was even more awe-inspiring in

person than in the drone footage we'd watched in class.

We'd also learned that this place was extremely dangerous, filled with poisonous plants and venomous animals eager to take a chunk out of us. They taught us that we should be lucky that the colony had done all the hard work to make this part of the planet livable to humans. They also mentioned that a tribe of dangerous native Vokiren called this place home. I hadn't seen any signs of them from the air, but if there were caves and caverns like this one all over the land, then it would be easy to hide.

I found my clothes and in the process realized that the cloth Gnnar used to clean me up was one of the thin blankets I'd stuffed into my pack from the research facility. I thought I'd grabbed only one thick blanket, but it turned out there were three thin ones rolled up in there.

Now that we weren't smashed skin to skin, the chill was setting in. That was another thing I knew about the badlands. It was like the desert in that it could drop to freezing temperatures at night even if it had been warm and sunny during the day.

Gnnar lay on the blanket on the ground and I settled next to him, cuddling in for warmth.

Gnnar said something and pointed up to the ceiling. The layer of rock that comprised a good portion of the top of the cave was a dark red color. The lanterns shining up at it dimmed, and suddenly, a shadow started moving across the ceiling. I frowned, squinting at it, trying to make out why it looked so familiar. It looked almost like a person, but... wait a minute... those were horns!

The scary-looking alien warrior was making Kadrixan shadow puppets!

"Hey! That's you." I reached up to rub one of his horns affectionately.

That had him grinning sheepishly and looking very much like a boy rather than the dangerous fighter who'd torn two guards apart after we'd first met.

Wow. Was that only a few hours ago? It seemed so long ago.

When I turned my attention back to the figure on the ceiling, he started to talk softly, narrating the shadow warrior's actions. The low rumble of his voice filled me with the irrefutable sense that everything was going to be alright, even though I didn't understand a single word. As Gnnar told his bedtime story, I started to feel the impact of the crazy day I just experienced. Technically, it had started yesterday since I didn't get any sleep last night due to the fact that I was devouring Penelope's story—sorry, not sorry.

I blinked, trying to stay awake as the shadow warrior turned into a spaceship and launched off into outer space.

I had to admit that Gnnar had a way of making me feel simultaneously small and protected and sexy and powerful in the best sort of way. Like he was the strongest, most capable man in the world, but I could still bring him to his knees with just a single word.

I never did find out what happened to the shadow warrior because I was already asleep, cuddled up in the arms of my very own Kadrixan warrior, before his spaceship landed.

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I eyed the suracet sunning itself on the yellow-brown boulder. This one hadn't quite figured out camouflage and had chosen the warmest spot on the raised rock rather than on the reddish sand nearby that was similar to its color. That would soon prove to be its downfall.

The stone felt like an extension of my arm as it flew out of my hand and hurtled toward the creature. It hit the suracet on the head and clattered to the hard ground, startling the nearby scaly sunbathers. The closest ones scurried away, leaving their fallen companion behind, but they didn't go far. Several reptilian heads turned to the sky, looking for signs of avian predators. Seeing none, they relaxed.

I picked up several more stones, hefting each in my palms until I found one that felt just right. I missed my weapons. As a weapons specialist in Kadri's extensive military, I was rarely ever seen without several blades and my favorite blaster. Currently, said blaster was the property of Nova Vita, though it was nothing more than a pretty decoration for them. It wouldn't work in their hands since it was programmed to my biosignature.

The blaster had been a gift from my brother. It had gone missing during training once, and when Ragnar and I had finally tracked it down, hidden under another new recruit's bed, it was the first time I'd ever been reprimanded for starting a fight, though it wouldn't be my last. I'd saved up to get a tiny chip installed so I could always find it. The weapon meant a lot to me.

I wondered if I'd be able to retrieve it from the humans. If they'd kept it inside Nova Vita, it would be difficult. But that was completely my fault. I wasn't even supposed to have been snooping around the human colony at all, which was why nobody at the

stronghold knew where to find me.

It had been a stupid idea anyway. After not finding my mate among the humans at our stronghold or at the human settlement, I thought maybe I'd check out the pickings at the edge of the main human colony. Not all parts of Nova Vita were fenced in, especially since it had grown a lot in the past few years.

I'd gone because something inside had told me to go; call it intuition. And I'd known that Krxare, our leader, would most likely not have approved if he'd known, so I'd left on my own. I hadn't even thought past what I would do after I got there.

Logically, it had been a bad decision, but I couldn't regret it, not when it meant that I'd met Dana in the process.

I scanned the colony of suracets again. My marksmanship was renowned, but that was with a blaster and ship weapons. It wasn't quite the same with a stone, even though I was still pretty damn good with throwing knives.

I aimed my stone at another suracet, glad that I'd flown toward the dryer terrain rather than through the dark forest. Weakened and with the rut on me, hunting suracets was a lot easier than fighting ruka beasts.

But this time, the suracets' reaction wasn't to me but to something else. They all turned their heads skyward. I did the same, squinting through the too-bright sun.

There was a pair of avian creatures, but they weren't eyeing their usual prey on the ground. Instead, they were chasing something metallic. But the presence of the predators was danger enough; several creatures stood on their hind legs and gave out shrill calls. The entire colony ran for their burrows under the rocks. The valley was instantly empty. If it weren't for my future lunch and dinner still lying on the ground, I'd have questioned if they'd ever been there.

Fuck. The drone was back, and it scared away all the food.

The Nova Vitan drone had been one of the reasons why I hadn't gone out to hunt or find fuel to start a fire when Dana and I woke yesterday after our first night together. The other reason was that the first two days of the rut were always the worst. I'd quite enjoyed spending the entire day with my little mate, but that also meant we were now out of food.

I weighed the pros and cons of knocking the drone out of the sky now. If I did, it wouldn't be able to follow us back to my hideout. But if I let the avian creatures take it down, then whoever was watching would be unable to confirm that we were in the area. I decided on the latter approach but kept a good-sized stone in my hand anyway, just in case it saw me.

When the drone ducked below a ridge, I took the opportunity to run out into the canyon basin to grab my prizes. With both suracets tied to my belt, I slung the blanket I'd made into a makeshift bag over my shoulder. The bag was filled with plant matter I'd collected during my outing. It was a good haul even though my trip had been cut short. Supplies in hand, I started heading back to my mate and our temporary hideout.

The sun was searing down today, making it feel much later in the season than it should be. It made my skin itch and crawl, urging me to hurry back to Dana and to the relief her body offered. But she was so much more than that. She was intelligent enough to outwit the cameras and the guards. Brave and determined enough to try to remove her ID chip on her own. And most importantly, she made me smile.

I remember her mock offense at me pretending to steal her meatball food package and grinned, a warmth filling my chest. I'd make her all the meatballs and gravy she'd want when I had the chance. For now, roasted suracets would have to do. The thought of her had the heat rushing in, so I forced myself to move faster through the maze of gullies and ravines.

After relieving our heat during the rut, male Kadrixans only had a short time before it came rushing back. We had to get as much done as possible while we were still clearheaded. I'd taken the opportunity to look for things to make the cave more comfortable.

The first night, the temperature had dropped more than I'd expected, and I'd spent much of it with my wings cocooned around Dana to keep her warm. Well, that, and fucking. That kept us warm too.

Last night, the temperatures were more comfortable, but tiny flying bugs had swarmed us. Dana hid under one of the blankets, and I'd spent most of the night slapping them away. We'd eaten whatever was left of the food she'd tucked into her bag, though we still had plenty of the water pouches left.

I didn't trust myself to make the rest of the journey to the other continent until the rut was over, so I'd gone out to look for things to make the cave more comfortable. Even though we didn't live on this continent, we'd done as much research on it as we could. I'd been part of the team sent out to explore this region when we'd first arrived. That was how I'd known that the suracets were rather tasty. I wondered if we could raise them over on our continent.

There were plants that gave off a scent when trodden underfoot or burned that warded off the biting critters. I'd also found the remnants of last year's seedpods of a tree that produced fleecy fibers. They'd make a good insulating layer under the blanket to ward against the chill of the cavern's floor.

I was almost back at our hideout when the caws of avian creatures had me looking up. The drone appeared from over the canyon walls and I froze, cursing the fact that there was nowhere immediate to hide. But there was a good chance the drone had not spotted me since it was too busy evading certain doom.

Behind the drone were not one, or two, but dozens of the creatures I'd seen chasing it earlier. It must have made the crucial mistake of attacking one of them. We'd learned that the hard way too the first time we were here, except they'd divebombed us en masse when one of us had thrown a stone at a particularly ornery one that kept swooping down on us. We'd had to duck into our shuttles to wait out their ire.

We never did get the names of these creatures from the Vokiren tribes that used to live here before the humans drove them away. I made a note to ask about them when I got back to the stronghold. We tried to use native words for the animals and plants we found here for both ease of communication with the indigenous population and for efficiency. It was a lot of work naming everything on a completely new planet, so why do it if it was already done.

I held still until the drone was out of sight again, still pursued by the many angry, clawed predators, then made the final push to the cavern where my mate awaited.

A muffled shriek had me dropping both suracets and my bundle of plant material so I could squeeze through the crevice quicker to get to her defense. I found Dana dancing around the cavern, a dozen or so multi-legged invertebrates with shiny dark green and purple carapaces scurrying around her. Each one was about the size of my hand. One of the creatures had been crushed by her boots, and the smell that came from it was putrid.

The moment she saw me, she launched herself at me with a soft squeal.

“Omigadimsogladyoureback itriedtocrushdem butdeysmellsobaaad andeywonlebmealooone.” The words sounded rushed, slightly panicky, but also filled with relief.

We hadn't come across these creatures during our reconnaissance mission, so I didn't know if they were dangerous. It was best to avoid getting stung or bitten. I grabbed

the large animal bone I'd strapped to my belt earlier and tried to carefully bat them toward the exit. I didn't want to kill any of them and release more of that noxious stench.

But they all stopped when they reached the plants I'd left at the entrance, refusing to even step near the blanket bundle. The plants must work on these creatures as well as the small, swarming ones. I released Dana and pointed to the back of the cavern, and she hurried back there. Picking up the tied blanket, I tossed it into the center of the cave before grabbing the suracets.

By now, the invertebrates were making their way back into the cave toward Dana. They were attracted to her, and now I worried if she'd already been bitten or stung, though I saw no visible stingers.

Too impatient to untie the knots in the blanket, I cut through them with my claws and grabbed a bunch of the repellent herbs, tossing it in Dana's direction. The creatures scattered immediately. I wondered if they worked for other invertebrates on our continent; they'd be useful as long as they weren't dangerous to the wildlife that shared our home, especially the kukees that helped keep our stronghold clean.

"Gimme gimme." Dana reached her hand out, her eyes on the bunch of weeds in my hand.

I handed it to her, more than happy to relinquish the bouquet. She took it from me and brandished it like a weapon.

"Ha! Howydaikedemapples?" she yelled victoriously as she chased the creatures around the cave and toward the exit.

I grinned so hard watching the spectacle that my cheeks hurt, and a tightness started in my chest, like it was so full from how happy she made me that there was no room

left for air. But that was okay. I'd live on her and only her for the rest of my life if I could.

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“And stay out!” I gave the last bugs a shove with my magical weapon of bug destruction before dropping the plants at the entrance to stop the creepy crawlies from even thinking about coming in again.

I had to admit, that was fun. When they’d first arrived, I’d freaked out. The things were almost the size of my forearm, and they were really interested in me. I wasn’t sure if they were just curious or if they were hungry, but when one of them took a bite out of my boot, I stomped it.

Instant.

Regret.

The galaxy’s most putrid odor had exploded into the cavern, burning my nose and threatening to knock me out.

So I figured if I danced around them for long enough, they’d give up and leave me alone. But they were persistent. Another one had just latched onto my boot, making me shriek and kick, yeeting it across the cave when Gnnar squeezed himself through the crevice and leaped to my defense.

He probably thought it was silly that I was freaking out over a bunch of creatures I could squash. But I was just glad he returned with magical plants.

I turned to see Gnnar watching me with the goofiest grin on his face.

Oops. I hadn’t realized my frantic attack on the bugs had an audience.

“What?” I said defensively. “They tried to eat my shoe!” I stuck my foot out, showing him the chunk of bio-plastic dangling pathetically from the sole, then pointed at the crushed bug on the ground. “And they stink!”

He replied in a jovial tone and winked, then said something that sounded like a question.

“I have no idea what you just said, but if you look that hot doing it, yes.”

Gnnar went to the mess of plant stuff at the center of the cavern and started separating the contents into two piles. The first was of the spindly plants with the needle-like leaves I’d used to banish the bugs. The other pile looked like giant bean pods.

He used a handful of the repellent plants to shove the dead bug to a corner, then scattered the herbs around the cavern, stepping on them as he went. A clean, fresh scent, almost but not quite like the generic “lemon-scented” cleaners everyone at the colony used, filled the air.

I brought my hands to my nose, and my skin smelled faintly of it. This scent had a more herbal component, smelling pleasantly bitter.

I suddenly remembered a factoid I thought I’d never use: antidotes were often found near the poison. I wasn’t sure how valid it was, but at least in this case, the repellent grew near the pests. I sure hoped they worked on the little biting gnat-like bugs too. They were so annoying. We had those at the colony, but never in the numbers I’d witnessed last night.

Gnnar took the remainder of the plants and started a small fire. The fire smelled sweet and clean, with just a hint of smoke, which was surprising. I’d always thought any open fire would smell disgusting and kill my lungs. But the best part was that it warmed up the cave. It was already mid-morning, and while the front of the cave was

warm from the heated air coming in, the back of the cave was still cooler than was comfortable. I bet during the summer, these caves were the only respite from the blazing midday sun for the animals here.

That fire would've come in handy that first night. It had been fucking freezing. I'd lost my jacket to the Harbinger, and the blankets we'd taken from the research facility were thin, so I'd relied on Gnnar's body heat to warm me.

The second night hadn't been much better. Because while it had been warmer, a bunch of tiny flying bugs came out to nip at us. I was small enough to hide under a blanket, but Gnnar, not so much. Luckily, they disappeared when the sun rose.

I sidled a little closer to Gnnar, curious about what he was doing. For the first time since he returned, I noticed the pair of dead lizards he'd brought back. Each of them was the size of my leg if you counted the chubby tails. I watched as he descaled and gutted them.

Was that for lunch and dinner today? I think I'd rather pass. I'd had the last one of those premium meal kits already this morning, and it was plenty. Those were the equivalent of rich people's prepacked lunches. With real meat!

With my decent job, I was able to purchase protein patties and other items made with meat products regularly, but an actual, unaltered piece of meat was for holidays and special occasions only. And I was so worried about messing those up with my limited cooking skills that I usually spent a little extra and went out to a restaurant for that.

Somehow, the lizard Gnnar was cutting up with a piece of extra sharp rock didn't look as appetizing. Though, if I had to be honest, the cows they'd brought over from Earth and hybridized so they could survive here didn't look particularly like good eating either. Neither did chickens. Those survived perfectly fine here with absolutely no modifications and had even escaped into the wilderness and established

populations there.

But as the meat started sizzling over the fire, and the rich aroma of cooking food filled the cavern, my stomach decided it was interested after all.

“Have you tried them before? What do they taste like?” I asked, only to remember that he could no longer understand me. He said something back to me that sounded like nothing more than a series of growls and rumbles. I still had no idea what he said, but his low, grumbly voice was having an effect on me again.

And we weren’t even touching!

He moved, and at first, I didn’t know what he was doing, but then I realized he was setting up an area for us to eat with several flat boulders to make a table. He rolled some of the vegetation tightly into a stick and then lit the end before jamming it into the crack on the top piece of stone.

Hey, would you look at that!

This was as close as we were going to get to a candlelit dinner. Or lunch. Did people do candlelit lunches? I didn’t care. I’d take it! He was putting in the effort, and I appreciated it. In fact, I was grateful for everything he’d done to make this place more comfortable.

“Gnnar?” I asked as we waited for our food to finish cooking.

“Dana.” He reached over to drape an arm around me and pulled me close.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that you don’t have a mate because, according to Penny’s book, being bonded meant you can’t physically get it on with someone else. I assume that also means for the rut. But you don’t have a girlfriend, do you?”

I knew he couldn't understand me. He just cupped my face in his warm palms and pressed his forehead to mine. Someone with a girlfriend back home wouldn't do that, would they? No, I decided. He wasn't taken; he was fair game.

He stirred the fire and turned our roast, which had developed a crispy skin and smelled divine. Who needed simulated bacon when we had rock lizards on a stick?

Judging by the grin on his face as he cleaned off his hands with one of our packs of water, lunch was ready. Instead of ripping me off a piece Gnnar pulled me into his lap and held a piece with some of the crispy skin to my mouth.

"I can feed myself," I said, with a chuckle, trying to take the meat from him.

But Gnnar insisted on feeding me.

Penelope's story took place before Nova Vita ended the trade agreement with the Kadrixans. In the book, they'd held big dinners to welcome the new batch of women, which were, in essence, like giant speed dating sessions but with attentive alien warriors and amazing food. But the utensils didn't fit the smaller female hands, which meant the warriors had to feed them. It was a Kadrixan courting ritual, but it also encouraged the females to release their brainwashed fear of the warriors.

Technically, I didn't need this courting ritual because I was already spending Gnnar's rut with him, and I never really believed the whole Kadrixans-were-demons thing, but I decided to enjoy it anyway. To be honest, I liked the attention. Gnnar made me feel special and cared for. Protected.

But it wasn't long before the fuzzy feelings were replaced with something else a little more carnal. The heat was back. Fed and rested, I was more than happy to oblige.

I didn't wait for him to jump on me; I jumped on him.

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“Stay behind me,” I yelled as I widened my stance, ready to fight.

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t heard the robohound coming until it was too late, and it was already at the entrance to our hideout. I had no one else but myself to blame. I’d tired myself out bringing my mate again and again to her pleasure so thoroughly that I’d passed out, letting my guard down.

Dana was the first to notice the hound outside. She shook me awake, but it was already too late.

Right after waking me, the first thing Dana did was grab several large handfuls of the plants and chuck them into the fire. Then she’d fanned it, encouraging the flames to grow. Did she think the repellent plants would work on the robohound? I doubted it.

Remembering how the Harbinger had targeted Dana, I’d immediately put her behind me. This cavern was a bad place to fight, but I’d do anything to protect my mate.

“No!” Dana grabbed my arm and pulled me behind the fire just as I was about to engage. “Staybehindthefire theyusethermalimaging.”

When I didn’t immediately move, she gestured wildly to the fire, then the bionic weapon. “Hot. See.”

Oh. She meant the fire would mess with its heat sensors. I wondered if it would be enough to prevent it from attacking, considering it probably still had visual capabilities. But with the extra vegetation on the fire, some of it still green, smoke started rising from the flames. Yes. It just might help hide us from the biomechanical

hound.

I circled the fire, keeping Dana behind me as she gathered our pack and shoved everything she could reach into it.

“We go,” she said urgently.

She was right; it was time to go. They knew now for a fact that we were hiding here. We might have tricked the robohound this time, but they’d try again. As it were, I didn’t know if there were more robohounds or Harbingers nearby. And as much as I wanted to fight the abomination, I knew that running was the better option. What if a Harbinger arrived while I was still fighting the hound?

Once outside, I looked around for the drone from the other day, but it was nowhere to be found. Had the avian predators finally taken it out? I couldn’t be sure. I almost expected the annoying metal sphere to appear over the top of every ridge. That was the thing with the drones; they were hard to eliminate if they refused to get close. They might not have any weapons, but they were fast, and I could only throw so far.

Deciding to use the landscape to our advantage for as long as I could, I set off on foot, guiding Dana through the narrow gullies and rocky ravines. If there were any eyes in the sky, the landscape would hide us. From what I understood, the drones often communicated with the robohounds, serving as an extra set of eyes. I had my credits on the fact that a drone was being sent to this location at this very moment.

I took the pack from Dana so she could move faster, but even so, it wasn’t long before I could tell she was tiring. The narrow crevice we were traveling along had a bit of an overhang up ahead, so I urged her forward to it. We could stop there to rest. The crack we were traveling along was craggy enough that if the robohound found us, it would take it some time to navigate, and the overhang meant we wouldn’t be spotted from the air.

My biggest worry was another Harbinger. One or two robohounds I could handle. Dozens of exploding murder bots all aimed at Dana's head? I felt sick just thinking about it. That was another reason why we were traveling on foot and staying hidden instead of flying. Once again, I lamented that I had none of my usual arsenal at my disposal.

She stayed in the cocoon of my arms as we waited, and I listened to her heartbeat and breathing to make sure she was truly rested by the time she insisted that we keep moving. We soldiered on, navigating quickly through more exposed areas and stopping to rest in protected sections until we were at the edge, where the jagged rock pillars faded out into a flat expanse.

These coastal plains were our last challenge before the strip of shallow sea that separated the Kadrixans' continent from Nova Vita's. There would be little place for us to hide out there if the drone spotted us, and they would surely call in reinforcements.

"Whatarewegoingtodo?" Dana looked out over the field of springtime vegetation.

If it were the end of summer the grass and brush would be high enough to offer some protection, especially for Dana, who with her size and lack of wings, could stay below the billowing seed stalks. But currently the plants were low, barely waist-height on me, and not tall enough to protect her.

There would be no shelter from now until the coast. Stepping foot out of our refuge now would mean it would be a matter of time before their drone located us. But if we stayed here, we would be no closer to safety. Also, Vostak had a team searching for us. Or at least I hoped he still did. They'd failed to find us while we'd been in our hideout. What protected us from danger also kept us from rescue, especially since the two things they could trace with, my communication device and my blaster, were probably back at Nova Vita.

I was still trying to make the decision when the sound of pebbles tumbling down a rock face had me suddenly on high alert. Dana hadn't heard it yet, and I didn't want to frighten her, so I kept listening. Sure enough, there was another sound, this time a soft scuffling of rocks. I put my hand on her arm to get her attention, then motioned her to be quiet. She caught on immediately.

The robohound had found us. My first thought was to grab her and leap into the air, but there was no room for my wings to fully extend. The narrow crack had slowed the robohound down and made it difficult for it to travel quietly, hence giving itself away, but it also hindered my ability to fly.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!”

I didn't need a translator to understand her as we scrambled out of the narrow passageway. I already had her in my arms and was leaping into the air when a second robohound appeared, pouncing from the ledge above us.

Fuck!

It was an ambush!

The four-legged hybrid soldier landed on my back, and there was a sharp pain as Dana and I tumbled to the ground. I twisted to protect her from the rocky landing, then quickly rolled again to cover her with my body. I felt the brush of sharp teeth on my calf and kicked hard before the beast could clamp its biomechanically enhanced jaws around me. The sharp teeth dragged across my skin, drawing blood, but the beast was flung away.

It crashed into a rock wall with a bang that shook down a hail of stones and shale. But despite the impact, the creature showed no outward signs of pain. I knew why. The creatures only had the appearance of a living animal. Whatever was done to them in

Exotech's labs had taken the life from them, removing the ability to feel pain or make their own decisions. They all had only one function: to obey orders.

The humans at Ellaston had reprogrammed several to use as guard dogs. They also programmed canine-like behaviors into their converted guards to make people feel more at ease. They'd explained to us that the base animal was something they called a dog, a companion animal from Earth. But they were only used as companion animals now for the ultra-rich. More commonly, they were used as guard dogs for the colony's elected counselors and large corporations.

That was until Exotech started selling hybrid hounds that were more durable, easier to keep, and completely obedient. It had begun with simple modifications, replacing one eye with a special camera and adding Bionicle features to make them faster and stronger, but slowly, more changes were made until we had what I was facing now: an amalgam of flesh and steel with none of its natural instincts left.

But after meeting Fido and Kong, converted robohounds that guarded the human settlement, I couldn't help but see the animal underneath. This one looked like the same model as Fido. Just a few days ago, I'd given it head scratches before leaving on my ill-fated trip. As this hound lunged for me, I sidestepped it, then grabbed it by the haunches, hauling it back toward me hand over hand. My target was right under its chin.

That was where Exotech placed the off button since any enemies coming close enough to the robohound's chin would usually be seconds away from death's door.

Dana's panicked words alerted me to the fact that the other robohound, the one that had been weaving its way through the narrow, winding passage, was almost on us. Above us, the drone whirred into view. I pulled harder, racing against the clock to disable the one I grappled with. The robot hound fought against me, kicking with his hind legs and catching me with its steel-enhanced claws. My legs gave way, but I

held on, moving up its body. I smashed the heel of my hand hard against the underside of its chin, and as was expected, the creature stopped struggling.

I was battered and bruised, with slashes on my legs and a burned back, but there was no time to rest. Dana had climbed one of the slopes and was shoving hard on a boulder perched over the exit of the narrow passageway. The boulder teetered on the edge.

The robohound had spotted her and was repeatedly trying to scramble up the vertical wall toward her, not knowing about the easy route up on the side. Locked onto its target, it didn't see me sneaking around to help her. This was when I noticed the drone whizzing toward us.

Fuck! The drone would act as the hound's eyes.

I grabbed a stone and aimed for it even though it was still quite far away. It was flying low, and from its vantage point, it couldn't see this hidden path, or else it would have relayed the information already.

My first stone missed, but it was enough to catch the drone's attention. It zig-zagged, zooming toward me. Surprising, as I'd expected it to fly away. I threw several more stones until one of them hit. But distracted by this drone, I didn't see the second one coming toward me until it was too late. The second drone fired. Another surprise, since Nova Vita's drones were usually unarmed and surveillance only.

I dove, trying to evade the shots. Something landed on the ground next to me. A dart? Poison?

I rolled to my feet and readied myself for another volley, but the world spun around me. I could barely make out Dana's form as she struggled against the boulder. I reached for her.

Dana!

But the ground rose up to meet me, and all I saw was darkness.

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I shoved wildly at the boulder as the beast leaped again, its claws loosening yet another hail of gravel and sand on itself. Aided by its bionic limbs, it could leap a ridiculous height. If it hadn't been for the lip at the very edge and the lack of purchase for its claws on the slick, crumbling rocks, the robohound would've made it up already.

My lungs were burning, and my eyes stung from the dust and sand, but I had to keep pushing. We'd been completely blindsided when the second one showed up. I was super lucky that this one wasn't particularly bright.

It kept trying to scale the vertical wall despite the much easier way up just around the corner. Every time it paused in its efforts, all I had to do was stick my head over the edge, and it would see me and start climbing again.

As I heaved again, something round and shiny zoomed into my peripheral vision. Shit! A surveillance drone.

I turned my head to look for Gnnar, only to see him on the ground, unmoving.

Panic and worry rushed in, and I had to tell myself to breathe when dark spots appeared in my vision. The second robohound was lying on the ground as well, so Gnnar couldn't be that hurt, right? I had to believe that much.

I refused to believe that I'd lose him when I just found him. I knew it had only been a few days, and we didn't have our translators, but it felt as if we'd been through so much together. And I absolutely refused to let Nova Vita win. Suddenly, I was angry. No, not angry, livid.

I was done being controlled. Done being lied to. Done lying for them. Julie was alive. She didn't go to the Utopia Project. And the Kadrixans weren't demons. And Gnnar and I were going to make it to his stronghold. I was ready to give up all the certainties of colony life for the exciting could-bes of a life with Gnnar, and no stupid robohound was going to stop me!

I shoved again, putting every ounce of anger and hate I had into it. This time, the boulder shifted. It was working.

But now, the robohound had stopped. When it moved again, it was to turn down the narrow passageway toward the exit. Shit. The drone had relayed another way up.

I went to the edge and yelled at it, waving my arms over my head and kicking gravel down.

That caught its attention again. There was a moment of hesitation as it processed the information. The command was probably to go around the back. But I was right here, waving my arms and making a ruckus like a madwoman, not twenty feet away. I kicked some stones and sand at it, hoping there was just enough animal left in it.

It leaped for me again, and I ran back behind the boulder and slammed my body into it. The boulder moved, leaning at first slowly over the edge, before it tumbled down the side. I almost went with it. I stopped myself right at the edge.

My heart sank at the sound of movement below. The back half of the robot was stuck under the boulder, which split into several pieces, but it was still moving. Which meant it was still dangerous.

I ran to Gnnar, my eyes scanning him for any obvious reason why he was down, but found none. His wings were damaged, and there were claw marks on his back. But that wasn't enough to take him out, was it?

The stupid drone was hovering above Gnnar's prone form. I tried to grab it, the image of me smashing it against the ground again and again crossing my mind, but it zoomed just beyond my reach. Frustrated and angry, I grabbed the only weapon within reach, the bone club Gnnar had been keeping tucked into a strap made from plant fibers on his belt. He hadn't used it to fight the robohound, which was completely understandable. The hound could snap it like a twig.

I flung the bone at the drone, but it dodged. I wondered if there was a real person controlling it right now. I'd never actually seen surveillance drones go off their usual programmed routes for more than a few seconds before. Usually, it was to check out an anomaly before quickly zooming back to continue their patrol.

Just in case there was someone behind those cameras, I flipped it both birds. I wanted Nova Vita to know what I really felt. I ain't ever going back.

"Gnnar?"

I put my head on Gnnar's chest. Thud-thud. Thud-thud. Thud-thud. His heartbeat was strong.

Keeping one eye on the drone, I jogged over to see the progress the robohound was making. It was still stuck. Good. By the time I returned to my Kadrixan warrior's side, the drone was back, hovering over him like a prize.

I didn't like its interest in Gnnar. They were probably marking his location so someone could retrieve him and lock him up again.

Fuck that! Not on my watch!

I picked up my only weapon again. The bone was shaped close enough to a bat, and I needed some anger management therapy.

I wasn't sure that I'd be able to protect Gnnar when that robohound finally freed itself, but I knew what I wanted to do with this hunk of junk.

"Get away from him!" I swung my makeshift bat hard.

It started to fly away, but the edge of my club made contact, turning it around, and instead of flying up, it crashed right into the dirt. I ran to it and brought the bone down as hard as I could. According to the PSAs put out by the colony, these drones were supposed to be indestructible. It was a way to dissuade colonists from shooting them down with homemade projectiles. Sure enough, no amount of bashing was going to break this one open. It did, however, shut down.

I planned to hold it hostage. Maybe the rebels at Ellaston would want one. It was always nice to bring a gift.

I took out one of the blankets and quickly wrapped the sphere up, making sure it was nice and tight and several layers thick. Remembering how the transport had blown up, I looked around for a way to drag it behind me. But when I heard sounds from where the robohound still lay in the gully, my stomach dropped, and I rushed back to Gnnar's side.

"Gnnar?" I tapped his shoulder nervously, worried that some unseen broken bones were the reason he was passed out. I didn't want to do more damage. But also, I doubted I could move him even if I wanted to. "Gnnar! Please, it's time to go. Get up!"

There was no response.

Next to me, the drone was trying to boot up again. It played a little ditty that made it sound more like a washing machine than a surveillance drone for a power-hungry colony.

Okay. So it ends here.

I stood between the robohound and my downed warrior, club at the ready, secure in the knowledge that I'd tried my very best and that I'd die fighting.

Suddenly, two small explosions sent the robohound flying backward. I threw myself over Gnnar's body, trying to protect him.

What the—

A vessel blinked into existence in the sky above us. Cloaking? I didn't know we had such effective cloaking technology. At first glance, it looked like a shuttle from Nova Vita. As it landed, I saw that some of the parts looked off. And while the back of the shuttle was shiny and new, the front half looked bashed up like they smashed two halves of a shuttle together.

This must be the rebels! The self-destruct sequence made sense now. Maybe the cloaking technology belonged to the Kadrixans. The only cloaking I'd seen from Exotech Robotics wasn't nearly this good.

The blanket-wrapped drone was trying to fly now, but I grabbed it, securing my gift and praying to the stars that it wouldn't explode on me. But I figured it didn't know about the rebels' appearance yet since the vessel didn't uncloak until the robohound was decommissioned.

The door opened, and a man stepped out. He had dark hair cropped short on the sides and left long down the center of his head. Behind him was a woman with blonde hair in a no-nonsense low ponytail with a kind face. They both wore strange clothes. He wore leather pants like Gnnar did. And she wore an iridescent top that looked completely out of place. She waved and smiled.

Relief flooded me. Rescue was here!

But safety first. “There’s a drone in the blanket,” I yelled. “Not sure if it’s going to self-destruct. Thought the rebels might want it. I guess that’s you guys.”

The woman grinned. “Sure are.” She pointed to a rock some way away where she directed me to place the drone, which was vibrating now as it attempted ineffectively to lift off on the ground. I did and quickly returned to Gnnar’s side.

“You must be Dana.” She stuck out a hand, and I took it. “I’m Macey. I came along since I thought you might want to see a friendly face instead of two sourpusses.”

“Hey! I resent that.” The man knelt next to Gnnar and sighed dramatically. “He’s lost a lot of weight, but he’s still a heavy mofo. I’m going to need help rolling him onto the stretcher.” He looked up at me. “I’m Sami.”

I shook his hand, and as I did, I noticed another man standing by the vessel’s door.

“I’m Sergio, the other sourpuss.” Sergio was definitely giving off a Viking-on-Earth vibe. Instead of shaking my hand, he offered a curt nod.

“Is it safe to move him?” I asked. “What if Gnnar hurt his neck? Or his back?”

The second man chuckled. “He’s fine. These warriors are tough as nails.” He bent and plucked a dart out of Gnnar’s thigh. “This is the culprit right here.”

“I kind of expected a Kadrixan rescue,” I said when we were safe onboard the shuttle. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Sami said, sitting down across from me. “The Kadrixans are about to hit their rut, so we volunteered. And besides, Gnnar’s done his share protecting our

little village. It wouldn't be the same without him."

Macey had gone up front with Sergio since he'd promised her a lesson in flying the shuttle as long as there were no enemies on their tail. We hauled the drone and the robohound Gnnar had disabled behind us.

Sami pulled out something from under his seat. "Is this yours?"

My backpack! "Yes. Thank you." I hugged my pack to my chest before opening it and bringing out my phone.

"It was smart to connect it to the Kadrixans' network. We were tracking your location through your phone and found it in a dryer. We were worried we'd missed the opportunity to find you. I'm glad you're alright."

"How did you guys find us?"

"We followed Nova Vita's robohounds. They came this way instead of the forests, so we figured you must have been hiding in the badlands."

Gnnar stirred on the stretcher, and I leaned over to put a calming hand on him. I wondered if the hormones went both ways. But he didn't calm.

"Hey! It's okay," I said. "We're safe. Rescue arrived."

That seemed to calm him. He sat up on the stretcher.

"Glad you're awake," Sami said. "We're on our way home."

"Home," I mumbled, more to myself than anything. "I guess I don't really have one anymore."

“You can join us in Ellaston,” Sami said with a wink.

That had me smiling. “Is that an invitation?”

Before Sami could respond, Gnnar snarled, dragged me across the bench, and tucked me into his body. His wings came to wrap around me despite the injury.

Sami only chuckled. “You Kadrixans really are something. It’s crazy that the rut can turn intelligent, disciplined soldiers into snarling messes.” Then, a little louder. “Don’t worry. He’ll get over it.”

I shoved at Gnnar’s chest. “Stop being so possessive,” I whispered. “I’m trying to make a friend.”

He snarled at me. His eyes looked different from before. Strange, glassy.

I reached up to hold his head still, and snatched my hand away. His face was burning up. And now that I noticed it, his whole body was warmer than usual.

Shit! Something was wrong. This wasn’t just the rut.

“Um, Sami?”

“Yeah? What’s wrong?”

“There’s something wrong with his eyes. And he’s really hot. And I don’t mean in a good way. Even at the start of his rut, he wasn’t like this.”

“Alright, let’s take a look. We’ve got one of their medical devices with us.”

But when Sami approached with the device, Gnnar lashed out at him, sending him

flying to the other side of the shuttle.

“Fuck!”

I grabbed hold of Gnnar before he could launch himself after the man. “Gnnar. Stop! He’s a friend.”

Gnnar let out a painful-sounding snarl, like he was fighting with himself.

“What the fuck is happening back there?” Macey shouted from the front.

“Guy’s freakin’ out.” Sami scrambled back. “Shit. Wait. There’s another dart in him. In his wing.”

“A tranquilizer dart?” Macey bravely made her way to the back, leaving Sergio at the helm.

“That’s what I thought first, but now I’m not sure.”

“Maybe a reaction with the rut?”

Gnnar was harder to control now. He stepped toward Sami, even as the male fumbled with the tranq gun strapped to the shuttle wall for emergencies.

“Gnnar, stop!” I latched onto him, trying to slow him down, but it was like trying to stop a rampaging bull. I climbed my way up his body so that I was right in his face, blocking his view the best I could of Sami. “Stop!” I yelled again.

He didn’t try to knock me off or anything, and when he grabbed my ass, it was firmly but tenderly, like he was giving me support. But the glassiness was still in his eyes, and he was much warmer than I remembered him. So warm, in fact, I worried that

whatever was happening would fry his brain.

He made that pained snarl again, but this time, it ended in a roar as two tranquilizer darts hit him in the shoulder. He went berserk then, and I was swung around like a limp rag. But my distraction had given time for Sergio and Macey to come behind and grab him. They wrestled him down to the shuttle floor as the drugs took effect.

“Good thing we got the fast-acting stuff,” Sami said, pulling the new darts from Gnnar before moving to the one in his wing and sealing that one in a small baggie. “It better not react with whatever the fuck this is.”

“Well, the sedation won’t last long. These guys process everything really fast. Let’s push this baby to the max and get home.” Sergio was already at the controls.

“I’ll send out a report so they know what to expect when we arrive,” Macey said.

Sami came to me and held out a hand, and only then did I realize I was sprawled on the shuttle floor.

“Thanks.” I let him help me up.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I hope this experience doesn’t scare you away. I promise it’s not always this crazy.”

“I believe you.” My eyes darted to Gnnar, who was still crumpled up on the shuttle floor. “Are you going to just leave him like that?”

“Yep. Ain’t no way I’m moving him again. He’ll be fine, I promise. These Kadrixan

bastards are tough.”

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 11:07 am

They had a team ready and waiting for us inside the hangar when we landed. Good thing too, because Gnnar was just coming around, and by the look in his eyes he wasn't back to his old self.

By the time they had him restrained, he was struggling and snarling. It hurt to see him like this. I wanted to run to him, wrap my arms around him and try to calm him down, but the others held me back, worried about my safety. I understood their concern, but I was sure that Gnnar would never hurt me.

"They'll probably want to play twenty questions and get all those scrapes and bruises treated, but if you have nowhere to go after, I can take you to Ellaston," Sami offered.

Before I could reply, a familiar voice said, "That's okay. I'll bring her over in the morning. She can stay here tonight. We'll get her some real clothes, good food, and a warm bed. I bet she's sick of traveling."

I turned to see Penny grinning at me.

"I'm so glad you made it!" Instead of offering a shake, she gave me a hug. And after the initial moment of shock, I sank into it. I needed this hug. I'd dealt with rough situations as a journalist, but nothing like the past few days.

"Nice to finally meet you, Penny," I said, hugging her back.

"I usually go by Penelope here. Penny is a pen name."

"Penelope. Thank you for taking my email seriously. I really wasn't sure it was going

to work.”

“No problem. Let’s get you out of here before they insist on debriefing you,” she whispered conspiratorially, eyeing Macey, who was already being asked a million and one questions about the rescue. “That can wait until tomorrow. Let’s get you to the infirmary, give you a quick tour, and get you settled.”

“It’s okay, really,” I said, suddenly self-conscious about the fact that I was wearing a blanket and was covered in bruises. “It’s not that bad.”

“If you’re worried about Gnnar attacking you, we have several medical labs. I’m taking you to another one.”

“Oh no! It’s not that. I don’t believe he’ll actually hurt me. Even when he was freaking out in the shuttle, he was super careful with me.”

Penelope didn’t look convinced. I understood her skepticism, considering he was attacking everyone and everything he could as they strapped him down.

She led me into the stronghold. Built into the side of a mountain, the stronghold was a mix of natural rock and sleek metal. At first the corridor was narrow, just large enough for the two of us to pass through, but it soon opened up into larger passageways. We stopped in a large open room.

“This is the Great Hall. We usually have our big meetings and special meals here, but I’ll let you know more when we do the official tour.”

We continued down one of the corridors which was lit by long, narrow lights set into the rock and metal walls. Additional light came from old-fashioned, gothic-looking sconces with fake, flickering flames. But what really drew my attention were the fountains set up in almost every hallway. They looked like they belonged in a

medieval castle.

“Those are the drinking fountains. They’re scattered around the stronghold. They’re natural mountain springs that they built a fountain around. Give it a try.”

I hesitated, not knowing what to do until Penelope cupped her hands and went right under the running water. “Just scoop from the fountain part. The pools aren’t dirty, per se, but we usually use them to wash or rinse things. No bathing in it, though, just washing hands.”

“What happens to the water?” There was constant water flowing in, but I didn’t see any water flowing out.

“It goes right back into the porous rock and continues filtering down the mountain.”

How convenient! I cupped my hands and held them under the flow. The water was much colder than I’d expected. The first sip had me hooked. It was the perfect combination of cool, crisp, and delicious.

That was when I noticed the little head with huge ears poking out of Penelope’s shirt.

I gasped. “Is that a cooki? It’s adorable!” The creature was even cuter than I’d imagined. Penelope described them as pom-poms with eyes, ears, and tails, and she was right.

“This is Hardtack. He’s special. He lives with me and Vostak. The rest are a little more shy, but you’ll start seeing them around the stronghold as they get used to you.”

Hardtack let me pet him behind the ears, and he was the softest thing I’d ever felt. Even softer than Mr. Snuggles, my childhood hamster.

As we continued down the corridor, I kept my eyes out, watching for more of the little guys. I only caught glimpses of a tail here and there as they disappeared into the walls. It was only now that I realized some of the decorative trim actually hid openings where the little creatures lived inside the walls. That would be a little creepy if they weren't so freaking adorable.

I was surprised to see the medic dressed very much like an old-Earth religious figure, in a long, dark hooded robe. This was more than a little creepy. He looked more like he was going to perform an exorcism than give me a medical exam. He looked terribly out of place because the infirmary looked super high-tech. Everything was sleek, and the equipment looked several centuries more advanced than what we had in Nova Vita, though some believed the technology for the masses had devolved rather than improved since the establishment of the colony.

I was a little nervous when Penny stepped outside so that Grtirr could do his work. My brain immediately went to alien probing, but I reminded myself that I'd already been thoroughly probed by Gnnar's alien cock.

I was worried for nothing because most of it was done through a body scan, though he did palpate my abdomen and take a look at the worst of the bruises. When all was said and done, I had my very own in-ear translator.

This one wasn't like the one I'd used for the interview. Instead of analyzing and translating one sentence at a time, it started translating the words as Grtirr said them. It was strange at first because the translation overlapped the original words by about two words. It took a while to get used to, but now I could understand him and all the other Kadrixans in the stronghold.

"Aside from the superficial injuries, you are in good condition," Grtirr said as he tossed his gloves into a compartment in the wall. "You are low in several micronutrients, but that can be fixed by eating what's provided at the stronghold."

There will be no need to add supplementation. Just remember to eat well and stay hydrated.”

His last words had me grinning. Those had been my own doctor’s last words to me.

I found Penny waiting for me with two very welcomed surprises: Julie and a change of clothes.

“Julie!” I squealed, running to her to give her a hug. “Holy moly! I’m so happy to see you. I’ve been looking for you for two whole years. Longer, if you count all the messages to your contact when you were sick.”

“I’m happy to see you too.” She hugged me back. “But I never got any messages.”

“Yeah. I thought you were ignoring me at first, but after you disappeared, I looked into it. I’m sure now they were blocking your incoming messages and calls. But I’ll explain all that later.” I held her at arm’s length. “You look amazing.”

She really did. The last time I’d seen her, she’d been rail-thin and pale. And that was before she’d gotten sick. She’d filled out a lot, and her cheeks were rosy and healthy.

“Thanks,” she said. “Living here suits me.”

I ducked back into the infirmary and behind a curtain to change into my new clothes, which included long, flowy pants and a short-sleeved top, both in a supersoft, colorful fabric. Macey had worn something like this. I’d thought she was overdressed for the rescue, but apparently these were their comfy clothes.

Penelope and Julie wore something similar, except in different colors. Mine was a dark red with flecks of gold in it.

My shoes, which were pretty wrecked from my trip, were replaced with a pair of comfortable sandals.

“There are different styles, and I know some of the women prefer the dresses, but these pantsuits are so comfortable that I am happy being in them day in and day out.” Penelope tugged at her hem. “They’re super stretchy. It’s like wearing pajamas all day long, but it’s totally acceptable, and they look good too.”

“Definitely feel as comfy as pajamas,” I agreed. “Too bad my bra is ruining the comfort factor.”

“There is a bra substitute in your official welcome kit,” Penelope said. “I’ve got Tasha putting one together now. You’ll meet her later. Her mate went into the rut early, so she’s indisposed. But she’s not one who can stay in the nest for days at a time, so she welcomed the excuse to leave for an hour or two.”

And that had me thinking of Gnnar and the hour or two of sanity he had between our lovemaking sessions.

“Wait, you do know about the rut, right?” Julie asked. She’d never been a shy one and would probably tell me all about the intricacies if given the chance.

“Yes,” I said before she could give me too much information.

“Great! You’re open-minded. You’ll catch on quick,” Julie said. “Come, let’s give you the grand tour.”

I wondered if I should tell them about my time with Gnnar, but they were already excitedly showing me around the stronghold, which was a lot larger than I thought it would be. For some reason, I thought it would be a small hideout, but the stronghold was huge. Definitely a lot larger than what it looked like on the outside.

The stronghold was divided into six sections, each one representing one of the six warships that settled in Vokira. Each section contained living quarters for the warriors and separate dorms for the women, though mated women usually stayed with their mates. Originally, the crew of each warship had their own kitchen and mess halls, but ever since the human women arrived, they turned some of the cafeterias into hobby rooms, keeping only the largest one, plus the Great Hall for special occasions. They did keep all six kitchens though.

Every once in a while, something in my peripheral vision caught my attention but was gone again when I looked. I couldn't wait until the kukees or cookis—she'd used both spellings depending on who was speaking—got used to me. I wanted one in my shirt too.

I had a hamster once. Mr. Snuggles was the only imported Earth animal Mom and I could afford, even with the large sum we got from Dad's settlement. All native animals were considered pests at Nova Vita and weren't allowed to be kept as pets.

They showed me the women's dormitory in one of the sections.

"This is where I am," Julie said. "They're putting you in here with me. Any bed without a name tag is fair game. You can claim one later."

Eventually, we stopped in front of a set of double doors. "And out here are the training areas."

The door opened out into a gorgeous valley surrounded by stoic peaks. The trees were heavy with springtime blossoms, and a warm breeze brought their fragrance to my nose. There was the swimming pond I'd seen in the photo, and beyond that was a large, multi-level jungle gym that beckoned me to embrace my inner child and play.

But my eyes were on the two Kadrixans circling each other in a makeshift fighting

ring. They had several female spectators as they punched, kicked, and swiped at each other, sometimes taking into the air but never leaving the circle.

The two Kadrixan males in the ring were really going at it. It looked terrifying, and if the women watching weren't so calm, I'd have thought they were actually fighting.

"It's a little more violent than usual," Penelope said, following my gaze. "It's not always like this, I promise. The rut is starting, and things get a little crazy."

"Yeah. I know. The rut hit Gnnar when we were on the run. That's why we were hiding in the badlands."

"Oh! I didn't know that. For some reason, I thought..." Penelope shook her head. "Never mind what I thought. So you've already spent part of a rut with Gnnar. I should probably give you the heads-up now before things get messy. You don't have to participate in the rut if you don't want to. It's not a prerequisite for staying here."

"Yeah, no pressure. You can stay in the women's quarters during the rut if you prefer or head over to Ellaston." Julie grinned conspiratorially and wagged her brows. "Or you can join the dark side and have the time of your life. Come on, I know you're not... chicken! Bok bok!"

"Julie!" Penelope gasped, nudging my longtime friend with her elbow. "You can't do that!"

"Pshh! Dana and I go way back. I was there for all her 'bad decisions.' At least these Kadrixan warriors won't leave her disappointed."

I eyed the huge, musclebound warriors who were training with each other. Each one was hotter than the next. But for some reason, I wasn't interested. They weren't Gnnar.

“Maybe I can spend the rest of it with Gnnar,” I said honestly. “I hope he’s okay.”

Penelope and Julie exchanged a look.

“What?” I asked.

“You said Gnnar started his rut when you were together. When did it happen?”

“Like, the first day.”

They exchanged another look.

“What?” I put my hands on my hips. “Spit it out.”

“Okay, so we have some rules here about the rut, some to keep peace and some to prevent... future difficult situations. It’s all in the welcome guide Tasha’s putting together for you, but I guess we’re doing a crash course now. Because of the hormones, we try not to stay with any of the warriors for more than one night at a time during the rut. Heartbreak is a real danger since those hormones mimic and encourage feelings of love.”

Something heavy started to settle on my chest as I remembered that feeling of completeness I’d felt with Gnnar during our time together. It had felt so important. So real. Had that all been just his pheromones playing tricks on me?

“Yeah,” Julie said, nodding. “Falling in love with a warrior who finds his mate in someone else is a recipe for disaster. To avoid conflict, we even have a rule that whatever happens in past ruts, stays in past ruts once a warrior finds his one and only.”

“Oh.”

“If you want to stay in the rut, you should follow that rule of thumb.” Julie held the next door open for me. “You don’t want to fall for Gnnar only to have him break your heart.”

The two continued their tour, completely unaware of the turmoil growing inside me as the truth came barreling at me like a heatseeking missile, Or was that a heart-seeking missile in this case? I was already in love with Gnnar. And I wasn’t his mate.

I followed behind my two friends numbly, not really paying attention anymore, and found myself sitting on a bench facing the fighting ring.

“It’s a lot to take in, I know,” Julie said, reaching over to a robot cart to pick up two colorful, fruity drinks and handing one over to me.

Before I could tell her that I’d manage, Penelope said, “Ooh, there’s my mate Vostak. You talked to him on the phone, remember?” She waved to the warrior.

Vostak was lean and mean, taller than many of the other Kadrixans, but just as muscular. He stomped toward us, looking almost angry. His eyes were solely on Penelope, like Julie and I didn’t exist. I gaped at the scary warrior. I knew Gnnar had the ability to tear someone apart; I’d watched him do it. But Vostak looked like a killing machine who’d laugh while doing it.

“I think the rut’s hitting him.” Penelope stood, looking apologetic.

Oh, that made sense.

Vostak approached, scooped Penelope up into his arms, and leaped into the air, the action reminding me of flying in Gnnar’s arms.

“Bye, ladies,” Penelope called from the air. “See you in a bit!”

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 11:07 am

I blinked up at the familiar rock and metal ceiling of our stronghold. My head hurt, and there was a dull ache everywhere. I reached over to find the flask of water I usually kept by my bedside, but my arms could not move.

What the fuck?

I looked around. I wasn't in my quarters but in one of our ship's infirmaries instead. Vostak stood with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

"Welcome back, Gnnar."

"What's going on? Why am I restrained?"

"Do you remember anything?" he asked, handing me a flask.

I chugged down the cold liquid as I reviewed my memories. The last thing I remembered was trying to decide whether to take the risk and fly across the grasslands and the channel to reach the safety of our continent. No. There was more. There were the robohounds and the drone. But that was it. I didn't remember getting rescued or arriving at the stronghold.

But I did remember an overwhelming sense of rage mixed in with a bit of fear like I had to fight or I would die.

"Dana. Where is she? Did she get her translator yet?" I needed to tell her that she was my mate. That part I remembered.

“She did. She told us everything she could about your adventure. You are lucky Dana thought fast and held on to you, using your rut to distract you so Sami could tranq your ass. She’s brave.”

She was. But what was this about Sami tranquilizing me? Why couldn’t I remember that?

“I don’t remember any of it. What happened?”

Vostak recounted the story.

“We found a chemical in your system that we couldn’t recognize. It matched the chemical in the dart. It must be a new Exotech creation.” Exotech Pharmaceutical was the sister company to Exotech Robotics, the people who created the robohounds and Harbingers.

“And they decided to test it on me?” Was that why they wanted to transfer me to the other facility?

“That is one possibility. The surveillance drone hovered over you after you disabled the robohound.”

“Researchers watching to see what happened?” I guessed.

“That was our conclusion as well. You didn’t wake until you were already inside the transport. You were not yourself. Didn’t respond to your name. According to Sami and Macey, you calmed only when Dana was touching you, but even then, you flung her off you, and she hit the side of the shuttle.”

My eyes grew wide. “Is she hurt?”

“She is unharmed. There are a few bruises, but she insists they were from before. She even mentioned several times that she was sure you wouldn’t hurt her. ”

“I would not,” I said vehemently.

“I know. You are a good male. Annoying sometimes, especially when it comes to showing off your marksmanship. But still good.”

I grinned. “You’re just jealous I’m a better shot.”

Vostak snorted. “But I’m a faster fighter.”

“Whatever makes you feel better.”

“Dana suggested that they might have been hoping that you’d attack her after you were dosed, and the other humans tend to agree. The Nova Vitans know we are nearing a rut. We are prone to violence at this time, and if they could prove that rutting Kadrixans were dangerous, attacking human females, it would justify an attack on us.”

Fuck! Every Kadrixan and human here knew that Nova Vita was trying to find every possible reason to justify an all-out assault on Ellaston and the stronghold. If they manufactured a scene with Kadrixans attacking humans, they could swoop in under the pretense of “helping liberate” Ellaston from crazed monsters.

“They don’t know the chemical works on us yet. The drone didn’t catch any footage of your reaction. Dana gift-wrapped it in a blanket and offered it as a ‘present’ to the people of Ellaston. And they dropped the drone and the robohound a little way outside the stronghold before flying in. They are going to leak the news that your retrieval had gone to plan with no incidents.”

That was for the best.

“Now, why the hell were you anywhere near that transport?”

Fuck. The moment I’d been dreading. I sheepishly admitted that I was hoping to meet more females. But I didn’t admit that Dana was my mate. Not yet.

I wanted Dana to be the second person to know, and not Vostak. I still thought of Krxare as our Champion and Vostak as his head general, even though they’d both insisted that we were no longer military and stepped down. Technically, he was right. We were civilians now; which was why we re-elected Krxare as our leader the very first chance we could. Vostak was now our head of security.

“Where is Krxare?” I asked. Usually, he liked to be present for something like this, though ever since finding his mate, he’d learned to delegate more of his tasks.

“The rut hit him early. He is with his mate.”

“So I’m not the only one who experienced an early rut.”

“No. It must be the mild winter and warmer spring this year. Almost half of us are feeling it early.”

Which, in a way, could be a good thing. A staggered rut meant a longer but less chaotic rutting period as there would always be some warriors around still with their wits about them.

“What about you? You look clearheaded.” Which must either mean his heat hadn’t arrived or that he’d recently sated it with his mate. Penelope might know where Dana was.

“It’s here. I just came from my nest. Penelope is there waiting for me. It’s about time you woke up. I want to get back to my mate. I enjoy my ruts now that I’ve found her. That was until I had to come down here to watch your ugly mug. You’ve been out for a whole day, and we’ve been taking shifts guarding you. The first time you woke, you were still gunning for a fight, so they knocked you out again. We had the medical bed monitor you and keep you sedated until all traces of the foreign chemical were gone.”

An entire day!

“Still have an urge to rampage?” Vostak asked, a smirk showing on his face. “Or run off and find females when there are plenty of females here?”

I snorted. There was only one female I wanted now. “I feel as good as new,” I lied. “Where is Dana?”

“Somewhere in the stronghold.” Vostak released me from the restraints. “I believe she decided to stay for the rut. She was with Penelope before I took my mate to our nest.”

The thought of her with another warrior had me feeling on edge. Maybe I still had an urge to rampage, but I didn’t say it out loud lest Vostak decide I was a risk.

“Go get some rest. You need to heal. The robohound got you good.”

I huffed. “I’ve had worse training injuries. You should see the hound.”

By the time I was finally allowed to leave the infirmary, all I could think about was my mate. I hadn’t wanted to give it away that she was my mate just yet, so I hadn’t asked more about her. I followed my nose instead. I could smell her everywhere.

But no matter where I looked, I couldn’t find her. I even went inside the female

dormitories, even though we weren't technically supposed to be in there unless invited. She wasn't there.

Could she, even now, be in another warrior's quarters cooling his heat? What if she triggered the mating bond of another warrior? Until she was fully claimed as my mate, that was still possible.

Jealousy, an emotion I was unfamiliar with, had me snarling and drawing the attention of several females. But they were used to snarling warriors during the rutting season. Not wanting one of them to come over and offer to "help" me, I quickly left.

I tried to recall the name of the friend she'd been looking for but came up blank.

A feeling of despair set in, which was completely irrational because I'd only been away from her for a single day. I had to control these crazy, unfamiliar feelings. I had to keep myself busy, so I thought of my nest. If I couldn't find her, then I'd busy myself building her the perfect nest so I'd be ready to fly her there and impress her the first chance I got.

We were super lucky that the mountains here on Vokira had so many caves and crevices for us to claim as nests. On Kadri, it was common for nest locations to be highly sought after and even fought over. With naturally formed aeries in short supply, many males on Kadri had to be happy with commercially made ones.

And while my nest on Kadri hadn't been the largest or on the best peak, I'd filled it with all manners of treasures. It was more than respectable, something I wouldn't hesitate to show to my mate when I found her.

My nest here was the opposite. It was high up in the mountains and in an ideal location, unreachable by predators, and with a beautiful view of the valley below. But

my entire life savings, which had filled my nest on Kadri, was missing.

Instead, I'd filled it with natural wonders. There were shiny gems and glittery ore, furs from beasts I'd hunted, and soft fabrics I'd procured from the native Vokirens. I'd also made sure it was comfortable and had everything we needed to survive the rut together, including a well-stocked food replicator.

I'd even traded with Trjun for his handmade furniture. His blaster now had every upgrade known in the galaxy, and I had a sturdy bed and table with matching chairs, one of which was made human-style to accommodate their strange knees.

I'd been told by many warriors that displays of weapons would not impress our mates, but I'd made room for my collection anyway. I wanted to show her that I had the tools to protect her from anything.

But despite everything I'd done, it still didn't feel like enough.

The thought dragged me further down the spiral. The heat was unrelenting, and my skin itched. Every face that was not Dana's irritated me, and by the time I bumped into a warrior coming around the corner, I was ready to start a fight.

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I brought the artificial vanilla latte to my lips and took a sip. It was my second one today, and it wasn't even lunchtime yet. I was pleasantly caffeinated, which was my usual state.

"I've got to give it to them," I said, leaning back against my chair. "These replicators make a mean faux-faux-faux latte."

Tasha frowned. "I get the first faux, because most coffee is made from a local substitute. And I get the second faux, because the Kadrixan replicators make a fake version of the already fake thing. But why the third one?"

"The third one's for the vanilla," I said. "That vanilla is fake as fuck."

Vanilla beans were even rarer than coffee beans on Vokira. Neither plant did well on the planet, and importing them from Earth was so expensive that only the rich could have real coffee or vanilla.

"Not that I would know what real vanilla tastes like," I said after another sip. "But whatever this is, it's damn good."

Shortly after Penelope had made her dramatic exit with her mate, a fight broke out right in front of Julie and me between two warriors outside of the training ring. The rut was affecting every Kadrixan in the stronghold.

It was then that I'd decided to sit out the rest of this year's rut. I just wasn't interested in anyone other than Gnnar. Just thinking about sleeping with any of the exceptionally muscled warriors around felt wrong.

“Technically, you’ve already done more than your share of the hard work this rutting season,” Julie had said. “Not that we’re counting.”

She’d then grabbed the warrior she’d been eyeing like a piece of cake, and they disappeared into the stronghold. I found Sami in the cafeteria, sneaking a bite before returning to Ellaston, and asked him to take me with him. Sure, I could hang out inside the women’s dorm area to avoid the warriors, but that was boring, and I was super curious about the settlement.

I’d been here since.

Tasha had flown in this morning in the arms of her warrior, holding a welcome basket for me. They looked for me in the stronghold first, and when they hadn’t found me, they’d come here. Tasha’s mate, Rrak, seemed a lot more mellow compared to Vostak. He’d left her here for a few hours so he could get a quick round of hunting done in the mountains nearby.

After he left, Tasha had confidently said, “He has like two hours at most before the rut has him crawling back. He plans short hunts during the rut every year, but it never works out. He’s like a rampaging charger during the rut, and every prey animal can hear him. He never learns.”

And that had me thinking about Gnnar and his quick hunt in the badlands. He’d had no problems hunting.

She’d then hooked her arm through mine and said she’d answer any questions I had over a replicator coffee. I couldn’t think of any questions, but I wouldn’t mind another coffee, so we headed to the fancy Kadrixan-made food and beverage replicator in the main community building.

As we enjoyed our drinks, hogging one of the unused tables, she went through the

welcome kit, which to my surprise, included a communication device.

I dug my phone, which was currently about as useful as a brick since I had no way to charge it, out of my pocket. “There’s still information on here I’d like to keep,” I said. “Do you think we can transfer it?”

“Off the top of my head, I think Annabel has an adapter.”

I’d met Annabel briefly yesterday. She was one of the engineers here and had headed the project to reprogram Exotech’s robohounds and the village’s single super soldier, Igor.

“I’ll go bother her later,” I said. The last time I saw her, she had her hands inside the former Exotech super soldier, messing with who knew what. Igor just sat there, looking like he’d been turned off, until he suddenly opened his eyes and waved hello to me. The whole thing had creeped me out.

“You’ll probably want to recycle that phone after you recover the data. Unlike that one, this one’s yours to keep.”

She was referring to the fact that we didn’t really own any of the devices we had in Nova Vita. Instead, we paid a transfer fee to one of the two colony-approved providers to connect the device to our contacts and then the monthly license to use them. That meant we technically weren’t legally allowed to make any alterations to them; this included downloading and running non-approved apps and programs or replacing the shitty battery with something not programmed to fail after two years.

“There are only three numbers programmed into it right now,” Tasha continued. “Penelope’s, mine, and Julie’s. So if you think of any questions, just drop me a message. We put the newcomer guides on the device. There’s one for the stronghold and one for Ellaston.” She handed the device to me, and I chuckled when I saw the

image on the home screen.

It was a picture of Julie with her arms across her chest and the words “S’up, bitches?” written over her head. Back in our school days, we’d found antiquated Earth slang and sayings hilarious and had spent a good year using them. Was it nerdy? For sure. But we didn’t care. Also, it made us realize that people back in the day on Earth weren’t much different from us.

“I know they make it sound like the stronghold and the settlement are two very distinct places, but you’ve probably guessed by now that they are not. Basically, if you are a resident of one, you’re automatically welcomed at the other, though usually we choose where we want to stay most of the time. I stay at the stronghold with my mate, and Julie is there most of the time too. But Penelope flies back and forth because she’s technically in charge of planning part of Ellaston’s infrastructure. She went to school for colony planning, so it’s perfect. I heard you were a journalist back in Nova Vita.”

“Yeah. Well, as much as I could be working for Omnia Pictures anyway. Everything I wrote had to be vetted multiple times and match their pro-colony narrative.”

“I bet. Have you given any thought to what you want to do here?”

“Not yet. I’m not even sure I want to continue being a journalist. I mean, yes, I want to put out something respectable for once. But after?” I shrugged. “Honestly, everything still feels like a dream, and I’m worried I’ll wake up in my bed at home in Nova Vita.”

What a nightmare that would be! Waking up to realize I’d never met or spent any time with Gnnar. And that it had been all in my head. That would make him a literal dream guy in the worst way possible.

“Well, if you are going to make a career change, now’s the time.” She stood. “Want to come stock the library with me? Penelope just finished her most recent Penny Wrights book.” She dug into her bag and pulled out a paperback book.

I gawked at the book. No one owned physical books anymore unless they were researching something in the archives or were freakin’ rich and had a private library. It was much cheaper to just pay for the temporary rights to read the electronic copies.

“Most people read the digital copies, but there’s nothing like physical books. I worked in the archives way back when. I started the library over at the stronghold, and when Chris and Mark started up here, they invited me to set one up here too. The collection is mostly digital, but I print up physical copies when I can, especially for reference material. And, of course, Penny’s work.”

“I haven’t met Mark or Chris yet, but I’ve heard all about them.”

“They’re usually either in their office or running around like mad trying to keep the place going. I’m sure you’ll bump into them soon.”

“I’m sure I will.” I started packing all my goodies back into the basket so I could bring them with me. “Say, you mentioned looking for me at the stronghold first. I was wondering if you know how Gnnar’s doing. Is he out of the infirmary yet?”

“Oh boy, do I have a story for you,” she said, grabbing her latte.

“I’m all ears.”

“We were asking around for you, and Gnnar comes out of nowhere in a rage and just punches my mate in the face.”

I gasped. “What? Oh no! I’m so sorry.”

She waved away my concern. “It’s the rut. They get like that. They tussled a bit, and Sarah offered to um... help him cool off...”

Who the hell is Sarah? demanded the little green-eyed monster in my head.

“But he completely ignored her. It took several warriors to restrain him so Rrak and I could retreat. I heard they’re worried it’s a side effect of some dart he got hit with, but I think it’s just the rut hitting him hard. He looked good though. Strong. I couldn’t even tell he was injured.”

“I see.” I wasn’t sure if I was glad he’d rejected the other woman or scared that he was acting so violent.

It had been hard not to think about Gnnar constantly while I was here. I kept thinking I saw him everywhere, and my heart would speed up, and I’d get that stupid, silly hopeful feeling. But when I looked, it was always some other warrior.

As we made our way to the second common building, I felt dozens of eyes on me. Sami had made general introductions when we first got here, but I didn’t remember anyone’s name on the account that I’d been dead tired.

“There’s Mark now.” Tasha waved to a man with his blond hair in a man bun.

The man she gestured to didn’t look very happy. He stormed directly toward us.

“You must be Dana. I’m Mark.”

“I am. Nice to meet you.” I stuck out my hand and put on my professional face, the one I used when meeting new people for my job, especially if I didn’t know if they were hostile or not.

He took my hand and shook. “Sorry if I’m coming off unfriendly. I don’t mean to. But we’ve got a little problem.” He turned the screen of his device toward me.

“ Omnia Pictures Journalist Kidnapped for Monster Rut,” I read out loud. “What! That’s not true.” I shook my head. “But it’s something Omnia Pictures would publish as long as Nova Vita paid the right sum.”

I kept reading. The bullshit article even had commentaries from my parents, who were begging the authorities to do everything in their power to bring me back. Except both of my parents were long gone. My dad passed when I was really young in a work-related accident, and I was raised by my mom. I lost Mom in the floods of the Big Tsunami.

But hey, they interviewed my neighbor, and that part was probably real. It was an Omnia Pictures special, seamlessly mixing truths and lies so you could never tell what was what.

“I’m so livid I can’t keep reading, but I’ve spent my whole life writing articles like this. I swear, I tried to find another job but couldn’t. And then Julie went missing, and I knew I had to use my contacts to find her.”

Mark’s face softened. “We understand. We all had to live.”

“Yeah, we get it. You had to publish what they wanted,” Tasha said, nodding. “Have you met Kat?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve met so many people in the last two days that I don’t remember.”

“She was Councillor Dubois’s assistant.”

My eyes widened. “Oh! That Kat! I have met her. But not here in Ellaston. I

interviewed her once. She's here? And alive?"

Councillor Dubois and his assistant had disappeared shortly after the information on the Utopia Project had leaked. It was assumed that they'd gone into hiding together, abandoning his "poor" wife. It was "true love," they'd said since she was willing to go on the run and disappear with him, even after he'd lost it all. I'd always thought it was a crock of bull.

Mark nodded solemnly. "She is. She splits her time between here and the stronghold. And if the other settlers can accept her, then they can accept you. So your old job isn't the problem. Keep reading."

I did, and the words had me fuming. Nova Vita was considering it an act of war!

"They're using me as an excuse to start a fucking war? Hell no! They're after the ore in the mountains. Have been since the treaty with the Kadrixans ended. I'm not going to let it happen. Do you have a way to broadcast to Nova Vita? I'm assuming you do because I watched the documentary with the survivors you rescued from one of the labs."

"We do."

"Good. I'm going to make sure Nova Vita knows the truth."

"Good for you!" Tasha gave me a double thumbs-up. "You show them who's boss."

"We can film it right now if you're ready."

"I sure am."

Tasha continued to the library, and I stepped back into the community center with

Mark, ready to rip Nova Vita a new one.

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Our leader paced in front of the brig, a stern look on his face. “Do we need to confine you for the rest of the rut?”

Considering the number of fights I’d started in the last planetary rotation, I didn’t blame Krxare for throwing me in the warship’s holding cell. While fights were common between warriors during this time, they were usually easily diffused by the human females with an offer to help us cool off. Problem was, I didn’t want them to help me cool off. I wanted Dana. My ability to think properly was eroding away by the minute.

Krxare turned to Grtirr, our medic. “Do you think the foreign chemicals are still in his system?”

“Negative, I do not believe so. He’s fully metabolized it, and there are no traces of it left at all.” Grtirr was at the edge of his rut; I could tell by the way he kept clenching his jaws and fists. “This is the rut. He’s displaying all the classic symptoms of a male denying himself.”

I had yet to tell anyone that Dana was my mate, but perhaps that had been a mistake. I needed help looking for her before the rut consumed me, making me dangerous to my own people.

Dana wasn’t anywhere in the stronghold. I’d looked everywhere. At least, that was what I told myself. The alternative was that another warrior had found her compatible as his mate and taken her to his nest, and that was unacceptable.

“Dana is my mate. Vostak said she stayed for the rut. I’ve looked everywhere for her,

but she is not here.”

Krxare visibly relaxed. “That makes sense now. I was getting worried that the chemical somehow damaged you, making you more violent permanently. In this case, the solution is easy. Go find your mate.” Then he paled. “Unless she has rejected you.”

We had protocols in place in case a warrior was rejected by his mate. First, we’d try to help them work out the issue. We’d had females reject a warrior that first year we had the treaty with Nova Vita simply because they were scared, not understanding our customs or our biology. We encouraged them to spend several days together in his nest, or even better, through an entire rut. Then, if she still found him unworthy, we watched the warrior for signs he could become dangerous.

It was common for Kadrixan males denied by their true mates to go crazy. Many had to be locked up for the safety of everyone else.

“She has not. Dana doesn’t know she’s my mate. She had no translator during our escape, and I have not found her to tell her. She has not rejected me.”

“Then congratulations.”

“She also has not yet agreed to be my mate. My chest aches when I think of her, and it feels so tight I cannot breathe.”

“That is love,” Krxare said. “It comes with the mate bond. You’ll get used to it.”

“Sounds more like a heart condition to me,” Grtirr huffed. “I’m glad I’m not afflicted.”

Krxare chuckled, opening the cell of the warship’s brig. “You’ll change your tune

when you meet your mate.”

Grtirr scowled in response.

“You have your entire life to convince her, Gnnar. You are a good warrior and a good male. She is an intelligent female. I have no doubt you will succeed.” Krxare turned back to Grtirr. “Do you need anything else to start isolating a cure for the berserker chemical?”

Sami and Macey had started referring to it by that name, and it stuck. They’d explained that Berserkers in old-Earth mythology were warriors who fought in a trance-like state of fury.

“No. Gnnar’s body had already started producing an enzyme to neutralize it. My guess is that future doses would need to be exponentially larger for it to work on him. Controlled exposure to a weakened form of the chemical can give Kadrixans resistance to it.”

“Will that work on the humans?” Krxare’s mate, Clara, was the sister of one of Ellaston’s founders. He had good reason to protect the humans.

“No. Clearly, this chemical was originally produced for use on human enemies. But I can make a serum containing the enzyme I took from Gnnar to help jumpstart the breakdown of the chemical in those affected.”

“Good. Get on that after your rut. Everything you need is at your disposal.” Krxare then motioned for me to follow him. “Let’s find her so you can stop being a menace.”

We stepped into his office, and he made an announcement asking Dana to come by as soon as possible. Before long, there was a knock on his office door. I found knocking to be a strange human custom; I didn’t understand why they didn’t just announce they

were here. There was more information in a voice than a knock.

Krxare opened his door from his desk, and I turned to face it, excited and relieved that I'd finally see her again.

But it wasn't Dana who walked in.

"Hey, Krxare," she said with a cheery wave.

Wait. I knew her! Judy? Julie? Yes. Julie. She spent a lot of time with Krxare's mate. I'd even seen her around the stronghold in my search for Dana. Her hair was messy, but she had a rosy glow on her face that told me the last warrior she'd spent time with treated her well and put her needs first. When she spotted me in the chair her eyes narrowed, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she turned back to Krxare.

"I know you're expecting Dana, but she's not here. She decided to skip the rest of the rut." She eyed me up and down. "I told her that she'd already done her share. She's in Ellaston."

"I will go find her." I stood.

"Now, wait just one minute. You spent days with her," she accused.

"I did," I said, amused. "And I wish to spend the rest of my rut with her."

"Are you trying to force a mate bond? I thought that wasn't allowed here."

"It isn't. Dana is my mate. I would've fallen to the ground for her if I hadn't been lying down."

Her mouth rounded into a little O. "She's your mate! That's so exciting! No wonder

she looked at all the other warriors like they were chopped liver.”

I frowned. Was that a good or bad thing? Kadrixans considered liver a delicacy, but we found many of the human females did not like it.

As if reading my mind, she said, “She wasn’t interested in them.”

“Now you know where she is. Good luck, warrior.” Krxare dismissed us both and stood, eager to head back up to his nest to be with his mate.

As we walked out of the commander’s office, Julie turned to me.

“When I first arrived here, I was sure that all my friends had abandoned me. I recently found out that Dana has been looking for me since I got sick. Nova Vita blocked her calls, hoping I’d choose to join the Utopia Project out of desperation when I couldn’t pay my medical bills. Her dedication to finding me means so much. I’m glad she’s your mate, but if you break her heart, you will have an enemy for life.”

Was she threatening me? She was half my size! But she didn’t need to threaten me at all; I planned on cherishing Dana for the rest of my life. I told her so. I also told her that I was nervous to show Dana my nest. It wasn’t anything like the one I’d built on Kadri. What if it wasn’t enough?

“I’m pretty sure she chose not to participate in this year’s rut because she’d rather spend it with you, even though I told her it was dangerous to do so. I think you’ll be fine. We were closer when we were younger. We went to school together. She doesn’t need pretty gems and priceless treasures; she just wants someone who’d devote his life to her. Pretty gems won’t hurt though,” she said, grinning.

“I am willing to devote every last waking moment to her.”

“Then you will be fine.”

Then, she was waving goodbye as she ducked into the corridor leading to the women’s dormitory.

“Good luck and congratulations,” was the last thing I heard before I stepped out into the valley.

For the first time, I was glad that I’d been forced to rest. My body had filled out much of the muscles I’d lost, and my injuries had healed for the most part. I still had the scars, but they no longer affected my mobility and strength.

It wasn’t long before I found myself circling the settlement, my eyes scanning the ground as my ancestors had as they searched for the right females to spend their ruts with. It wasn’t just for the ruts, but for mates as well—the only difference was if they brought the female back to their nest or not.

In less civilized times, it was common for a male Kadrixan stricken with a mating bond to swoop in from the skies and carry the female away to his nest and keep her until she agreed to stay with him. Our aeries were made high up in the cliff, and like humans, female Kadrixans cannot fly.

Some males did this with females they coveted but had no bond with, hoping they’d both develop one. Back on Kadri, that ploy would be a costly one because if it didn’t work, the male forfeited his entire nest, which was usually everything of value he had saved throughout his life. Each nest could only be used for one female.

Here, with our simple nests and few worldly items, we had voted to outlaw forcing mate bonds. We could only bring a female to our nest if we had already formed a bond to them.

I circled the settlement again until a door opened. Dana stepped out, a rather confused look on her face. She held a device in her hand as she looked up to the sky. The smile that spread on her face at the sight of me was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

She said one last thing into the device, then tucked it away in her clothes. Just in time, too, because I was already swooping down to meet her. She threw her arms up, reaching for me.

She was laughing as she jumped into my arms and wrapped her legs tightly around my hips.

"Gnnar! I was so confused when Julie told me to go outside and look up but wouldn't tell me why. No wonder she was being so cryptic." She buried her face into my neck. "I missed you."

It was also good to be able to understand her again. "I missed you too, my mate."

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“I missed you too, my mate.”

It took me several seconds for the words to finally make sense. At first, I thought I’d imagined it. Perhaps he meant something else, or the translator malfunctioned.

“What did you just call me?”

Gnnar pressed his lips into a thin line, and his arms tightened around me. “I was planning to bring you to my nest first. But I cannot deny the truth any longer. You are my mate, Dana. My Starlight. I do not wish to live a moment longer without you.”

Starlight? So that was what he had been calling me during our escape. I liked it.

There was a soft but drawn-out “Awwwww,” from behind us and I realized we had an audience. Before I could look, Gnnar’s wings wrapped around us, cocooning us and giving us a semblance of privacy, despite standing in the middle of the courtyard.

“Yes, Gnnar. I agree. I’ll be your mate,” I blurted out.

Was it too early? Was it crazy to devote the rest of my life to someone I’d only met last week? Yes. It was. What I should do is tell him that we should date for a while first before making such a huge commitment. Mates were forever. But I’d spent my entire life doing what I should and never what I wanted. I needed a change, and that change was him.

Gnnar frowned. “You haven’t seen my nest yet.”

“I don’t need a nest to know that you’d do anything to protect me. I don’t need a nest to know that I can count on you when I need you the most. And I definitely don’t need a nest to know that you make me happy. But I also know that this nest is very important to you and your culture. So please Gnnar, show me your nest! Then, after, if it makes you happy, I’ll tell you I’ll be your mate again.”

“That would make me very happy.”

In an instant, Gnnar had his hand tangled in my hair and his lips devouring mine with a hunger so fierce that it turned my knees to jelly. I would’ve melted into a puddle if he hadn’t been supporting me.

I kissed him back, filling the Gnnar-shaped void that had grown in his absence. Our tongues danced and dueled. I found myself wrapped around him, my feet no longer on the ground. The need for him was wild, overwhelming, unrestrained. I wanted—no—needed him like I needed air itself.

It was the shouted “Go get a room!” that had us coming up for air. I turned and glared at the voice and found Sami grinning like a fool and giving us a thumbs-up.

Yup, I wasn’t in Nova Vita anymore.

“I have a better solution. Ready to see my nest?”

I nodded. I was more than ready.

Gnnar leaped into the air. There was no fear this time as the village disappeared below me; I knew Gnnar would never drop me. I was safe in his arms.

Then the significance hit me: this was our mating flight! This was it! He was taking me to his nest. Warmth welled up inside me. Even though I’d already told him I’d be

his mate and had meant every word, this felt infinitely more official.

I closed my eyes, overcome with a feeling of awe. His masculine scent filled my lungs, the crisp spring air rushed by, and there was the steady beating of his powerful wings. It was perfect in every way. Superior to anything I could read in Penny's books because it was with Gnnar. This was ours.

His hands explored my body like he was trying to memorize every inch of me. It started little fires all over my skin. By the time we were hovering in front of a ledge with a carved wooden door and an intricate pattern painted in neon green over it, I was begging him to help put the fires out.

The door slid open as he approached and he swooped inside, landing gracefully on his feet as his wings closed behind him. As my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, I focused on Gnnar and all the places we touched. He still carried me, and I reached up to pull myself higher so I could leave kisses all over his face and throat.

He released me, and I landed on something soft and bouncy. It was a bed, but not just any bed—this one was round and had sides that came up ever so slightly. I understood that the entire cave was considered a nest, but he'd made a nest inside his nest! It was covered in the softest blankets, some made of furs, others of cool-feeling fabrics. But the best thing by far about the bed was that Gnnar was crawling onto... or into, it.

Horned, winged, and rippling with muscles—he'd filled in since the last time I saw him—he was the sexiest, most majestic beast of a warrior I'd ever seen. And he was all mine!

He was naked too, having shed his pants onto the cave's tiled floors. His dark red cock jutted out proudly in front of him, making me lick my lips at the memory of having it in my mouth. When I'd first seen the way his thick vertical ridges spiraled

around his length, it reminded me of sweet frozen treats, and I had to go in for a taste. The musky, salty-sweet flavor had me staying for more.

I licked my lips, but before I could reach for it, Gnnar shoved me down onto the mattress, pinning me with a big hand across my throat. He loomed over me, big and powerful, as his other hand made quick work of my clothes, tearing them from my body like frivolous wrapping.

His eyes glittered as he took me in. “You’re so perfect, my sweet Starlight.” His forked tongue snaked across his lips. “Just a little taste.”

He bent down, nudging my head to the side so he could kiss, lick, and nibble down my throat and neck, fanning fires he’d started on the flight here. I couldn’t stop the needy whimper that escaped my lips. The whimpers soon became moans and pants as he moved down over my belly. My legs were shaking as I urged him lower with my hands on his horns.

Gnnar chuckled. “Eager, little mate?”

I responded by scratching my nails lightly at the base of his horns, pulling a groan from him. Shredding the last piece of clothing from my body and tossing it over the edge of our nest bed, he dove in for the kill, lapping at my clit like a man starved. I reeled, tossing my head back against the pillows. My knees tightened over his horns, shaking as his tongue teased and played me expertly.

Then his tail was there, taking over for his mouth. It rubbed in firm, tight circles as it vibrated. His tongue, now free, delved into my pussy. The shrill sound that came from my lips echoed through the cave. I bucked my hips, but his powerful hands held me down as his tail and tongue continued to drive me higher, slowly but surely drawing the pleasure from me.

I was cursing and begging now, completely lost in the mindless bliss, tossing my head from side to side. When he stopped, leaving me at the very edge, I whined. Lifting his head and tearing his horns from my grasp, he stared at me with a wicked grin.

“Not yet, Starlight. I want to watch your face.”

His words left me a little confused until his hand came to collar my throat again. There was a glint in his fiery eyes as his tail moved, thrusting into me. He curved his tail up, pressing it against my front walls, then started a punishing rhythm, each thrust hitting something inside that had me howling and screaming. Wetness gushed from me, coating his tail.

But the sexiest thing of all was the satisfied grin on his face as he watched me thrashing wildly.

“Fuck. That’s so beautiful.”

My channel was still pulsing around his tail when he flipped me over, shoving several pillows under my hips so that my ass was displayed in the air for him. I only mourned the loss of his tail for a split second before he was rubbing the thick head of his cock up and down my slit.

Draped over the pillows, my body shook and shivered as he pressed in, his huge cock splitting me open. Just like every time before, it felt as if it was too much. But this time, when his monster cock was finally seated in me, Gnnar surprised me with something new. The tip of his tail, still wet with my juices, pressed against the rosebud of my ass.

My eyes went wide, and I stiffened when I realized what he planned to do.

“Trust me. Relax. I’ll care for you.” His softly crooned words calmed me, as did the pheromones he produced.

Rolled up into a bullet shape, the tip of his tail pressed in as he pulled out with his cock. I let out a squeak as it slid in. Okay, that wasn’t too bad. But then he thrust in with his cock, filling my pussy again, and everything changed. Gnnar repeated the motion again, pulling out with his cock, and pressing in with his tail. And again, when he refilled me with his cock, his tail didn’t budge an inch.

Oh god! I was so full.

The scream I let loose when he started fucking me hard shook the entire mountain.

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Fuck! Dana was so hot filled up with my tail and cock.

Only the tip was in, but with how she reacted it was enough. I loved the way she gripped me, and how I had to fight to move inside her despite how dripping wet she was. My tail started to vibrate, something I couldn't control, and she started to shove back at me, desperate and needy. Her whole body shook and the sounds she made were everything a warrior like me could want.

I reached forward, grabbing a thick handful of her silky tresses, pulling her head up so she had to arch her back. Just when I'd thought I'd seen the best side of her, I found something I loved even more. And I swore to take her in every way and position possible before she left my nest.

The new angle had her howling again in pleasure. I growled triumphantly as her cunt squeezed and fluttered around me wildly.

I knew I wouldn't last long. I pounded into her, the delicious friction making the frisson of tingling start at the base of my spine. I was soon thrusting into her silken channel with jerky, uncontrolled motions. The pressure in my loins grew until I could contain it no more. I exploded, snarling as I emptied myself into her.

I moved, careful not to crush her until she was lying against my front, spooned in my arms, my cock still inside her. I kissed her hair tenderly as the air cooled our bodies. Everything was perfect in the world.

I stayed there, enjoying the moment until Dana expressed discomfort at my seed oozing between her legs. I grabbed a soft towel I had at the ready and cleaned her up,

tossing the towel and the soiled pillow under her hips into a bin at the foot of the bed.

Rested and cleaned, and with the rut no longer hounding us, Dana sat up and stretched, her eyes peering around the nest. “You know, if I hadn’t already read Penelope’s book, I would have expected a real nest, like a bird’s, you know, because of the wings and all.”

I imagined flying her up to an aerie at the edge of a cliff. “I assume that our predecessors had nests like the ones you refer to. It wouldn’t work for modern-day Kadrixan females. They are no better at flying than you are.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. In that case, an actual nest at the side of a cliff would be a horrible idea. I have to admit that this circle bed is close enough. It’s even shaped like a nest. And with the soft sheets and fur blankets, it’s a lot more comfortable than a bed of twigs and leaves. We tried that already in the other cave, remember? Didn’t work out very well.”

I gave her a quick tour around the cave. As expected, she loved the dimmed-down string of construction lights, though she called them “fairy lights.” She also appreciated that we had a small trickle of fresh glacial water running through the cave. She even paused at my weapon collection, commenting on how deadly they looked.

“Ooh! We have our own replicator? That’s amazing! This one looks a little different.”

“It is an older model. Slated for recycling. I fixed and updated it in my spare time. It has all your coffee and tea drinks on it.” I knew that human females enjoyed those beverages. But that wasn’t the thing I wanted to show her.

“Hungry?”

“I could use a snack. Sex counts as exercise, right?”

“It does.”

I panned over to the newly programmed dishes and selected the first one.

She squinted at the crudely drawn image for a moment before her eyes went wide.

“Wait! Are you making meatballs and gravy?”

“It was easy to find the recipe used by the producers. But we didn’t have some of the hyper-processed ingredients, so I programmed the machine to make substitutions.” It also made the resulting meal healthier. “If you don’t like it, I can tweak the recipe.”

“I love it,” she said around a mouthful as we ate at the table. “It’s even better than the original.”

I had the machine roast some meat for me, plain, simple, and full of protein. As we ate, she told me all the things she’s been doing here in the settlement. I hadn’t known that Nova Vita had used our escape to spew the rhetoric of war.

Why hadn’t Krxare told me? I was the weapons specialist. It was my job to make sure we had the firepower to protect ourselves against attack. Technically, Vostak was responsible for the shield system, but I’d signed off on every interceptor that would meet and greet enemy missiles sent our way. I’d also made sure we had weapons at the ready to retaliate if need be.

But perhaps Krxare had good reason for not telling me; I hadn’t been myself the last few days and was itching for a fight.

“I’m not sure what I want to do for the rest of my life yet,” she said, bringing the tray to her mouth and licking the gravy. “But I do know that I want to interview a lot of

people here. Not just the ones rescued from the labs but also the ones who left Nova Vita on their own in search of a different life. They have interesting stories that deserve to be told. But after that..." She shrugged.

I'd been told the human females, in general, had an independent streak, or perhaps, the ones that ended up here were self-selecting for independence. I understood now why Penelope had insisted that her work would bring the right type of females.

"I will support you whatever you decide to do," I said solemnly. "I am stationed as a guard here often. I also train the settlers on weapon use and marksmanship. Whatever you decide to do, we will make it work." I didn't tell her that originally I'd volunteered because I wanted to meet the females here.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

When we were done, she made herself a peppermint tea, and we crawled back into what she started to call the nest bed. But I couldn't relax because despite knowing that she'd already accepted me as her mate, I was still nervously awaiting her official assessment.

She looked at me quizzically, taking a sip of her tea before putting it carefully into the easily accessible holder next to the bed. "What's wrong?"

I hesitated, not wanting to rush her.

"Wait. Lemme think." Her face lit up. "I have to accept the nest, don't I? Like, announce it." She cleared her throat. "This nest is wonderful. You thought of everything. There's fresh mountain water. It's got climate control. There are no giant shoe-eating bugs. And most important of all, you're here. It's perfect. I'm more than happy to spend every rut here with you as your mate from now until forever, for the rest of my life."

Joy filled my chest, and I pulled her to me, burying my face into her hair.

“You have made me the happiest warrior alive.”

I held her then, not wanting to let her go, ever. I wanted this special moment to last forever. But soon, the rutting heat returned, and our cuddling turned into me pounding into her until her screams echoed through our nest. The myriad of pillows and furs made for many position options, meaning we could go on for longer without me having to worry about her comfort. My nest was so much better than any old cave.

“Can you tell me the story again?” she asked as we lay in our furs.

I was confused for a moment before she clarified. “The one with the shadow puppets. I fell asleep last time, and I couldn’t understand it.”

Oh, so that was what she meant. “It was one my brother told me often when we were young.”

“You have a brother? Is he here?”

“No. Had. He is gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I am too. Ragnar would’ve wanted to meet you. He would’ve been happy for me.”

I started the story from the very beginning, using a single lighting diode of the altered construction lights. I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know the ending to the story because I’d fallen asleep every time before it ended. I wondered if there ever was an ending. I suspected that Ragnar had made it all up, adding a little more each time

until I was asleep. Maybe that was what I'd have to do now for her and our future offspring.

But I was worried for nothing because before I could even get to the same point in the story as I'd left off last time, Dana was already snoring softly in my arms.

I pressed a tender kiss to her head. Here, together in our nest, it felt as if nothing could ever be wrong in the universe again.

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“Thank you, Igor. If you remember anything else, just give me a shout.” I stuck my hand out, and Igor took it, giving it a firm but somewhat awkward shake. “And I’m glad your headaches are feeling better.”

“Me too,” he said. “Thank you for teaching me about Faraday pouches. I’m gonna make a new hat.” He patted the tin foil helmet on his head. “Improved! With copper foil!”

I’d never thought I’d get the chance to have a conversation with an altered Exotech super soldier and most definitely not a full, sit-down interview.

Igor became a ward of the colony when his unknown mother gave him up as a baby. The colony had sold him off to Exotech when he remained unadopted by the time he hit puberty. They turned him into a cyborg super soldier. The process was inhumane and grueling, but it was the only life he’d ever known.

Up until very recently, he hadn’t had any memories of his younger years. The drugs they’d given him had shortened his memory, only letting him remember enough to do his job as Dr. Kingsley’s personal guard, something he had been since he could remember. But little snippets were coming back now that he was free from Exotech influence.

And while he wanted to make sure that his story would never be lost again, he’d been wary of me at first, which was totally understandable. It was amazing he could even live a normal life after what he’d been through, but the settlers here seemed to really care about him, treating him like one of their own. It must help to have such a strong support system.

He agreed to the interview after I showed him my homemade Faraday pouch and explained the research I'd done on how to block unwanted signals. He worried that Exotech would hack into his brain again and make him do things he didn't want, like murdering all his new friends.

His fear wasn't unwarranted. While the engineers here had managed to remove and replace most of the receivers in his head and body, they were unable to remove one, which was deemed too dangerous to touch since it was so close to his brain stem. If I were him, I'd be worried about being controlled too.

As a result, Igor often wore an unwieldy tinfoil hat around his head whenever he wasn't using his extra hardware to control and communicate with Fido and Kong, the two robohounds they'd converted to protect the community.

After my run-in with the biomechs with Gnnar, I'd been a little skeptical about being anywhere near them, but Fido and Kong didn't quite act like the ones that had attacked me. For one, they listened to commands, like sit and roll over, and they had little mannerisms that made them more lifelike. Things like scratching their haunches, tilting their head to the side, or lolling their tongues out in the cutest most derpy way ever.

They were food-motivated too. And while I'd known the robohounds still needed sustenance, both the biological as well as the electronic kind, it was something else altogether to see one of these creatures beg for a treat. And yes, I was calling them creatures because, in my head, they were more beast than machine.

Unlike with Igor, these robohounds have had every single transmitter linked to Exotech removed. Annabel, the head engineer, assured me that they were safe.

After our talk about passive signal technology—Igor suffered from headaches, and overusing a counter signal made them worse—he asked if I would help him write his

biography, and I agreed. It would take a long time, since he was still remembering little tidbits here and there, but that was fine. I was here for the long haul.

I split my time between the stronghold and Ellaston, much like Penelope did. It felt good to be part of building a thriving new colony, and I surprised myself with how fast I adapted to my new life.

As Igor ran off to find material for his new hat, I got up and stretched, deciding that today was a chocolate mint mocha kind of day.

The rut was over, at least for Gnnar and me, though some of the other Kadrixans were only just starting theirs. We'd stayed up in our nest for four more glorious days and nights after I'd agreed to be his mate, but now that our mini honeymoon was over, he had work to do. Krxare and Vostak had given him extra work for disappearing off to Nova Vita without alerting anyone and getting caught.

Gnnar made it pretty clear, though, that he didn't regret a single moment and would happily do all the extra work as long as he got to hold me when he returned.

I realized something was off the moment I stepped outside. Wanting to know what all the tight-lipped whispering was about, I flagged Macey down, who was wrangling her two school-aged boys.

"What's going on?" I asked.

It wasn't her but one of her sons who answered. "They caught someone from Nova Vita."

"Yeah," the other boy said, butting in. "They're gonna interrogate him!"

Macey rubbed her temples. "I'm not touching that one with a ten-foot pole. But yes.

They found him on the outskirts.”

“Dana!” I turned to see Sami waving at me.

I hurried over. “What’s up?”

“Guy claims to know you. Says his name’s Amir. Figured we could get your opinion before Mark dumped him in the dark forests tied up for the ruka beasts. He’s a little less diplomatic when it comes to these things than Chris is.”

And Chris, I’d found out, was away visiting a native Vokiren tribe.

Interesting. I didn’t know anyone named Amir. Could it be Omnia Pictures sending someone else to get the scoop?

Sami led me to a small building at the end of the main street that was still under construction. “It’s going to be the sheriff’s office when it’s done.”

“The sheriff’s office? Like back on old Earth?”

“Yup. We thought it was fitting since this is like the Wild West, but Vokira style.”

“There she is,” Mark said, noticing me as Sami and I walked in. He looked like he had a few more gray hairs. “Know this guy?”

And there, strapped to a chair, was the guard from the shuttle, the one that had warned us about the self-destruct sequence. He looked like he’d been to hell and back, and there was a large bruise starting up just under his black eye. He was still in his uniform pants and a shirt, but they looked like they’d seen better days.

“I do, actually. He’s the one who warned Gnnar and me about the self-destruct

sequence on the shuttles.”

The man looked up at the sound of my voice. “Hey. You made it.”

“We found him sneaking around the outskirts.”

“I wasn’t sneaking. I was trying to get your attention.” He turned to me. “Listen, you have to get everyone out of the village. Now.”

“And why the fuck should we believe you?”

“I told you before. They’re going to bomb the place.”

I exchanged a look with Mark. We’d released a recording of me telling my side of the story, or at least a very curated version of it.

I explained how I’d interviewed the Kadrixan prisoner on behalf of Omnia Pictures, only to find my device and account locked by the colony that very evening. I was kidnapped by men in uniform before the night was through. They were transferring me as a prisoner, without trial, to an Exotech facility when a fellow prisoner, the very Kadrixan warrior I’d interviewed the day before, overpowered the guard they were giving him and escaped, bringing me along.

“They said the camera in the cell stopped working when I was in there,” I’d said in the video. “But I don’t know how things like that even work. Someone messed up and tried to blame me for it. And no, I haven’t been kidnapped by a Kadrixan for the record. I’m currently living at Ellaston where the settlers have welcomed me with open arms.”

There had been no official response from the colony yet.

“How do you know they’re going to bomb us?” I asked.

“After you two flew off, I called in the incident and requested for a pickup. While I waited, I had nothing to do, so I messed around with my radio.”

“You mean a homemade radio?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

Those were illegal. Colonists were only allowed devices set to public broadcasting channels. Just last year, they arrested two teenagers who made radios for fun so they could talk to each other privately.

“So where is this radio?” Mark asked. “We found nothing on you.”

“I ditched it with my phone and my ID chip.”

I glanced down at his arm, and sure enough, it was bandaged.

“I heard them talking about nuking the settlement.”

“Who? Nova Vita? Exotech?” Sami demanded.

Amir shook his head. “I don’t know. It wasn’t on a known colony channel. But I heard what I heard. You have to get everyone somewhere—” He suddenly started shaking violently.

“Fuck. It’s happening again.” Sami jammed something into the man’s mouth.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What’s happening to him?”

“Don’t know. It happened twice already.” Mark blew out a breath and paced the room, mumbling to himself. “What do you think? Should we believe him?”

I suddenly remembered something I’d heard once. “I don’t think he’s lying. I think he’s going through withdrawal. I’ve heard rumors of Nova Vita dosing high flight-risk soldiers to prevent them from defecting.”

“Fuck!” Mark kicked a chair. “Any idea what they use?”

I shook my head.

A loud siren suddenly had me covering my ears.

“Fuck!” Mark swore again before stomping out of the room.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Sami looked grim. “It’s too late.”

We were under attack.

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I checked the security system one last time before taking to the air to give the area a final once-over. This was one of four hidden emergency entrances to the stronghold. Nova Vita knew about the main one since they'd delivered the females for our yearly rut there.

That one was large enough to drive transports and shuttles into, and led to an opulent meeting room we'd used whenever we had to meet with Nova Vita representatives. It was the only part of the stronghold we'd allow them to see. They didn't know that section was separated from the main fortress by a long corridor that could be sealed off at either end and flooded.

There was also the exit out to the valley, which we often used since we encouraged warriors and human females who lived with us to spend time outdoors. Both species naturally produced vitamin D through exposure to sunlight. That entrance was well protected since it was the meeting junction between all six of our hidden warships.

Then there were the four hidden exits. Like the main entrance, they were protected by long corridors that could be sealed off and flooded. They weren't in any of the maps we'd distributed to the human women living here either. They were there for absolute emergencies, but the goal was never to use them at all.

I had just started to head back to the valley when a bright flash filled the sky. It started at one point, then it spread until it was all I saw. Then, as quickly as it started, it was gone.

I knew in an instant what had happened. One of my interceptors had found its target, causing it to explode just out of range of the stronghold and the human settlement. As

the very air molecules around me shuddered, I squinted through the blinding flash, trying to estimate where the impact had happened.

Our shield system was designed to intercept and destroy any missiles or drones from reaching both the stronghold and the settlement. Originally, it only covered the stronghold, but extending it out to the settlement had been easy. With Penelope often working there, Vostak had insisted on it.

It was similar to the shield we used on Kadri to protect the capital. The one on Kadri would intercept dozens of missiles and aircraft simultaneously and could rearm in a matter of minutes. This one was less impressive but still very effective. It worked like a net of protection. The missiles would explode at the edge of the net, close enough to rattle the settlement but do no damage.

But before the rumbling could stop, there was another blinding flash as another interceptor found its mark. I dropped down low over the treetops and pushed myself to fly faster. One interceptor might mean we'd stopped a single shuttle or missile. Multiple meant we were under attack.

I landed in the valley at a full sprint and was soon inside Krxare's office. Our champion's eyes were glued to his screen, his features grim.

I'd known this day would come, but I'd never have guessed it would be so soon. For once in my life as a warrior, I did not wish for war, not now that I'd just found my mate. I wanted peace so we could grow our lives together.

And the worst part of it all? Dana was currently in Ellaston, and I was here. As much as I wanted to drop everything and fly to her now, I knew that I could do more to protect her here. I had to rely on the shield system to keep her safe until we had a plan.

The door slammed open, and Trsak stomped in. His mate Kat, former assistant to a Nova Vita councilor and the reason we had access to top-secret information in the first place, was with him. They both looked like they'd barely got their clothes on before coming here.

"We came the moment we saw the flash," Kat said, slightly out of breath. "It's not the nukes. Those haven't been launched yet."

She was referring to the warheads Nova Vita had pointed at the stronghold and Ellaston. Well, technically, they were now pointed at an empty part of the ocean. Kat and Trsak had gone in using Councilor Dubois's access to change it. Then, they masked the new location so they wouldn't know until it was too late.

Knowing the way Nova Vita operated, they wouldn't use those warheads until it was absolutely necessary. Those weapons would spoil the bounty of our mountain and ruin the very thing they wanted.

"Where's Vostak?" Krxare demanded. "I want to know the status of our shield. They will attack again when they realize their weapons have been nullified."

Nova Vita wasn't going to give up so easily. Not with their eyes on the ore in this mountain. Not with the anger they had for the defectors who dared to choose another life.

My communicator vibrated with a message from Dana saying that they were loading all children and noncombatants into a transport bound for the stronghold now. She was disappointed that she wasn't allowed to stay to report on the situation since she'd had no weapons training.

I knew that her noncombatant status wouldn't last long, however. Many of the females living at the settlement insisted on fighting for their home, right along their

male counterparts. It was admirable. Humans might not be built as strongly as we were, but they were tough mentally, and that made all the difference.

But right now, I was secretly relieved. She would be here in the safety of the stronghold soon.

They must have timed the attack during the rut, thinking we wouldn't be able to help. That was utter folly. We were all itching for a fight during this time.

The door slammed open, and Vostak stormed in; he looked like he'd flown here as fast as he could. "We have to send help now. It's not just the failed missile attacks. They had super soldiers waiting. They used bombs that released something into the air. Those who breathed it in have turned against their friends. It's chaos."

"Grtirr and I both have resistance to the chemical," I said. "So do several other warriors we tested it on. And a few of the human females do too."

"Collect the warriors and go help them however you can," Krxare ordered.

I hurried out of his office. Finding the warriors I needed was quick, as they were already outside waiting for a report. It wasn't long before we were suited up and flying in formation toward the human settlement.

But when we arrived at the settlement, we found no one to fight there unless you counted the settlers affected by the chemicals who were being restrained by the rest of the villagers. Igor stood just outside one of the buildings minus his usual helmet and with a feral-looking Annabel scratching and kicking in his arms. Fido and Kong patrolled the edge of the village. Some of the buildings were on fire, and there were people running around, trying to put them out. There were no signs of the transport. They must be already on their way to the stronghold.

I landed, my eyes scanning the confusion for Dana's face, but it was Mark who approached, looking harried.

"The soldiers just left." He sounded out of breath. "They marched in after the explosions went off, fired the gas canisters, caused a bunch of shit, then left. I'm not complaining. We're having enough trouble controlling the ones affected by the chem—"

Before he could finish, a male who was being restrained broke loose. He screamed as he charged Mark, fists swinging wildly. Mark dodged, and I caught the affected male, holding him so he couldn't hurt himself or anyone else. The male's eyes were glassy, and he did not respond to any attempts to communicate.

"They almost look rabid," Mark said. "Fuck! This better not be some accelerated form of rabies. No fucking cure for that shit."

I'd heard of this Earth disease. It sounded like a nightmare.

"No, this is not a pathogen," Grtirr said, stepping close with a length of cord to help bind the male safely. "It's more like a mind-altering drug. We developed a serum to counteract the effects of the berserker drug."

"Berserker drug?" Mark raised a brow at the human word.

"That's what Sami and Macey called it," Grtirr said.

"Sounds about right. Thank fuck you already have a serum."

"We don't have enough for everyone, but I can synthesize more."

"Let's get everyone secured first," Mark said. "Then we'll figure out who to dose."

We got to work, setting up a makeshift infirmary in the common building. It wasn't the type of work I was used to. I was used to fighting, not healing. Throughout all of it, I couldn't help but feel a sense that something was off, but I couldn't pinpoint what was wrong, nor could I verbalize the feeling.

The last affected settler was Annabel.

"Good work, Igor," Mark said as he took a still-struggling engineer from the super soldier's arms. "I guess the chemical didn't affect you."

"My system detected it, and I held my breath until it was too dilute to be effective." Igor's eyes never left Annabel.

"How long was that?"

"Five minutes."

"Jeez! Five minutes!"

"I didn't know what to do when they started retreating. I didn't follow them."

"That's okay. You were busy helping Annabel. You did good, Igor." Mark patted him on the back. "One of the drones is following them."

"Negative," Igor said. "They took it down. I lost contact with it just outside of the settlement."

I'd almost forgotten that the super soldier could connect mentally with all the devices in the village.

Mark squared his features. "I see. Well, you still did good."

My communicator buzzed from my belt, and I picked up to an agitated Vostak. “Is the transport still there with you? It hasn’t arrived yet. Penelope is on it.”

My stomach sank. The transport should be there by now.

“What now?” Mark dragged a hand over his hair.

“The transport is gone.”

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I stared Dr. Noble down. So this was the asshole they'd originally planned on sending Gnnar and me to. At first, I hadn't realized who she was because I was expecting a man, but Dr. Noble was a woman. A very perfect-looking woman, who had clearly used everything in her arsenal to stay looking not a day over twenty-one, despite the fact that I was sure she'd been working at Exotech for at least two decades.

Omnia Pictures had referred to Dr. Noble as a he in past videos and publications, yet no one had ever corrected us, not even Exotech themselves.

Hell, not even Igor had known! He'd referred to the doctor as a man as well, and Igor was the product of many of her chemical compounds. Though, in his defense, they'd kept him in the dark about many things and it wasn't until he'd been given to Dr. Kingsley that he started remembering little things here and there.

"So you're the journalist that got away." Dr. Noble looked down at me over her picture-perfect nose from across the table. "It's too bad we never recovered that Kadrixan of yours."

"Gnnar isn't mine," I lied.

"A trifling detail. I see he didn't go berserk like I'd expected him to. They must metabolize the chemical a little more differently than I thought."

Sick of listening to her, I got straight to the point. "What does Nova Vita want from this? The ore? They can't even extract it. If they could, they'd have started mining it before the Kadrixans arrived."

“You think Nova Vita is behind this?” She cackled. “They could only wish to accomplish what I could. They can’t even transport one Kadrixan warrior to my lab. No. This is personal.

“Those rebels and monsters ruined my life’s work. I had it all. Exotech and Nova Vita were willing to give me anything and everything I needed at the snap of a finger. I had unlimited funding, unlimited equipment, unlimited test subjects. I could’ve achieved such great things. Dr. Kingsley and Kim and I could’ve lifted humanity from the coils of mortality. We were so close.

“So no. This has nothing to do with the ore. Nothing to do with Nova Vita. This is about our work. We’ve been cut off. Forced to work in hidden labs. We have limited resources. They couldn’t even get one measly Kadrixan warrior out to me so I could finish researching what made them heal so quickly.”

So that was what she’d wanted Gnnar for.

“They told us we needed to procure our own test subjects. Can you believe that?” Dr. Noble asked, her voice going shrill. “So we did. It’s so nice of you to round up everyone for us in one transport. I didn’t expect to find you too. This is a sign. You shall document Dr. Kim’s and my work from now on. The world... no, the universe will know of our achievements.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “No. I’ll do no such thing.”

“You will be paid well. Better than you could ever get at Omnia Pictures. Don’t you want to be the first to announce to the galaxy all the new advances Dr. Kim and I will make in the coming years? We are going to change the course of humanity, and you can be there with us. You can help the commoners understand why we do what we do.”

“You just told me you’re going to use all those people as test subjects.”

Dr. Noble sighed. “I thought of all people you’d understand. Progress must be made. Science waits for no man. Sacrificing several lives can serve the greater good.”

“But some of them are children! What about choice? You can’t just take that away from them.”

She scoffed. “Choice and freedom are such selfish principles. They stifle progress. You have to think bigger. Think of humanity as one. What’s a few children now when the children of the future need not worry about sickness or death? We can make the cure for anything. Wouldn’t a treatment to make people heal as fast as the Kadrixans be great for society?”

“So you develop the cure, then what? Exotech would tag an addictive drug to it, then sell it as a monthly subscription. It won’t benefit anyone.”

She waved my concern away. “How they want to sell it is none of my business. My job is in the labs.” She gestured to the super soldier next to her. “Look at him! He is the perfect soldier. Obedient, strong, emotionless. Functions weeks without food and days without water. He can survive underwater long after everyone else is dead. They sent him into the void of space, and after a set of new skin to replace what was damaged by the cold, he was as good as new. We did that. We made him.”

If this super soldier was anything like Igor, then he was not emotionless. They might’ve dampened his emotions, yes, but they weren’t lost. He was still human underneath.

“Given more time, we can make the perfect anything . Name it, and we can do it. The perfect worker. The perfect athlete. The perfect human. We could be gods!”

Okay, so Dr. Noble was batshit crazy. Got it. I had to tread carefully or I'd end up dead or worse.

A ruckus outside of the shuttle had Dr Noble cursing. "What now? Can't anyone do anything right? Come," she ordered the super soldier. "And bring her along."

The super soldier gripped my upper arm. His hands were cold and unyielding, like a metal vise. He really did seem completely emotionless, almost robotic. Had Igor been like this? It was hard to imagine it.

When the attack started, Igor had immediately gone into action. Together with Fido and Kong, he held off the super soldiers they'd sent in. But he wasn't able to stop the gas. He'd been the one to call out the alarm, telling everyone not to breathe it in.

With everyone on board, Penelope and I scrambled to get the transport door closed just in time. We were halfway to the stronghold when the transport took an unexpected turn. We tried to stop the transport, but it was unresponsive. We couldn't even open the doors to get out.

When the transport finally stopped, we were greeted by several super soldiers and a band of mercenaries in fatigues. They had several shuttles and transports.

Outside, the situation was tense. The mercenaries had their weapons pointed skyward, their necks craned as they stared up into the clouds. The super soldiers were also looking at the nothingness above them, standing stock still like statues.

One of Macey's boys, Clay or Canyon, I still didn't know who was who, used the distraction to tackle a mercenary who was several times his size. The mercenary threw the kid off and was about to hit him with the butt of his weapon when there was a sudden flash of red in front of him. The merc was lifted up by invisible arms and thrown against a tree.

The other mercs fired, but all they managed to do was hit their own guys. Then, it was eerily silent again.

“Fucking demons!” one of the mercs spat. “Stop being cowards and show yourself.”

The Kadrixans! It must be their cloaking technology.

As the paid soldiers faced off against the invisible Kadrixans, the super soldier holding me started to move, dragging me back toward the shuttle. All the super soldiers were doing the same, like they were following unheard orders.

“Let me go!” I screamed when I realized they were going to take me with them.

But it was already too late. As the fight broke out, I was dragged into the shuttle. I struggled against the super soldier, but it was no use.

“Put up the cloak and get us out of here,” Dr. Noble ordered as the door slid shut behind us.

No! Rescue was so close. I bet Gnnar was out there!

But instead of leaving right away, Dr. Noble ordered the pilot to stop just within shooting distance of the melee. “All our shuttles are out of the radius. Hit them with the pulse. Take away their cloaks. Let’s give those mercs a chance to tear up some demons.”

There was a moment of complete silence, and my hair stood on end like the moment before lightning struck. But there was no lightning. Then it was over.

“Ha! Yes! Shoot them down,” she cackled.

Worry for Gnnar had my heart pounding in my chest.

She grabbed a device and spoke into it. “Bring me back one of those aliens alive, and I’ll double your pay.” She slammed the device down, looking too smug and satisfied with herself. “Now, get us back to the lab.”

A loud thud on the roof suddenly rattled the shuttle.

“Shit! There’s something on the ship.”

“Well, get it off.”

The pilot veered, and we all slid toward one side of the shuttle.

“Get out there, soldier,” Dr. Noble ordered. “Get out there and get the fucking monster off my shuttle.”

The super soldier moved, taking me with him.

“No! Don’t take her along, you idiot!” Dr. Noble tore me out of the soldier’s hands, then shoved him at the door. “You,” she said to the pilot, “keep flying.”

The super soldier opened the door and crawled out, leaving me shocked that Dr. Noble had sent him to fight a Kadrixan on a moving shuttle. The super soldier might be inhumanly strong and durable, but he couldn’t fly. But I didn’t stay stunned for long. With the soldier gone, I lunged for the doctor, then immediately regretted it.

She was a lot stronger than she appeared. She didn’t even feel like flesh and bone. It was like attacking a train. She flung me off and threw me across the shuttle like I weighed nothing at all. The world spun as I hit my head against the wall.

“You idiot! I offered you a deal! A generous deal. You could be invincible like me. You could live forever, and all you had to do was make Dr. Kim and I look good and help share our vision with the world.” She grabbed me by the shoulder and shook me so hard it felt like I’d smashed my head again. “You stupid, stupid bitch.”

Determined to go out fighting, I grabbed the first heavy object I could and bashed her over the head with it. Whatever it was broke, thick smoke rising from it. I released the broken shards as Dr. Noble kept shaking me like she was making scrambled eggs with my brain.

The smoke was filling my lungs now, suffocating me. It tasted acrid, vile. This was it. I was going to die here.

Suddenly, the shuttle lurched, and she was being ripped away from me. I blinked through the dots flying in my vision. Fuck! My head hurt.

But I had to keep fighting. I reached out, blinded by the smoke, searching for something, anything, that could be used as a weapon. I was so angry, and I needed to take it out on something, anything. I found something cold and metallic under one of the seats, and I held onto it like it was my lifeline.

Where the hell was that bitch? Fury blurred my vision, making it hard to see or think. The smoke! It was another form of the berserker chemical! The last thing I saw before red-hot rage took over was Dr. Noble aiming a blaster at Gnnar as he climbed into the shuttle.

I lunged for her with a yell, the metal bar raised over my head.

Time seemed to skip forward, and I was staring at a bloody metal bar. Gnnar had already disabled the pilot and was carefully easing the bar-cum-murder-weapon out of my hands. Moments later, he was jumping out of the shuttle with me in his arms.

I watched transfixed as the shuttle crashed into the side of the mountain and was engulfed in flames.

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I speared another meatball with the tip of my fingers and plopped the bite-size piece into my mouth. These tasted nothing like the ones from the packages; they were infinitely better since Gnnar had made them from scratch himself.

I was recovering in our quarters here in the stronghold because every bed in the infirmaries, both here and in Ellaston, was filled with people who needed more medical care than I did.

One of them was Amir, who was being carefully monitored as they weaned him off the drugs Nova Vita had had him on. He'd known about the drugs and the results if he didn't return to Nova Vita and had still come here to warn us. He didn't know the name of the drug he was on, but they'd figured out quickly that it was the same thing Igor had been on when he first arrived. It would take some time, but they were weaning him off slowly.

Despite Gnnar's reservations, we'd gone over to Ellaston to visit him, and I'd forgiven him for the role he played. Gnnar, not so much, but he'd come around.

During our quick visit, Mark had hired me to be the director of the yet-to-be-formed Ellaston Gazette. The pay was still undetermined, considering the colony still ran on barter within themselves and with the surrounding Vokiren tribes. But that was fine by me. I got to be the start of something new, and that was priceless.

Besides, I owed them so much already.

There was a knock on my door. It was probably Julie or Tasha.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Julie came barreling in, waving her tablet in the air. “Did you hear?”

I frowned. “No. What?” I didn’t like not being the first in the know, but I was recovering from a concussion, so I forgave myself.

Also, technically, Julie was my agent collecting data for me. The first thing I did as director of the Ellaston Gazette was bring her on.

“Some big off-planet electronics corporation is courting Ellaston for a direct trade deal for the ore. They’re going to bypass Nova Vita completely. And guess who’s going to get the exclusive coverage if the deal goes through?” She didn’t give me the chance to reply. “That’s right, us!” Julie rubbed her hands together like she couldn’t wait.

If the deal went through, it was going to put Ellaston on the map and get us recognized as an official colony. Nova Vita was going to be so pissed. Being officially recognized and accepted as a colony meant that they’d think twice before attacking lest our trade partners retaliate.

Despite Dr. Noble claiming that it had been personal, that wasn’t what our investigation turned up. Sure, she and Dr. Kim had been banished to secret labs and no longer listed as Exotech employees, but the credits used to fund their work were still traced back to a small Exotech subsidiary, as well as to private donations by Nova Vita leaders. This included the hiring of the mercenaries present during the attack. It might have been a private matter to Dr. Noble, but Nova Vita and Exotech had a hand in it.

And that brought us to Dr. Noble herself. When they’d sent a team to the crash site to

salvage the shuttle, her body had been missing from the crash. There had been no sign of it, not even ash. And it hadn't been the work of the local animals because the pilot's body had remained untouched.

Gnnar had been sure she was dead when he dragged me off her. And no, I didn't remember any of it. One day, I'd need to see a therapist about going feral and killing someone in a fit of rage, but perhaps I hadn't killed her at all. Could she still be out there? And what about Dr. Kim?

"Vokira to Dana." Julie waved her hand over my face. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I didn't want to worry her with the thought that Dr. Noble could still be out there with a freshly developed hate-on for me.

"You know, we can talk about it if you want."

"Nope. I'm good. Thank you."

"How's the headache?" she asked.

"Better today. Much less like an omelet." Being ordered to only eat, sleep, and rest helped.

"Good. You had me worried." She eyed the last meatball on the serving platter. "You gonna finish that?"

I quickly speared it and shoved it into my mouth before she could steal it. "Yup. Gone," I said around a mouthful of deliciousness.

"You lucky bitch. I want a warrior who can cook."

“You mean, you need a warrior who can cook. I’ve seen you burn water, Julie.”

“I’m better now, I swear. They held classes when we first arrived.”

“Sure. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

With my food done, I stood and stretched before gathering up my serving platters and containers. I’d amassed quite a few in the past two days and I really should get them back down to the kitchen. That was the thing about staying here rather than at our nest. Things here weren’t really ours. Gnnar had to book one of the big kitchens during off hours to test out his recipe.

But that was fine. His room had a small, personal food storage unit that helped keep things cool and warm things up, but no kitchen. When you remembered that these warriors had been part of the Kadri military, the living setup made sense.

“I’ll help,” Julie said, grabbing another platter.

“Thanks.”

We made our way down to the nearest kitchen and were waved away by the Kadrixan there when we tried to help wash the dishes. So we decided to sit out in the valley instead to get some fresh air. Watching the warriors train also happened to be one of Julie’s favorite pastimes.

Except today, she had a scowl on her face. I followed her gaze to the Kadrixan on the right. Grtirr, the medic. Without his robes, he looked a lot more... normal. In fact, he was pretty damn hot, super fit and fast too. Not that I was noticing, because I only had eyes for Gnnar.

“Do I sense a crush?” I asked, waggling my brows.

“Me? On him?” She pointed to her face. “Does this look like the face of someone with a crush? Hell no. Did you know the jerkwad forbade me from volunteering for the serum testing? When they made a call out for volunteers, I went in with Lily, Jessie, and Sarah, and he was like, ‘no, not you.’”

“Why?”

“He claims it’s because I was sick when I first came in. My kidney function was still subpar when I arrived here, and he’s basically been treating me like an invalid since. He used to make comments if I didn’t finish my food and would check on me to make sure I was taking my vitamins like I was some misbehaving kid.

“I’ve had normal kidney function for a whole year now, and even Krxare asked what the problem was if the drug and serum were metabolized by the kidneys and if it posed any dangers to the other ladies. He said no but still wouldn’t let me participate because I had a ‘weak constitution.’ Weak constitution, my ass!”

“Maybe he likes you and just doesn’t know how to express it?” I was really going out on a limb here.

“No way,” she whispered since we were getting within earshot of the fighting warriors. “And if I were his anything, he would know by now because he’s touched me dozens of times during my checkups. I’m definitely not his mate, thank fuck!”

Tasha and Clara came to join us. I’d finally met Clara yesterday. I never would’ve pinned her as Krxare’s mate since the Kadrixan leader seemed so strict, and Clara was super chill. But I guess it all worked out since her brother, Chris, co-led Ellaston with Mark.

She was telling us all about the swimming pond she planned on installing at Ellaston when a dark red form flying into the valley caught my attention. No matter how many

times I saw Gnnar in flight, the image always left me in awe. He was so majestic and powerful. And he was all mine!

“There’s your warrior,” Julie said, elbowing me. “I guess that means the shield system has been thoroughly checked and rearmed.”

I got up and said goodbye to my friends, old and new, as he landed. And soon, I was in my warrior’s arms, and he was planting kisses all over my face.

“Miss me?” I asked with a giggle.

“Every moment I was away.” He made a face. “You are much better company than Vostak.”

That had me chuckling. “You better think so, cuz I’m never letting you go. You’re stuck with me forever.”

“You say that like it’s a long time. I love you, Starlight. When it comes to you, forever isn’t nearly enough.”

Warmth and happiness welled up in my chest, filling me up until they threatened to leak from my eyes as tears. “I love you too, big guy.”

I turned my face to the setting sun, ready to embark on the next step of our journey together forever.

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A few years later...

“It’s time for bed.” I took the device from my son’s hand.

“Aww. But I’m not tired yet.” His drawn-out yawn as he rubbed his horns told the truth.

“You don’t want to be tired and weak for tomorrow’s training trip, do you?” I asked.

Gnnak sighed dramatically. “Fine. But can you tell me a bedtime story? The one with Shadow Ragnar.”

By now, Dana was in on the secret that the story technically had no ending. The warrior named Ragnar traveled infinitely through the stars, having grand adventures on every planet he landed on. When I was young, the warrior never had a name; Ragnar had always just called him the warrior.

It had been Dana who’d suggested naming the character after my brother. I liked the idea. I wanted to believe that he was out there exploring the stars. Somewhere along the way, Shadow Ragnar had picked up a mate, and they were now exploring the universe together with their offspring Ragnar Junior, often shortened to Junior.

“I’ll do it,” I said, picking Gnnak up and bringing him to his bed.

Dana pulled me down and gave me a peck on the cheek before stepping back out to the main area of our family suite here in the stronghold.

Things have changed a lot since those early days when a few of us mated warriors decided to reverse our fertility block and start our families. For one, we'd remodeled the tiny warrior quarters to accommodate growing families.

It had started with Tasha and Rrak and their twin boys, and Clara and Krxare had their little girl. They are expecting again, this time a boy. Dana and I had our hands full with Gnnak.

In Kadrixan culture, being a father was a full-time job. This was especially true with male offspring since they often became hard to manage once they learned to fly. This was why we had to earn the right to reproduce on Kadri, and why we had to hoard a nest of treasures before finding our mates. Family life often meant retiring from full-time work to care for our offspring.

Things were different here on Vokira, though. We couldn't retire, not with peace being so fragile and no younger generation to pick up the mantle. But I didn't mind. I'd never been happier in my life.

Gnnak was asleep before we got to the second planet. I carefully snuck out of his room and into the one I shared with Dana.

I found her already in bed, so I stripped off my pants and climbed in with her, pulling her rounded form close to my chest. She felt as perfect there now as she had that first time.

She turned to sniff my chest. "Mmm. Yummy. I can't wait for tomorrow."

Tomorrow was the start of the three-day training session all the children did once a month. It gave all the children, human and Kadrixan alike, a chance to learn all the skills required to survive on their own, both out in the wilds and in society. It was basically all the information we Kadrixans had determined was missing in a formal human-style education.

I was shocked to find that some of the humans had no idea what was edible growing all around them. Many could not prepare and cook food that had already been hunted for them, such was their reliance on prepackaged foods. Some females on Kadri did not cook, but that was because they chose not to, not because they'd never been taught. What good were equations if you starved to death surrounded by food?

Every month, when Gnnak went with the others on the extended training, we'd disappear up into our nest and spend it renewing our bond. Dana called it a "long weekend."

"That doesn't have to wait until tomorrow," I purred into her ear. "We got sound-dampening material installed between the rooms, remember? I say we put those claims to the test."

She arched her back, rubbing her ass against my crotch. "That kind of sounds like a challenge."

"Oh yes, it's definitely a challenge." I held her to my chest by the throat and nipped the shell of her ear.

Her breathing hitched, just as I knew it would. My little mate was perfect, and as I reached around to fondle her full breast, she rewarded me with that breathy moan that never failed to turn my cock to steel. I slid my tail under the thin scrap of fabric that covered her sweet cunt, and teased at her entrance. She was already so wet for me.

With my tail pressed to her clit, I lined us up and pressed in, filling her with one smooth thrust.

"Fuck! I love you so much, Starlight."

This female was my life, my soul, my light. It took getting exiled from Kadri and starting over on a strange planet to find her. And now that I had her in my arms, I was

never letting go.

THE END