



Bound to the Marak (Stolen From Earth #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Leonie never expected her quiet life as a nurse in London to end with her being abducted by aliens and sold at an intergalactic auction. But when a masked figure shatters the frenzy with a single word and claims her as his own, everything changes.

She's taken aboard his ship, given luxurious quarters—and watched. Touched only with care, but owned completely. He speaks in a strange, lyrical tongue. He never removes his mask. And yet, his presence wraps around her like gravity.

Leonie doesn't know who—or what—he truly is. But one thing is certain: he's not just powerful. He's dangerous.

As desire begins to blur the line between captor and companion, Leonie must decide if she's falling under a spell... or stepping into something deeper.

Because whatever he is, he isn't letting her go.

Not now. Not ever.

Total Pages (Source): 53

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

One

Leonie stared up at the sky, her breath catching in her throat. It was the kind of dusk that made the world feel hollow—clouds thick and low, painted the color of old bruises, tinged with the last dying embers of sunlight. The horizon burned faint orange, but the rest of the world was sinking into steel grey.

A damp wind slid across the field, curling through the tall grass like cold fingers brushing her skin. She tugged her jacket tighter and gave the leash a soft pull.

“Come on, Alfie. It’s getting late.”

Alfie, her white Maltese Terrier, was nose-deep in a clump of flattened grass, tail wagging lazily. He was always stubborn at the worst moments. She tried again—firmer this time—and he finally relented, trotting up beside her with a soft huff. His ears twitched at the rising wind.

They walked together along the path that edged the field, a line of trees ahead silhouetted like jagged sentinels. The grass rustled louder now, hissing in waves. Leonie glanced up again, a strange unease unfurling in her chest.

There was something wrong with the sky.

The air had gone strange. Thicker. Charged. Her skin prickled with static, as if the world was holding its breath.

And then?—

The heavens cracked open.

A bolt of white light tore across the sky with no warning, no thunderclap—just an explosion of brilliance so bright it burned into her retinas. She stumbled, throwing an arm over her eyes. Alfie barked, frantic, yanking against the leash.

The hum followed.

It wasn't sound—it was sensation. A low, vibrating pressure that drilled into her bones, into her skull, like her body was being shaken apart from the inside. The leash slipped from her fingers.

“Alfie!” she cried, turning—just in time to see him backing away, tail between his legs, barking at the air.

Then everything twisted .

Reality tore at the seams. The field warped—stretching, bending, spinning in on itself. Her knees buckled. The ground fell away. Her scream died before it could leave her throat.

She was weightless. Untethered.

Her body floated in a sea of blinding white, every atom buzzing. Her senses blurred. Sight bled into sound. Gravity ceased to exist. There was only that terrible hum , and the feeling that something massive and merciless was watching her.

And then?—

Black.

* * *

She awoke to cold.

An aching, nauseating cold that settled in her bones and made her teeth clench.

Her head throbbed. Her mouth was dry. She tried to move, but her limbs felt slow, disconnected. Her cheek was pressed to a coarse, gritty surface—cool and unfamiliar, like damp concrete left too long in the dark.

She forced herself upright with a groan. The motion made her vision blur.

"Alfie?"

The word cracked from her throat, barely more than a whisper.

Silence.

She blinked, trying to see. The light was dim, cast from blue panels that glowed faintly from the corners of a curved ceiling. Metal? She couldn't tell. The room—or chamber—was vast, too smooth and seamless to be man-made.

And she was in a cage .

A cylindrical enclosure, maybe two meters across. Bars smooth and metallic, faintly warm to the touch. There was no lock. No hinges. The floor was seamless with the walls.

Her pulse spiked.

She scrambled to her feet, pressing her hands to the invisible seams. "Hello?!"

No answer.

“HELLO!” she screamed, her voice ricocheting off distant walls she couldn’t see. “IS ANYONE THERE?!”

Nothing but her own echo.

She slammed her fists against the bars. They didn’t rattle. Didn’t move. They weren’t bars at all—just solid, seamless columns of something like metal, humming faintly.

Her breath came faster now, chest tightening.

She was alone.

She was caged.

And Alfie was gone.

“Please,” she whispered, voice trembling. “Please, someone?—”

But the only response was the low, constant thrum beneath her feet, pulsing through the walls. Like a heartbeat.

Or an engine.

Or something alive.

She curled into herself, shaking. Cold. Angry. Terrified.

This wasn’t Earth.

This wasn't anything she knew.

And something had taken her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Two

A metallic clank cracked through the corridor like a gunshot.

Leonie jolted upright, heart thudding against her ribs. The sharp movement sent a wave of pain through her neck—raw and tender where the collar had already bruised the skin. It wasn't just heavy; it bit into her, as if it had a will of its own.

The lights in her cell flickered—pale blue one moment, flickering red the next. Long shadows crawled across the curved walls. Then the far panel of the cell—smooth, featureless—shimmered like heated metal and peeled open without sound.

What stepped through wasn't human.

It was shorter than she expected—barely chest-height—but squat and powerful, like a living slab of muscle and stone. Its green skin gleamed wetly under the stuttering lights, like polished jade slick with oil. Thick arms swung heavily at its sides, each tipped with blunt, clawed fingers. Its eyes—completely black, without whites or irises—reflected no light and showed no emotion. It stared at her as if weighing her on some internal scale.

Leonie scrambled to her feet, trembling. “Where... where am I?” Her voice cracked. “What do you want from me?”

The creature didn't answer.

It tilted its head to one side. Its ears—jagged and pointed—twitched once. Then came

a sound: deep, rattling clicks from its throat, layered and inhuman. The noise sent goosebumps across her arms. It wasn't language—it was a warning.

And then it pressed something on its belt.

Pain exploded through her neck.

It wasn't just a shock. It was a searing bolt of agony that lit her nerves on fire and sent her sprawling to the floor with a strangled scream. Her limbs convulsed, her breath vanished, her vision whitewashed. For one horrible moment, she couldn't move at all.

Then—blessedly—it stopped.

She lay gasping, trembling, every part of her body screaming. Tears stung her eyes. The collar pulsed faintly against her throat, like a living thing waiting for its next command.

Footsteps.

Two tall figures entered behind the squat alien—taller than humans, their bodies lithe and angular beneath dark, skin-tight suits. Their faces were smooth, oval plates—featureless and gleaming like polished obsidian. No eyes. No mouths. Just blank, empty masks.

They moved without sound. Like machines.

Leonie tried to push herself up, but her limbs betrayed her. She made it to her knees before they seized her—cold, precise hands gripping her arms and yanking her upright. Panic surged.

“Don’t,” she gasped, “don’t touch me?—!”

The squat alien shifted slightly. One stubby finger drifted toward the control device on its belt.

“No!” she cried. “Please—please don’t?—!”

The collar vibrated again. Not pain—yet—but enough to let her know it could be worse.

She went still.

The taller ones began to strip her.

Rough hands unfastened the simple clothing she’d been given when she first awoke. She screamed, fought—until the collar pulsed again. Her fight died in her throat.

They didn’t react to her sobbing. To her begging.

Her body shook with rage and humiliation, but the fear overpowered everything else. Her bare skin felt ice-cold under their alien hands as they led her, naked and shivering, into the next chamber.

The air changed.

It hissed with sterilizing vapor—thick, bluish mist that reeked of metal and antiseptic. Jets blasted her body from every angle. The warmth of the mist was no comfort. It felt clinical. Dehumanizing. Like she was being washed not for cleanliness—but for ownership.

When they were done, they handed her something.

Clothing.

If it could even be called that.

Two pieces of silken fabric—slick, alien in texture. The top clung to her skin like liquid, wrapping around her chest and leaving her stomach bare. The lower piece was little more than a strip of fabric that settled on her hips, leaving her legs exposed. It didn't feel like clothing. It felt like display.

Like she was being packaged.

They escorted her back to the cell and shoved her inside. The squat alien followed her in, standing just inside the threshold. It barked something in its language—short, sharp syllables that scraped like stone against stone.

Then it pointed to her collar.

The meaning was clear.

Obey, or suffer.

She didn't speak. Couldn't. Her throat burned with swallowed screams. But her eyes blazed with fury.

The creature gave what might have been a satisfied grunt and turned away.

As soon as it was gone, a section of the wall opened with a low hiss , and a tray slid out with a mechanical jerk.

On it sat a bowl of thick grey paste, the color of wet cement. A cup of water trembled beside it.

She stared at the food.

It didn't move. It didn't smell. It might not even be food.

Still, her stomach churned with hunger. But she didn't touch it. Not yet.

She backed into the far corner of her cell, hugging herself tightly. The lights dimmed. The hum of the walls returned—low, steady, alive.

She didn't cry.

Not yet.

But her body trembled with the effort it took to stay quiet. To stay human .

She didn't know what they wanted. She didn't know what was coming.

She only knew two things.

She wasn't safe.

And Alfie was still out there.

Somewhere.

Alone.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Three

Leonie awoke to movement.

The walls of her cage vibrated softly, the rhythm of motion humming beneath her like a massive engine thudding somewhere below. A new light filtered in—pale and sterile, far brighter than the eerie glow of her prison cell. When she sat up, her heart caught in her throat.

She was no longer in the cage she knew.

Now, she was in a clear container—glass or something like it—with bars running vertically along its sides. A crowd bustled beyond, strange figures moving in and out of her blurred field of vision. A platform. A stage. Her prison had become a display case.

A market .

Leonie pressed her hands against the transparent wall, her breath fogging the surface. The air outside buzzed with alien voices—clicks, hums, and garbled tones—none of which made any sense to her. It was like standing in the middle of a language she couldn't even begin to decipher.

A slender figure stepped forward. The first “buyer,” she realized grimly.

It was tall and grey, with a narrow body and elongated limbs. Its skin looked soft and rubbery, and its three-fingered hands moved with curious precision. Large black eyes

blinked at her—too slowly. Its mouth opened to emit a series of high-pitched tones, melodic and almost childlike.

It tilted its head. Studied her like one might inspect fruit in a market stall. A hand reached up, tapping at a data tablet on the other side of the glass. Then it walked away.

The next made her blood run cold.

Red-skinned. Broad-shouldered. Humanoid, but clearly not human. Its skin gleamed like lacquered stone, and it wore a heavy suit of dark, metallic armor fitted with glowing strips and whirring servos. Across its back, weaponry bristled—some kind of bladed staff, and something else shaped like a cannon.

It stared directly at her, unblinking. The breathing holes along its jaw flared, and it said something in a guttural, grinding language. The sound alone made her flinch. It bared its teeth in what might have been a smile—or a threat.

She backed away from the glass.

Then, silence.

The next figure stepped forward, and the crowd seemed to still.

He was tall. Easily a head taller than any other being on the floor. A long, black cloak trailed behind him like living shadow. His form was obscured by robes layered with intricate symbols that glowed faintly, their meaning lost on her. His face was hidden behind a smooth mask of dark metal etched with swirling patterns. No eyes. No mouth. Just the mask.

He moved like liquid—elegant, silent. Even the air around him seemed to hum in a

different frequency.

Leonie held her breath as he approached.

He stood before her for a long moment. Said nothing. Then, slowly, he reached out with a gloved hand and ran his fingers through her hair. A shiver crawled down her spine—not of fear, exactly, but something colder. Something older.

He spoke.

The words were like music made from a language she could not hope to understand. Deep and rhythmic, layered with strange tones that seemed to resonate inside her chest more than her ears.

Whatever he said, the crowd behind him parted. Some even bowed.

Then came the bidding.

Lights flared across the room, flashing red and green. Symbols raced across digital panels suspended in the air. Voices called out in a dozen alien tongues, each announcing a number, a price, a claim.

Leonie pressed her hands to her ears. Her cage vibrated with the noise. Panic welled in her chest.

And still, the cloaked figure stood silently, unmoving.

Waiting.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Four

The bidding had started as a pulse. Now it was a storm.

Lights flared overhead, blinding and hot, illuminating the platform where Leonie stood encased in her floating cage. The space beyond was a swirl of motion and noise—a vast arena of glass and metal, brimming with creatures she couldn't begin to comprehend. Dozens of bidders filled the surrounding tiers, their bodies shifting and twitching, limbs gesturing, devices flashing with competing offers.

Symbols burst across the air in radiant columns—glyphs and holograms in constant motion, each representing a value, a stake, a price. She didn't recognize a single one.

Languages clashed like weapons. Some barked, some clicked, others hummed in dissonant chords. A nearby alien—slender, silver-skinned, with insectile eyes and too-long fingers—emitted a rapid stream of trills as its bid was registered. A guttural roar answered from across the room, where a massive red-skinned warrior slammed a clawed fist into the console in front of him. The weapon strapped to his back buzzed with restrained energy, glowing with static heat.

Another creature hissed nearby—scaly, sharp-jawed, eyes flickering like candle flames.

Leonie stood motionless in the center of it all, her heart a clenched fist in her chest.

Her knees were locked. Her throat was dry. The collar around her neck itched and throbbed faintly, a constant reminder that she wasn't just being watched—she was

owned . Or soon would be.

And the question that haunted her now wasn't if she would be sold.

It was to whom.

The red-skinned warrior? All coiled muscle and snarling heat, who radiated violence like a furnace?

The skeletal grey alien, whose voice grated like metal and who stared at her like a puzzle to be dissected?

A hissing, bloblike dark blue shape with no discernible face, who kept uttering what sounded like her measurements?

She didn't know which would be worse. Every time one raised a bidding device, her stomach twisted.

This is insane, she thought, panic spiking. This can't be real. This can't be happening.

But it was.

The lights pulsed again—red this time.

Final round.

The arena turned fevered. The red-skinned warrior bellowed something and slammed his device into the console. Sparks flew. His eyes—black and burning—never left her.

Others joined in with lightning-fast gestures, codes flashing through the air in bursts

of color. The noise grew louder. Shriller. It was a wall of sound and want. The air itself felt charged, crackling with invisible energy. Her skin prickled. Her pulse thudded like thunder in her ears.

And then—like a dagger through flesh?—

A voice.

Not a bid. Not a number.

Just one word.

Spoken quietly.

Deep. Resonant. Impossible to ignore.

It came from the figure cloaked in shadow near the far edge of the platform. He had stood motionless until now—alone, arms folded, shrouded in flowing robes of black and deep violet. The hood obscured his face, but she had felt his presence the moment he entered. The air had shifted. The other bidders had stilled. Even the auctioneer had hesitated.

He hadn't raised a device. Hadn't moved.

Until now.

The word he spoke wasn't shouted. It didn't need to be. It rippled through the arena like an earthquake's echo—low, lyrical, and final.

And just like that, the chaos collapsed.

Silence fell in an instant, as if the entire chamber had forgotten how to breathe.

The red-skinned warrior froze mid-motion, lips parted around a snarl. His expression flickered—not anger. Something closer to dread. The other bidders withdrew, one by one. Devices lowered. Eyes averted. Even the floating auctioneer, a grotesque amalgam of mechanical limbs and twitching stalk-eyes, dipped low and gave a metallic warble that signaled the end.

The lights dimmed.

The bidding was over.

No one contested it.

The masked figure had spoken.

And the entire room had obeyed.

Leonie gripped the bars of her cage, her palms clammy. Her breath came shallow and fast.

She didn't understand the word.

But she understood the effect .

A section of the platform slid open beneath her. Her cage lifted gently, guided by invisible forces, and began to drift forward, off the stage, into the unknown.

Panic flared again. She pressed her forehead to the bars, desperate to see the figure as he moved to follow.

He walked in absolute silence.

His steps didn't echo. The hem of his cloak whispered across the polished floor like mist over deep water. Every line of his body radiated control. Restraint. Power.

But not the raw, violent kind.

Something colder.

Something older.

The other bidders shrank back as he passed. Even the guards stationed along the walls avoided looking directly at him. No one followed. No one dared.

He was alone.

Because he didn't need anyone.

Her heart thudded harder. She stared at him, trying to make sense of the fear and fascination crawling up her spine. She couldn't see his face beneath the hood. Only a faint gleam of a mask: dark, smooth, and featureless except for a thin vertical line down the center.

He had spoken one word.

And now she was his.

She didn't know who he was. Or what he was.

But she knew this: whatever he wanted her for... no one would stop him.

Not here.

Not in this place.

Not ever.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Five

The corridor stretched out like a vein in a living machine.

Leonie's bare feet pressed against the smooth, hard metal floor, every step sending a faint pulse through her soles. The floor was warm—too warm—like it held a heartbeat, and it trembled ever so slightly, as if the entire station was breathing. She flinched at the sensation but said nothing. There was no one to complain to. And even if there was... would it matter?

The discomfort of the metal biting into her heels, the way her toes curled instinctively at the sensation—it all added to her growing sense of wrongness.

She shouldn't be here.

She shouldn't exist in this place.

The corridors were cavernous—vaulted high above, built to accommodate creatures of a hundred different shapes and sizes. Some slithered. Some stalked. Others floated. She caught glimpses of them through archways and intersecting passages—outlines in shifting light, conversations in voices that scraped and buzzed and sang in alien cadences. Signs flickered overhead, lines of fluid symbols flowing across glowing panels. None of it made sense.

Her wrist bore a band now. It glowed faintly with blue light and pulsed in time with her heartbeat. A restraint, perhaps, or a tracker. But it wasn't what held her in place.

Fear was the real leash.

She walked beside the masked figure—his dark robes flowing silently with each step, a living shadow that seemed to command the very air around him. Two silent drones flanked them, drifting like vultures made of glass and chrome. Her cage was long gone. She had been released from it, yes... but freedom wasn't what she'd gained.

Eyes followed her from every corner of the corridor.

Dozens of them. Hundreds.

Some curious. Some amused.

But many gleamed with hunger.

Leonie could feel the weight of their gazes, crawling over her exposed skin like ants. The thin, silky fabric clinging to her body was more like decoration than clothing—alien material that shifted unnaturally with her every movement, too perfectly fitted, too revealing. She folded her arms over her chest, instinctively shielding herself, head lowered.

Her cheeks burned with humiliation. She didn't want to see their stares. Didn't want to know what they were imagining.

They passed through an open plaza, where crystal towers rose like frozen lightning bolts. Light refracted in fractured beams, scattering rainbow glints across the polished floor. It might've been beautiful under other circumstances—breathtaking, even—but the moment soured instantly.

A group of aliens lounged near a circular drinking terminal. Bipedal, squat and fur-covered, their postures slouched with drunken relaxation. Their eyes, small and

gleaming, tracked her the moment she entered the plaza. One lifted his head and let out a low, garbled howl—a sound that reeked of intoxicated aggression. His thick paw pointed at her.

The others laughed. Barked. One mimicked a whistle. Another made a lewd gesture that didn't need translation.

Leonie froze, breath catching in her throat. A flare of panic hit her chest. She felt exposed— too exposed. The collar around her neck felt tighter.

She didn't move.

Didn't breathe.

Then—

The figure beside her stopped.

He didn't speak. He didn't raise a hand. He simply turned to face them.

The drunken aliens fell silent mid-jeer.

It was like someone had cut the air out of the room.

Recognition dawned like a slap. The one who'd howled made a choking sound and shrank visibly. Another dropped his drink. The laughter turned to stillness. Heads bowed. Not out of respect—but instinct. Like animals before a predator.

One by one, they backed away into the shadows, stumbling over each other in their hurry. Not a word. Not a glance.

The robed figure lingered for a moment, silent.

Then a sound escaped his mask—barely audible. A low exhale. Almost a sigh. Maybe annoyance. Maybe disgust.

Leonie stared up at him.

She couldn't see his face. The mask was smooth, seamless, dark as obsidian, split only by a faint vertical line that hinted at nothing beneath. He hadn't raised his voice. Hadn't made a threat.

And still, they had scattered like leaves in a storm.

She swallowed hard. What kind of power does he have? What sort of reputation made aliens twice his size run at a single glance?

He turned toward her again. His voice emerged—just one word, quiet and melodic, that meant nothing to her but carried the tone of a command. Not cruel. Not aggressive. But firm. Like someone telling a child, Come along.

So she did.

They descended deeper into the station. The noise faded. The walls changed—less chaotic, more refined. The lighting dimmed, turned golden and indirect. Every line was smooth, every angle deliberate. There was no more need to shout here. No posturing. The very air felt still.

And then they reached the hangar.

She saw the ship.

And all the breath left her lungs.

It loomed on the polished floor like a beast coiled in sleep. Sleek and seamless, like it had been poured into being rather than built. Its surface was a gleaming gunmetal grey, lined with soft matte-black ridges that hinted at weaponry and speed. The hull shimmered faintly, like it was veiled in water. No seams. No windows. No doors she could see. Just one long, lethal shape curved for power and grace.

Her feet stopped moving.

She stared at it, rooted to the floor, the realization crashing into her all at once.

This was real.

She was leaving.

Earth—gone.

Alfie. Her flat in Shepherd's Bush. Her morning rituals. The smell of fresh coffee and the buzz of the kettle. The chaotic din of the surgical ward. Her coworkers. The chatter. The exhaustion. The normalcy .

Her life.

She blinked, and her eyes stung. But no tears came. Not yet.

She was no longer a nurse. No longer anything. Just a human plucked from her world, stripped of everything, walking barefoot into the grasp of a being who had silenced a room with a word.

She didn't know what he was. What he wanted.

But he'd bought her.

And now she belonged to him.

The masked figure turned, lifted a hand, and gestured to the ship.

It opened for him.

Not a hatch—not really. The hull simply parted , as if obeying a master's thought, and a ramp unfurled with liquid smoothness.

Leonie stepped forward, every nerve taut. Her legs shook.

She walked into the unknown.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Six

The ship sealed around her like a dream, soundless and seamless.

Leonie crossed the threshold, and it felt as if she'd stepped not into a vessel, but into the heart of something alive. The air was subtly perfumed, not with anything familiar, but something sweet and mineral, like ozone after lightning. The walls were curved and smooth, absorbing light more than reflecting it. Pale veins of silvery-blue pulsed gently beneath the surface, like blood through an alien skin.

With every step, her unease deepened.

Her bare feet touched the warm floor: smooth, unmarred, almost glass-like. It was clean, meticulously so, but the sensation of her skin against it unsettled her. Each step reminded her she didn't belong here. That she wasn't prepared. Not for this place. Not for any of it.

She glanced ahead at the two figures leading her.

Tall, silent, unnervingly graceful.

They were humanoid—more so than any of the creatures she'd seen in the auction hall—but there was something off about them. They moved like dancers, each gesture purposeful, fluid, as though their very bodies had been trained to obey an aesthetic law she couldn't perceive. Their pale skin shimmered faintly under the lights, and the subtle rise and fall of narrow gills along their necks told her what their perfectly still faces did not:

They weren't human.

Not even close.

Their hair was obsidian-black, impossibly smooth, and their eyes—featureless, liquid black—reflected nothing. They didn't look at her. Didn't speak to her. When they spoke to one another, it was in that same language the masked one had used: low and melodic, like water over stone, threaded with something sharp and ancient.

Leonie followed in silence, her heart thudding, her mind a riot of fear and speculation.

Why was she here?

What did he want?

Her imagination grasped for answers, wild and scattered. Medical experimentation? Breeding? Labour? Entertainment? Some kind of trophy? A pet?

Her stomach clenched.

Pleasure?

The thought came unbidden, and she nearly stumbled.

Her cheeks flushed with shame. Not just at the idea—but at the uncertainty. He hadn't touched her. Hadn't said a single word she understood. But his presence had spoken volumes. He hadn't bought her out of mercy. That much was certain.

Her pulse ticked louder in her ears. She could still hear the single word he'd used to end the auction. Still see the way the others had shrunk from him. He hadn't needed

to threaten. His authority was intrinsic—like gravity. He was power.

And now she belonged to him.

No escape. No rescue.

Even if she found a way out of this ship, where would she go? She didn't know what planet she was on. Didn't know the language. Couldn't even identify a door without help.

I'm trapped.

That thought hit like a blow to the chest.

No escape. No help. Not anymore.

The corridors narrowed slightly, and the lighting dimmed to a soft gold as they arrived at another chamber. The door dissolved open, mist spilling outward like exhaled breath.

A cleansing room.

She hesitated, but the attendants waited patiently, wordlessly. They didn't push her. They simply bowed, elegant and remote, then stepped back, leaving her to enter alone.

Inside, warm vapor rose around her. Water—soft and scented—fell in smooth arcs from the ceiling, surrounding her in a gentle, perfect rainfall. The mist swirled with some perfumed cleansing agent that smelled of crushed leaves and electric minerals. She expected surveillance. Prodding. More humiliation.

But it never came.

This ritual, unlike the brutal sterilization back at the station, was oddly gentle. She was cleansed, and when she stepped from the mist, new garments awaited her—laid neatly on a curved bench of pale stone.

A gown. Deep green. Silken, heavier than it looked, with sleeves that slid across her arms like breath. The skirt fell around her legs in flowing layers, split to allow movement. Modest, compared to what she'd worn before. More... dignified.

A gift?

No. Not a gift.

A presentation.

They dressed her with reverent silence, then placed soft slippers on her feet. When she looked down, the soles shimmered faintly—like something made from spun light.

It would have been beautiful—if it weren't so unreal .

There was a click. A swirl of a hand. And then, to her surprise, the collar fell away. The servant took it, along with the strange glowing wristband.

At least she was free of those things now.

But what did it all mean?

She was led onward, up a curving staircase of translucent crystal that pulsed beneath her feet. Every step felt like ascending into some impossible dream—or a velvet-lined prison.

Her quarters were waiting.

The room was large, domed, softly lit from above by unseen sources. The floor was smooth and iridescent, the walls dotted with glowing script that shifted when she looked at it too long. At the center stood a bed—grand, circular, surrounded by gossamer netting suspended from a point so high she couldn't see where it was anchored. The net shimmered with violet and silver, like moonlight trapped in silk.

Everything was seamless. Curved. Organic. Luxurious.

And utterly alien .

A soft chime.

She turned.

One of the attendants entered silently, bearing a tray. He didn't look at her. He bowed—low, his long fingers brushing the floor—then placed the tray on a low, gleaming table before retreating without a word.

Leonie stared after him, chest tight. Even they won't look at me. Why? What am I to them?

She approached the food warily.

It was art.

Sliced meats that glistened like precious stones. Spiral-cut vegetables in vivid colors she couldn't name. Floating orbs of golden liquid suspended in crystal glasses. Tiny, trembling squares of some gelled delicacy that glowed faintly when touched.

She hesitated.

Then hunger won.

Each bite was strange: delicate, unfamiliar, but divine. The raw meat melted like butter. The blue-green root was cold and sweet. One sliver of pale fruit left a trail of cold sparks along her tongue.

“I really hope none of this kills me,” she muttered, voice dry and thin.

When she finished, she curled onto the bed, legs pulled to her chest. The fabric was soft as breath, but the ache inside her would not ease.

Her thoughts wandered.

To Alfie. To the flat. To the sound of her phone’s ringtone. To the friends who might still be calling. Searching. Hoping.

To Earth.

To everything she’d lost.

And inevitably... to him .

The masked one. The lord. The shadow that now owned her. Who walked with reverence and made entire rooms fall silent. Who’d looked at her once and brushed her hair aside with a gloved hand like she was something precious. Something claimed .

What do you want from me?

What are you?

And, most terrifying of all...

What will you do to me?

She closed her eyes, but there was no peace.

Only the soft, glowing silence of the alien chamber that held her.

And the certainty that her life would never be her own again.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Seven

The throne room of the Velthra pulsed with life, though no breath stirred the air.

Karian, Marak of Malvar, sat at the heart of it—still, watchful, immense. He was Majarin, yes, but not like the others. Not like the Yerak, who served him with tireless precision. No—Karian was one of the Seven. A Marak. The ruling caste. The apex. A biological anomaly born once in every century, forged by the depths of Luxar's oceans and shaped for dominion.

He did not reign by politics. He did not command by vote. He was, by law and nature, sovereign.

The chamber acknowledged him.

The walls themselves—grown from living coralsteel and memory-glass—shifted subtly in rhythm with his breath. Lights shimmered along the vaulted ceiling, trailing across rune-carved columns like bioluminescent waves through dark water. Every inch of the room echoed with the past: battles won, treaties sealed, rebellions crushed. Generations of Yerak had inscribed their loyalty into this place.

And in its center, the throne—a living construct, grown specifically for him—cradled Karian's massive form.

His seven tentacles lay coiled beneath him, gleaming obsidian-black, sheened with iridescence, lined with suckered ridges capable of splitting reinforced alloy. Even at rest, they radiated controlled violence. His upper torso remained perfectly still, arms

folded across his armored chest.

Stillness, for a Marak, was not passivity.

It was the threat of motion.

His mask—forged from obsidian alloy, veined with flowing silver, smooth and featureless—concealed his face. It had never been removed in the presence of another since the day of his ascension. To show his face would be to offer something intimate. Something sacred.

No one alive had earned that right.

Not yet.

Around him, the Yerak moved with clockwork precision. Slender, graceful, endlessly obedient. Though Majarin in origin, they were cast apart from him by biology and ancient law—smaller, softer, incapable of the generative force that birthed the Marak line. They were his engineers, his warriors, his hands and voice.

But never his equal.

And never his pleasure.

Temian approached from the shadows, robed in dark-blue silks, his age marked by the silver threading at his temples and the slightly dulled edges of his gill lines. He bowed deeply, one hand touching the floor in deference.

“My Lord,” he said, voice quiet and measured, “the human has been cleansed, clothed, and delivered to her quarters. The nourishment you prescribed has been prepared according to genetic and enzymatic tolerances.”

Karian inclined his head.

“She has not spoken in any recognizable tongue,” Temian continued. “But... she is afraid.”

“She should be,” Karian said simply.

Temian did not flinch. He knew better than to mistake the Marak’s bluntness for cruelty. Karian did not rule through sadism. He ruled through precision, through clarity, and through power.

Fear was not an indulgence. It was a tool.

Karian’s tentacles shifted, flexing slightly, the tips curling and uncurling against the floor with the lazy menace of a predator not yet hungry. The movement alone caused the walls to dim slightly in deference.

The silence held.

And then, softly, Karian spoke again.

“She watched me at the auction.”

Temian blinked. “Yes, my Lord.”

“She did not beg.”

“No.”

“She did not avert her eyes.”

“No, my Lord.”

Karian leaned forward, just slightly, the weight of his attention shifting like a shifting tide.

“She intrigued me.”

It was not a confession. It was a declaration.

Temian bowed his head once more.

“Your judgment is absolute.”

Karian turned his thoughts inward. The human— Leonie —was from a planet so remote most maps considered it a myth. Earth. Crude. Fragile. Undeveloped. Yet teeming with a kind of emotional volatility that the Majarin had long since purged from their evolution. The Yerak revered order. Obedience. Perfection.

But perfection, he had begun to suspect, came at a cost.

There had been something wild in her gaze. Defiant, even in fear. A spark unburned. It called to something in him he didn't yet understand.

“She must learn our tongue,” he said.

“I will summon the linguists,” Temian offered.

“No.”

Karian stood.

The movement was liquid. His cloak, stitched from the living fibres of sea-thread harvested in the midnight trenches of Luxar, flowed behind him like a trailing current. He rose to his full height, towering above even the tallest of Yerak. The light dimmed reflexively, shadows bowing before his ascent.

“I will teach her myself.”

Temian’s breath caught—but he schooled it quickly.

“As you command, my Lord.”

Karian stepped down from the throne. The platform shifted beneath him, adjusting to his weight and flow as his tentacles propelled him forward in a low, sweeping glide. Faster than any humanoid stride. More fluid than any engineered motion. The Velthra responded, walls flexing open before him like breathless lungs.

At the threshold, he paused.

“See that she is treated with care,” he said. “No harm is to come to her.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

And then he was gone—slipping into the living corridors of his vessel, the heartbeat of the ship echoing through his bones. The ache in his chest remained—a hunger unfulfilled, deep and ancient.

Others of his kind drowned such hunger in conquest, or ritual, or political games.

But Karian had always been different.

And now, in the silence of his command, he felt it stirring again. Not just interest.

Possibility.

A single flame in the dark.

And he would see where it led—no matter what it changed.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Eight

The chamber was silent, as it always was, but Karian could feel the ship breathing around him.

The Velthra was alive in its own way. Grown, not built. It pulsed with energy drawn from the depths of Luxar's oceans—luminescent lines in the coralsteel walls tracing the ship's pulse, the flow of neural data, the beat of motion and thought. And in this most sacred room, Karian's private sanctum, the Velthra responded only to him. No Yerak entered here. Not even Temian.

This was the chamber of observation. The chamber of control.

Karian stood unmoving before a curved hollowall—his tall frame cloaked in layers of sea-thread and shadow, his arms clasped behind his back. His mask glinted in the dim light, smooth and impassive, carved from Luxar obsidian and traced with sigils of his line. His tentacles lay still beneath him, coiled in perfect symmetry.

To others, this stillness would seem lifeless. But to those who understood the Marak, it was anything but.

It was discipline.

It was dominance contained.

The image before him flickered softly—a translucent pane suspended in midair, drawn from the ship's sensory matrix. It was not surveillance, not quite. It was

communion. Observation on a level beyond cameras or screens. He could feel the temperature in her room. Could taste the rhythm of sound. Could follow the curvature of her breath.

And she was there.

Leonie.

The human.

She moved slowly through the quarters he had prepared for her—barefoot, cautious, still cloaked in the robe his attendants had dressed her in. She looked small among the arching walls and fluid curves of Majarin architecture, a flicker of softness among sweeping metal and bio-light.

She ran her fingers along a shelf—tentatively, then with more confidence. Touched the edges of alien furniture as if to test their reality. She looked around constantly, eyes wide and wary.

He watched her for a long time.

Longer than he intended.

There was something mesmerizing about the way she moved. Clumsy by Yerak standards—her limbs shorter, her gait uneven. But there was elegance there too, in the way she tilted her head, in the subtle grace of her hands, the occasional flutter of her hair when she turned too quickly.

Hair that fell like black silk around her face—wild, unbound, shimmering like oceanweed caught in current.

Her skin was... sun-kissed . That was the word he had learned from Earth's linguistic data. The light had touched her flesh. A warm, golden hue that felt— alive. Like the surface of her planet: bright, burning, blooming. She was of a wild, living place. One that was blessed with a sun that reached into every corner of its being.

Not like Luxar.

His people had been shaped by darkness. By pressure. The lack of light in the deep had stripped them of pigment, of warmth. Their bodies had grown pale, luminous in places, adapted for survival. But Leonie's skin told a different story. Not one of survival—but of living.

She was alien in every way.

And yet...

His eyes lingered.

Not just on her face, though he studied it—those wide, expressive eyes, too white, too soft. Her irises were a warm brown, and when she stared into the reflective surface of the room's paneling, he imagined she was trying to see herself. Trying to make sense of what she was now.

A prisoner. A possession. A novelty, perhaps.

Or something more.

He watched her sit. Stretch. Shift the robe around her like it could protect her. She muttered to herself in her Earth-tongue—soft syllables, strange cadences. He did not know the meaning. But he understood the emotion.

Tension. Frustration. Confusion.

Fear.

She looked up once—at nothing—and sighed. It passed through him. A quiet, aching sound.

And then she lay back on the bed. Her gaze remained fixed on the ceiling, but her expression changed. Her mouth slackened. Her eyes drifted.

Sleep, at last.

Karian didn't move.

He could remain like this for hours. Days. The Marak were capable of perfect stillness—like statues carved from power itself. But this wasn't discipline anymore.

It was fascination.

And beneath it, something else.

His body reacted first. Subtle warmth spread through his core. A thrum in his limbs. His tentacles shifted faintly, betraying arousal he hadn't felt in many cycles. The last time had been... long ago. Longer than he cared to remember.

Majarin biology did not stir easily.

The Marak even less so.

But something about her—her softness, her innocence, her vulnerability —lit a fire beneath his self-control. She was so fragile. He could crush her. With one arm. With

one thought. She was unguarded, unaware.

And yet she had looked at him in the auction hall.

She had watched him. Not with reverence, but with challenge. With life .

He shifted slightly, the holowall flickering in response to his movement. His fingers brushed the edge of the display, tracing the curve of her form. Not touching. Not yet. But close.

She is mine.

The thought came unbidden.

He had acquired her legally. He had done nothing forbidden. And yet—there was a feeling rising in him that made ancient instinct stir beneath the centuries of control.

Not lust alone.

Possession.

Possibility.

His.

She slept now. She would rest.

And when she woke, he would go to her.

Not to threaten. Not to take.

But to learn .

To play.

A word that did not exist in the Marak tongue. But one that he would find a use for.

His human. After so many cycles. After centuries of silence and sameness, she was something new.

And he would explore her.

In time.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Nine

Leonie woke with a jolt—not to sound, but to presence .

Thick, oppressive. Like a storm about to break.

Her body tensed before her eyes even opened. Some instinct deeper than thought screamed: You are not alone.

She blinked against the gentle light overhead, her breath catching in her throat.

And there he was.

At the foot of her bed.

Still as stone.

Watching.

The alien lord.

The one who had silenced a chamber full of predators with a single word. Who had bought her, caged her, and brought her aboard a ship that pulsed like a living heart. The one whose shadow loomed behind every corner of this impossible place.

Now, he was here.

Leonie couldn't move. Her limbs refused to obey. Her mind stalled, caught between terror and disbelief.

He didn't speak. Didn't shift.

He simply stood , cloaked in shadow and silence, his towering form outlined in the soft, spectral glow of the chamber walls. The mask on his face—a seamless, glistening black—was shaped to reflect nothing. No eyes. No mouth. Just that single vertical ridge that ran down its center like the blade of a sword.

A mask carved for gods, not men.

Leonie's hands moved without her permission, clutching the soft sheets and pulling them instinctively up to her chest. As if that thin layer of fabric could protect her from him . It was laughable. Childish.

But she couldn't stop herself.

Her heart thundered in her ribs.

He didn't advance. Didn't raise a hand. He simply watched her.

And in that long, unbearable silence, awe began to creep through her fear.

She had never seen anything like him.

He was tall— inhumanly tall—and perfectly still. Still in the way deep ocean things are still, motionless only because they are waiting. His cloak shimmered with a barely perceptible motion, as though it flowed through currents no one else could see. His very presence dominated the room. Bent it around him.

This is no ordinary being , she thought, her mind racing. He's not just some alien warlord. He's something... more.

“Who...” she began, her voice cracking through the silence. “Who are you?”

A pause.

Then a voice.

Deep. Resonant. So low it vibrated in her bones. A single word, like the stroke of a gong across water.

“Karian.”

She repeated it, dazed. “Karian.”

The name didn't sound like a name. It sounded like a title. Like something ancient. It echoed in her ears, commanding reverence by its mere utterance.

He raised a hand.

Slowly. Deliberately.

A simple gesture.

Come.

Leonie hesitated. Everything in her body told her to stay where she was. But another force—just as primal—pushed her forward. A need to understand. A deeper current of curiosity that fear couldn't drown.

She sat up.

The sheets fell from her shoulders as she moved, and she felt the air on her skin. Cool. Expectant.

Karian stepped forward.

And extended his hand.

She flinched at first—couldn't help it—but he didn't retract. Just waited, hand open, patient.

She stared at it. It was broad, powerful. Armored with sleek black material that glinted faintly under the light. Then, slowly, she reached out and laid her trembling fingers against his.

A current passed through her the moment they touched.

Not pain. Not quite. But force . Pure, contained force. Like brushing fingertips to lightning sealed in glass. His warmth shocked her. She had expected something cold. Wet. Inhuman.

But he was warm. Alive.

And overwhelmingly strong.

Her breath caught again as he stepped closer.

His robes shifted with him—and from beneath them, something emerged.

Not legs.

Tentacles.

Seven of them.

Black, sinuous, and fluid. They moved independently, coiling softly over the polished floor like creatures in their own right. Sleek, ridged, silent.

Leonie's stomach clenched. Her mouth went dry.

She'd known. She'd seen glimpses. But seeing them this close— this clearly —was different. Her mind reeled. This wasn't a man in a costume. He was another species entirely. Not human at all.

"You're..." she whispered, unable to finish the sentence.

He said nothing. Only watched.

And now she noticed more.

His outfit today was different. Gone were the voluminous robes from the auction. In their place was something more fitted—like living armor—clinging to his torso, accentuating every muscle, every ridge of power beneath his pale, hard body. He was carved from shadow and strength, an apex creature draped in elegance.

He could kill her in an instant.

He could crush her with one limb.

And yet... he didn't.

Instead, he reached out—again—with his hand. Not to grab. Not to harm.

But to touch.

He brushed a strand of her hair from her face, his movements slow. Purposeful. A mirror of what he had done back in the auction chamber.

It was almost... reverent.

The breath she'd been holding shuddered out of her.

“What do you want from me?” she whispered.

But he gave no answer. Not yet.

Instead, he turned, his movements as fluid as the sea, and gestured toward the doorway. His meaning was clear.

Come.

She looked back. At the bed. At the food tray. At the empty silence that now filled the chamber like water.

There was no going back. No other choice.

Whatever he wanted, whatever this path would lead to—it had already begun.

She stood, legs trembling.

And followed him into the unknown.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Ten

The corridor they walked through was dimly lit, with walls that pulsed faintly, like the soft throb of a living heartbeat. Leonie wasn't sure if the light came from the walls themselves or from something beneath them. Everything about this place seemed half-organic, half-machinery. Alive and not.

Karian moved ahead of her without looking back, but she could sense his awareness of her. It was in the measured pace of his long strides, slow enough for her to keep up. In the way his tentacles moved—silent and fluid—never touching her, yet always just close enough to remind her how near they were.

He could reach her at any moment. Surround her. Crush her.

But he didn't.

She was still reeling from the sight of them—those coiled limbs that moved with eerie grace. It should have repulsed her. She wanted it to. But it didn't. Not entirely.

She was frightened.

But also... curious .

And more than that—if she was honest with herself—she was starting to find him compelling . Something in the way he moved. The sheer physicality of him. The presence he carried, silent and commanding.

They entered another room—this one different.

The lighting here was gentler, casting soft golden hues that shimmered along the curved walls. Cushions lined a low seating area, circular in shape, as if designed for conversation or meditation. A table at the center glowed faintly, its surface alive with slow-moving patterns.

A lounge, she realized. Or something like it.

Karian stopped and turned to her.

Then, without a word, he reached up and removed one of his gloves.

His bare hand was revealed—strong, long-fingered, the skin a smooth shade of moonlight-pale that shimmered slightly in the ambient light. He stepped closer.

Leonie's heart was racing again, hammering against her ribs.

He reached out and—slowly, gently—brushed his fingers along her cheek.

Her breath hitched.

The contact sent a jolt through her—something warm, electric, alive. Not cold or slimy as she might have imagined. His skin was warmer than hers, with a texture like the finest silk, yet with a subtle firmness beneath.

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat.

He murmured something in his language—soft, almost reverent. She didn't know the words, but the tone made her skin prickle.

Then, he held out his hand to her.

An invitation.

She hesitated, then lifted her own hand, placing it against his palm.

He let her explore. Let her feel .

She traced the lines of his fingers, the slight webbing between them, the unusual texture of his skin—like velvet-wrapped stone.

Then he moved.

One of his tentacles lifted, slowly, gracefully—coiling in the air beside them. She watched it, wide-eyed, unsure whether to step back.

But he offered it to her, just like his hand.

A silent question.

Trembling, she reached out and touched it.

It was nothing like she expected.

Not slimy. Not rough. It was soft . Warm. The surface had a strange, delicate give to it, and yet beneath that softness was the suggestion of immense strength.

She looked up at him—his mask still in place, unreadable—and he did something that startled her.

The tentacle wrapped gently around her forearm, curling once, twice, in a loose,

possessive loop. It held her—not tight, not painful—but firmly. Securely.

She didn't pull away.

Couldn't.

He was holding her like something claimed.

The realization made her shiver. Not in fear. Not entirely.

She met the dark reflection of his mask, her breath shallow.

And though she couldn't see his face, somehow she knew?—

Karian was no longer just studying her.

He had chosen her.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Eleven

He had wanted a human for many cycles.

They were spoken of in hushed tones among certain corners of the outer markets—rare, fragile, soft-skinned creatures from a primitive planet on the edge of the mapped stars. Most of his kind dismissed them as curiosities, irrelevant. But not Karian.

Karian had studied them.

Watched black-market feeds when they surfaced. Read stolen biological reports. Catalogued linguistic patterns. Desired .

But not like this.

Not like her .

She was more than he'd imagined. And now that she was here, in his chamber, her warm hand against his, her trembling fingers brushing one of his tentacles with innocent curiosity—he found himself... unbalanced.

She was so small .

So soft.

Her skin was smooth, her scent light and strange—sweet, like a blossom from the

floating gardens of Virelle. Her breath came quick, but not in fear. Not real fear. She did not understand what he was. What he had done.

What he was capable of.

She didn't know that he had once shattered a fleet in orbit with only seven ships.

That the other Marak had attempted to dethrone him in the First Divide—and that he had silenced them with fire, forcing them to kneel. Even now, they did not speak his name lightly.

The Marak of Malvar.

The Warlord Beneath the Black Waves.

Breaker of the Eastern Armadas.

Karian the Untouched.

He was power incarnate. Ruthless by design.

Yet now, with her hand stroking the ridged edge of his tentacle, with her wide, searching eyes lifting to meet the mask that concealed him... all he could feel was heat .

And wonder.

He had not expected to find her beautiful .

Not like this.

Her dark hair, tangled slightly from sleep, shimmered in the low light. Her skin, sun-kissed and luminous, held a softness unlike anything he had touched. And her eyes—those large, expressive orbs—held none of the guile or venom he was used to from the court schemers and the outer diplomats.

She was innocent. Not weak. Unarmed.

And yet, he realized with a slow breath, she had already begun to disarm him .

She let him touch her. Let his tentacle wrap around her arm. Had she known what he could do with it—how it had once strangled the life from a steel-blooded war general—she might've screamed.

But she didn't.

Instead, she looked at him.

Explored him.

And he found... that he liked it .

He liked the way she touched him not out of duty, but out of curiosity. He liked that she hadn't begged, or groveled, or flinched in disgust. There was hesitation, yes. But not repulsion.

She was learning him.

And he, her.

When her fingers slipped along the velvet underside of his tentacle, he let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. His tentacle tightened, just slightly, pulling her

closer—not enough to frighten, but enough to claim .

He could have her now.

It would take no effort at all.

But he wouldn't.

Not yet.

Instead, he released her, slowly, letting his appendage slip away like water falling from her skin. He stepped back, taking her in. The rise and fall of her chest. The flushed warmth in her cheeks.

She would remain innocent a little longer.

But not untouched.

Not anymore.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Twelve

He left her with a murmur in that strange, melodic language of his—a few soft syllables, low and resonant. She didn't understand the words, but the tone was gentle. Like a goodbye... or a promise.

His hand had touched her cheek again, the warmth of it lingering even after he stepped back. Then came the tentacle—gliding slowly along her arm, curling once at her wrist like a ribbon of heat before slipping away.

Then he was gone.

The door to her quarters whispered shut behind him, and Leonie was left standing there, heart racing.

She let out a shaky laugh. She didn't even know what she was laughing at. Herself, probably.

What the hell just happened?

She stumbled toward the low couch and sat down hard, letting her breath spill out in a whoosh. Her legs felt light, as though they weren't fully hers. Her skin still tingled from his touch.

It hadn't been threatening.

That was the strangest part.

He could've hurt her. Overpowered her in a second. And yet... he hadn't.

He'd touched her like she was precious . Like she was something to be studied, yes—but also something to be revered . Admired.

And she hadn't stopped him.

God, she hadn't wanted to.

Her fingers curled in her lap as heat rose to her cheeks again.

But the giddy haze was already starting to fade, replaced by a steady drumbeat of something colder, harder. Logic. Doubt.

Don't be stupid, Leonie.

She was light-years from home. She didn't even know where she was. What planet, what galaxy. She didn't speak the language. Couldn't read the symbols on the walls. Couldn't ask questions, couldn't understand answers.

He had brought her here. Taken her.

And yes, he was giving her soft beds and strange silken dresses and meals that looked like they belonged in a luxury interstellar restaurant—but that didn't change what she was here.

A possession.

An acquisition.

Maybe even a pet.

Her eyes drifted to the canopy above the bed. She'd never been so comfortable, and yet... never felt so trapped.

She hugged her knees to her chest and stared at the softly glowing walls.

Could she trust him?

She didn't know him.

He'd shown her tenderness, yes—but that didn't erase the memory of the collar, or the cage, or the terrifying alien who had first shocked her into obedience. She still didn't know what he wanted from her.

Was this all just some long, elaborate courtship ritual before something darker began?

The fear crept back in like a slow, cold tide.

She missed Alfie. Missed his warm little body pressed against her at night. Missed her flat in London. Her coworkers at the hospital. The sterile white walls of the surgical ward. Her life .

Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them away fiercely.

No. No, not now. You can't fall apart.

She needed her wits about her. Needed to stay strong. If she let herself slip into despair now, she might never climb out.

At least Karian wasn't the monster she thought he'd be. Not yet, anyway.

And as much as she hated to admit it...

There was something about him. Something that called to her. Something that made her skin remember his touch even when her mind screamed caution.

She'd play along. For now.

Until she knew more.

Until she found a way to survive... and maybe, one day, go home.

Thirteen

The stars blurred into streaks of silver and violet as the Velthra pierced through the fabric of space, sliding into the wormhole like a blade through silk. Karian stood at the helm, cloaked in silence, his black-gloved hands resting on the forward control interface. The hum of the ship's energy core resonated with the rhythm of his breath.

Luxar was near.

It had been over a cycle since he last left his dominion. He hated being away—hated giving his enemies even the illusion of absence. But when word reached him of the human, something ancient and undeniable had stirred within him.

Curiosity. Hunger.

And now, possession.

She was his.

Not just as a matter of law or auction claim—but something deeper. He could feel it in his blood, in the primal part of him Majarin civilization had long since tried to temper. Every moment since they had shared touch—her soft hand trembling slightly against his skin, her eyes searching his masked face for meaning—he had thought of her. Relived it.

Her warmth.

Her scent.

Her soft, inquisitive gaze.

Karian clenched his jaw, willing away the intensity building in his core. No. Not yet.

He would not frighten her. Her innocence was not weakness—it was rare. Refreshing. A soul untouched by the games of interstellar courts and the constant threat of betrayal.

He wanted her willing. Curious. Open.

He wanted... her trust.

And more than that—he wanted her to want him.

His thoughts were interrupted as the chamber doors slid open with a soft hiss. Temian, his most trusted attendant, entered and bowed deeply, the ceremonial folds of his blue robe pooling on the obsidian floor.

“My Marak,” Temian said gravely, his voice edged with urgency. “We have received reports. The Tixan fleet has entered our system. They pierced the Nebulith Expanse five rotations ago and now orbit the outer rings of Luxar. They believe you absent.”

Karian’s muscles tightened.

Fools.

“Their numbers?” he asked coolly.

“Twenty ships. Four carriers. At least three flagged with siege-class weaponry.”

Karian's tentacles unfurled behind him, coiling in slow, controlled arcs. "They bring siege craft... to my territory?"

"They think you're still at the edge of the quadrant. They were emboldened by the whispers of your departure. Spies, no doubt. Planted in the trade networks."

A low, rumbling sound escaped Karian's chest. "Then they've made two grave mistakes. Believing me weak... and thinking I would return alone."

He turned to the forward display. Beyond the shimmering edge of the wormhole, Luxar's star system was beginning to emerge. And with it, twelve Majarin destroyers—his personal fleet. Sleek, vast, and cloaked in living metal.

"They will learn the error of both assumptions," he said.

Temian bowed again. "Shall I prepare the war command chamber, my lord?"

Karian nodded. "Summon the captains. Ready the planetary defenses. Position the Velthra at the command point. We meet them at Luxar's edge."

As Temian moved to leave, Karian paused.

"And send word to the human. Let her know I will return soon... and that she is safe."

Temian looked surprised but nodded. "Yes, my Marak."

When the doors closed, Karian remained still for a moment longer.

He had enemies to crush. A planet to protect.

But even now, at the edge of war... his thoughts turned to her.

Her touch had awakened something in him—something more than hunger, more than curiosity. Something he hadn't felt in cycles.

And once this battle was done... he would explore that feeling.

Thoroughly.

Fourteen

The chamber doors slid open without warning—seamless metal vanishing into the walls with a whisper like breath sucked from the room.

Leonie jolted upright.

It was one of them. The tall, silent attendants. This one was male—or at least, appeared that way. Like the others, he was slender and inhumanly graceful, dressed in deep blue robes that shimmered like water under moonlight. His skin had the same pale luminescence as the rest, and his black hair hung in a precise curtain down his back. His eyes—pure black, bottomless—reflected no light. No emotion.

But this time, he wasn't carrying food or linens.

Instead, resting in his palm was a small, flat object. It looked like a polished river stone, silver and smooth, no visible seams or buttons.

He approached her without a word.

And then—he spoke .

But the voice wasn't his.

It emerged from the space around him, a projection—not mechanical, not robotic, but something that cloaked the real sound beneath it. The tone was soft, neutral, and unmistakably human . English.

“You must be seated. There,” the voice said, as the servant gestured toward a sleek chair in the corner.

Leonie’s breath caught. The chair had gone unnoticed before—minimalist, almost elegant, with curved metal and padded supports. But now, as the order echoed through the room, it looked ominous.

She narrowed her eyes. “You keep calling me ‘human.’ I have a name. Leonie.”

The servant didn’t flinch. His face didn’t move. He neither acknowledged nor refuted her.

She stood taller, voice sharper than she intended. “I said—my name is Leonie .”

Still nothing.

A flicker of unease curled at the edges of her chest.

“Do you even have a name?” she asked bitterly, her tone defensive, but her palms were already damp.

Then the voice returned—calm, smooth, and matter-of-fact.

“The translator node will assist us from now on,” it said. “It was designed many millennia ago to allow communication between the Majarin and the peoples under their dominion.”

He held the silver object up slightly, allowing her a closer look. It pulsed faintly in his palm, as though breathing.

“It cloaks my voice in your language,” the servant explained, “and cloaks yours in

ours . The Marak will hear you in his tongue. As you will hear him in yours.”

Not just a translation, then. A complete veil. A bridge between two species—one Leonie hadn’t even known existed a week ago.

“You will use it to understand us,” the servant continued. “And to speak with the Marak.”

The Marak. That’s all they ever called him. Never Karian. Never a name.

Leonie’s gaze flicked to the chair.

“Why do I need to sit there?”

The servant stepped to the side and touched a hidden panel on the armrest. There was a soft click—then smooth restraints slid free, like petals unfolding. Wristbands. Ankle clasps. A broad support across the chest.

They weren’t threatening.

But they were final .

Her pulse spiked. “Wait—what is that? What are you doing?”

“For your safety,” came the translation again. “The descent will be unstable.”

Descent.

She went cold.

“You mean we’re landing ? Where? Why didn’t Karian?—”

The servant drew in a sharp breath through his nose.

He looked directly at her for the first time.

Not with hostility.

But with something close . Offended. Stiff. Like she had committed a blasphemy without knowing.

He said nothing.

But his movements changed.

He stepped behind her with a new urgency. Not harsh—but no longer gentle. His hand gripped her upper arm, not painfully, but firmly enough that she felt it. A reprimand in action.

“Wait—stop, just talk to me?—”

He guided her toward the chair. She resisted, digging in her heels, but it was like trying to hold back a tide.

The moment her back hit the seat, the restraints hissed closed—cool bands snaking around her limbs, locking her in.

She gasped.

“What the hell is this?” she cried, twisting. “Let me out! I said let me out!”

The servant didn’t flinch.

“For your safety,” he repeated, the projection just as neutral as before.

Then he turned, and walked out.

The doors sealed behind him.

Leonie was alone.

Strapped down.

The hum of the ship had deepened. She felt it in her bones. Something massive stirred beneath her, preparing to shift.

They were landing.

But where?

Why hadn’t Karian told her?

She thought of the way he had looked at her. Touched her. The odd tenderness he had shown.

And yet—now this.

Held like a package. Like something fragile... or dangerous.

A flush of fury rose in her chest. But underneath it, deeper—colder—was fear .

Fear that she was wrong about him.

Fear that she was naïve.

Fear that she might have misread everything.

How dare he.

How dare he make her feel like she mattered—only to leave her restrained and voiceless the moment it suited him.

But what scared her most?—

Was that she still wanted to believe in him.

And that was what truly made her feel helpless.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Fifteen

The restraints bit into her wrists and ankles—not painfully, but unrelenting, as though the chair itself had no intention of releasing her, ever. Leonie had long since stopped struggling. Her muscles trembled faintly from the earlier panic, and now, bound and helpless, all she could do was wait. Her breath misted faintly in the cool air, and the silence—the absence of any voices, footfalls, or familiar sounds—wrapped around her like a coffin lid.

Her heart beat hard in her chest. The room was too quiet. Too still.

And then... the ship began to move.

It started as a subtle vibration in the floor beneath her feet. Just a hum. But it deepened almost immediately—intensifying, resonating through the frame of the chair, through the bones in her spine. The lights overhead flickered, and the temperature dropped slightly. Something was building.

A thrumming pulse filled the air, low and rhythmic, like the ship itself had a heartbeat.

Leonie's eyes widened. She strained against the restraints instinctively, trying to sit forward—but she couldn't move an inch. The pressure against her chest, her limbs—it was unyielding.

Then came the first boom .

It was distant, muffled, but deep. Like thunder striking underwater. The room shuddered in response.

She gasped. “What the hell is going on?!”

No one answered. Of course.

Another shockwave struck—closer this time—and the lights dimmed almost to nothing. She was trapped in a cold metal chair in the dark, alone on a ship in the middle of God-knew-where, and now it sounded like the ship was under attack .

A jolt snapped through the chamber. Not just a tremor this time, but an impact. Something had hit the vessel. Hard.

The walls shivered. The air thickened. Alarms didn’t blare—but perhaps that was worse. The silence implied that either the systems were too advanced for such primitive things... or they didn’t bother alerting the cargo .

Her heart pounded. She began to sweat.

What if this is it? What if I die here?

She imagined the ship torn open, her body ejected into the void. Cold. Silent. Forgotten. No Alfie. No Earth. No chance.

Her mouth was dry as she whispered, “Please don’t let this be how I die.”

And then... the vibrations began to slow.

The hum softened. The booms ceased. The lights returned, gradually, casting an eerie, sterile glow across the ceiling. The pressure in the room lifted slightly.

It was over.

But the stillness that followed was worse .

She sat perfectly still, limbs aching from tension, breath shallow, waiting.

And waiting.

Time passed in long, agonizing minutes. Her thoughts spiraled—toward home, toward the surgical ward, toward the cup of tea she never got to finish. She thought of Karian. He should have told me. He should have warned me. He left me here.

Then—

The door opened.

Bright light flooded the chamber.

And there he was.

Karian.

But this was not the Karian who had touched her hair, who had spoken in soft tones through a translator. Not the being who had shown strange patience and restraint.

This Karian radiated something far colder. Violence . Power .

He stepped into the room like a storm wrapped in flesh.

His armor was like living metal, black as the void, threaded with subtle lines of iridescent silver that pulsed with internal energy. It clung to his massive frame,

accentuating the rippling strength of his chest and arms. His pauldrons arched outward like crescent blades. His cloak whispered behind him, fluid and soundless.

His mask was different now—sharper, deadlier. War-shaped.

He looked like a conqueror .

Leonie's blood ran cold.

She flinched before she could stop herself. Even the sound of his boots—those perfectly silent steps—made her stomach twist. The presence of him filled the chamber like a crushing wave, and she was still strapped down. Trapped.

This wasn't just an alien.

This was something ancient . Weaponized .

He held the translator stone in his gloved hand.

Leonie's voice scraped its way out of her throat. "You..."

She swallowed hard. "You knew this was going to happen. And you didn't tell me."

He said nothing.

His silence was worse than anything.

She thrashed once against the restraints, a sharp burst of anger rising over the fear. "You just left me here. Strapped down. While your ship shakes apart—while I'm locked in like a lab rat."

Still, he didn't answer.

It was like talking to a statue made of iron and wrath.

Then the stone pulsed.

“For your protection,” came the familiar filtered voice—his voice, now cool and absolute.

Leonie's eyes burned. “I don't want to be protected like this. I want to be informed . I want to be treated like a person , not some kind of helpless thing !”

Her voice cracked—but she didn't look away from him.

For a moment, he simply stood there, massive and unmoving, a monolith of dominance and silence.

Then—at last—he raised a hand.

With a sharp gesture, the restraints hissed and pulled away, receding into the chair like water evaporating into air.

She leapt to her feet immediately, her limbs stiff, her wrists sore. She rubbed them furiously, breath unsteady.

They stared at one another in tense, heavy silence.

“I returned,” came his voice again, filtered but low, steady. “As I said I would.”

She shook her head. “No. You didn't say anything. That's the problem.”

Something shifted.

A muscle in his jaw, maybe. A subtle lift of his shoulders.

Then—slowly—he stepped closer.

Not threatening.

But not comforting either.

He extended the translator toward her.

She took it, reluctantly, fingers brushing his.

Then he gestured to himself.

“Karian,” he said. Not through the device—this time, his voice was unfiltered. Deep and quiet, in the alien tongue, but the way he spoke his name carried meaning . Recognition. Identity.

And then?—

His gloved hand lifted.

He reached for the edge of his mask.

Leonie’s breath caught again. She couldn’t stop staring. Her heartbeat surged in her throat.

And he began to remove it .

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Sixteen

She hadn't moved.

The restraints had long since disengaged, whispering away into the frame of the chair, but she remained seated. Rigid. Guarded. Her arms were still drawn tight to her chest, fingers clenched into the thin fabric of her gown. Her legs were pressed together, her shoulders slightly hunched—as though any wrong move might trigger something terrible.

But she didn't cower.

She didn't sob.

She looked at him.

And Karian... stood.

Watching her.

Feeling her fear ripple through the air like electric current. It clung to her skin. Scented the room. But beneath it, something else stirred in her. Not hatred. Not despair. Something much sharper.

Defiance.

It fascinated him.

He approached, each step deliberate. The floor beneath him acknowledged his movement with a low, resonant hum.

When he stopped in front of her, the silence grew heavy. Thicker than before. It wasn't just the ship settling after battle. It was the space between them—the unknown.

He reached up.

Her eyes tracked the movement immediately. She flinched. Her hands twitched at her sides.

But she didn't stop him.

She didn't look away.

Slowly, he pressed his fingers to the edge of his mask. The hidden seams parted at his touch, whispering open with a quiet release of pressure. The air touched his skin—cool, clean. For a long moment, he hesitated.

Then he lifted the mask away.

He did not look down. He looked at her.

And she... stared.

Her breath caught.

Her pupils dilated. Her mouth parted.

Not in horror. Not in disgust.

Just— awe .

And fear. Of course. But it wasn't revulsion that flared in her gaze.

It was something far more dangerous.

It was admiration .

Karian said nothing at first. He held her gaze, let her see him fully. Let her study him. No one—not even the other Marak—had looked at him like this. Not since his ascension. The mask had always been power. Tradition. Shield.

Now, it was gone.

And she saw him.

That should have made him feel vulnerable.

Instead, it pleased him.

Deeply.

“I need to know your name,” he said at last. His voice was softer now, unfiltered. The words resonated low in his chest, carried to her ears without the translator's veil.

She blinked once. Then again.

Her voice came, quiet. Trembling, but clear.

“Leonie.”

He repeated it immediately. “Leonie.”

And again, slower. “Le-o-nie.”

The name was strange. It moved oddly in his mouth. The syllables caught on his tongue like starlight over dark water. But it suited her—unexpected, sharp-edged, and alive.

Leonie .

He let it rest in the air between them like a jewel.

“I watched you,” he said. “During the descent.”

Her jaw tensed.

“I saw your fear.”

“You left me,” she said. “Strapped to a chair. Alone.”

“Yes.”

It was a quiet acknowledgment. No justification. No lies.

She swallowed hard, her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought I was going to die.”

“You didn’t.”

“You should’ve told me.”

“I should have.”

That surprised her. He saw it in the way her mouth twitched, the brief widening of her eyes.

“I did not know your name,” he said. “That was... careless.”

She lifted her chin. “You think?”

The sharpness in her tone cut through the room like a blade. He accepted it.

“I know it now,” he said again. “Leonie.”

He moved closer—not much, just enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from him.

“I do not want you to be afraid of me.”

She gave a bitter breath. Not quite a laugh. “That’s not really your call to make.”

Karian tilted his head. Considered her words.

“No,” he said. “It is not.”

Her gaze lingered on his face—still wide, still tense. But no longer unreadable. Her fear hadn’t gone. But now, it was mingled with curiosity. Fascination.

She was studying him.

He reached out, slowly. Not to touch her. Just to show he could , and that he would not . His hand hovered, then lowered again.

“I protected you the only way I knew,” he said. “Majarin ships do not fall. But war is

never certain. And if anything had happened to you...”

He stopped.

He didn’t finish the sentence.

She watched him in silence. Her body relaxed—only slightly—but he noticed it. She rubbed her wrist, still sore from the restraints.

“Why?” she asked. “Why go to all this trouble for a human?”

His voice dropped. “Because you are rare. Because you didn’t break. Because you are not afraid to look at me.”

He leaned in slightly, letting her see the subtle movement of his breath. Letting her feel the raw honesty in what came next.

“Because you stir something in me I do not understand.”

Silence stretched again—but it was no longer hostile.

She looked down, then back up.

“I’m still angry,” she said.

“I do not expect you to forgive me,” he said. “Only to keep speaking.”

He stepped back.

And then—quietly, with the same precision he had removed it—he lifted the mask once more.

The seams sealed with a soft whisper as he pressed it into place.

A part of him regretted it.

But the world outside demanded the mask.

At the door, he looked back.

And this time, his voice dropped low—not a command, but a vow.

“Sleep, Leonie. You are safe now.”

Then he was gone.

But her name echoed in him still.

Leonie.

And the memory of her eyes upon his face.

Seventeen

Leonie hadn't been able to look away.

The moment Karian had removed his mask, something inside her shifted. The air between them had felt impossibly still, charged with meaning she didn't yet understand. She had braced herself for horror—for some grotesque face that would cement the truth of her captivity, something alien enough to crush whatever fragile link had started to form between them.

But what she saw shattered that expectation completely.

He was beautiful.

Not beautiful in a human sense. There was nothing familiar about his features. And yet... they mesmerized her. His skin shimmered with a pale, opaline glow, like moonlight filtered through deep ocean currents. His features were sharp, sculpted—high cheekbones, an elegant, predatory jawline, and a mouth that looked neither cruel nor kind, but deeply controlled. Regal.

His eyes were the most disorienting of all—black from edge to edge, devoid of whites or irises, vast and depthless like two polished stones. She had expected emptiness. Instead, she saw... weight. Age. A quiet force that made her chest tighten with something like awe.

And then there were the tentacles.

Seven of them, long and fluid, trailing from beneath the hem of his dark robe. They moved subtly, curling and adjusting with a life of their own. Sleek, muscular, lined with delicate ridges and faintly gleaming suction pads. They weren't threatening—not overtly—but they unsettled her all the same. She couldn't stop imagining what it would feel like to be touched by one. What he could do with them. The raw strength they implied.

She shivered, more from thought than temperature.

He hadn't touched her with his tentacles. Not yet. But he could.

And she wasn't entirely certain she didn't want him to.

That thought terrified her more than anything else.

He'd known she was afraid. He admitted as much. And still—he hadn't come to her. He'd left her strapped down, silent, bracing for death while explosions shook the walls of the ship around her.

She wanted to scream at him for that.

And yet... when he had spoken her name, his voice had shifted. Softened. There had been no cruelty in it. No ownership. Just reverence. It had sounded like discovery. Like she was something precious he hadn't expected to find.

And when he said he didn't want her to fear him... she had almost believed him.

Almost.

Her wrists still bore faint impressions where the restraints had held her. She rubbed them absently as she sat on the edge of the alien bed, her eyes fixed on the door he

had exited through. The metal was smooth, seamless, but it might as well have been stone. She didn't know if she could follow him, or if she even wanted to.

Safe.

That's what he'd said.

"You are safe now. I give you my word."

She wanted to believe him. Desperately.

Because it would be easier to accept this place—this opulence, this captivity—if she could believe she wasn't in danger. That her captor wasn't also her protector. That she could trust him. Even if only a little.

He hadn't hurt her. Not once. He had kept his distance. He hadn't punished her for her anger, nor mocked her for her fear. And when he'd removed his mask, she had felt... chosen. As though he had offered her something sacred.

His face.

His trust.

That had meant something. Hadn't it?

And still, she couldn't forget the power in his body. In the sleek precision of his movements. In the way his tentacles had shifted around him like silent weapons. He had returned from battle still humming with violence—she could feel it in him, held barely in check.

And yet he had stood before her... vulnerable.

The duality unsettled her.

She lay back slowly, curling her knees toward her chest on the too-soft bed. The room's lights dimmed in gentle pulses, casting shifting shadows across the smooth, curved walls. The ceiling above shimmered faintly like a dome of water, and she stared up at it, feeling smaller than she'd ever felt in her life.

"I have to stay sharp," she whispered aloud, voice hoarse.

Because she didn't know what he really wanted from her.

Because she didn't know how long her resolve would last.

Because even now, what frightened her more than anything was this simple, haunting truth:

She wasn't sure she wanted to run.

And that made her feel less like a captive... and more like something dangerous was waking up inside her.

Something she wasn't ready to face.

Eighteen

The landing had been a blur.

Leonie barely remembered the descent—only flashes of strange sounds and the shuddering of the ship's bones. She'd been released from the restraints by then, but her limbs had remained frozen, her mind too full of what had just passed between them—Karian's face, his voice, the feel of his hand brushing her skin.

After that, there had been movement. Doors opening. The hush of corridors. She hadn't known they were landing until the gravity shifted and her stomach gave that sickening lurch. The ship had touched down without a sound.

And then the doors opened to reveal a different world entirely.

Night on Luxar was like stepping into a dream.

She hadn't known what to expect—red skies, black oceans, jagged cliffs lit by twin suns. But this... this was something else entirely. The air was cool and crisp, laced with salt, and it wrapped around her like silk. The sky above was impossibly vast, a velvet canvas scattered with thousands of stars, more than she'd ever seen in London. Two moons hung above the horizon—one silver and brilliant, the other a pale, ghostly blue.

And all of it was silent. Majestic. Unnerving.

She walked slowly beside Karian down the ramp of the Velthra. The ship still pulsed

faintly beneath her slippered feet, as though breathing out the last of its journey. The cool metal hummed in her bones.

Karian didn't speak. He didn't need to.

He was masked again. Armored. Regal. Unreachable.

The version of him who had shown her his face—his strange beauty, his quiet hunger—was gone now. This was the Marak. The lord of this world. Clad in a robe of black and silver, threaded with faintly glowing sigils. Silver chains and plates adorned his chest and shoulders, clinking softly with every fluid movement. His tentacles coiled and shifted beneath the hem of his robes, alive and watchful. One of them brushed the metal beside her foot, and she tensed, heart fluttering.

They descended onto a vast platform that floated above the ocean, a massive disc of gleaming white metal with no visible supports. It simply hovered, suspended in the night air, humming gently like a living thing. When she looked down, the sea was a dark, churning mass far below, reflecting the moons in broken fragments.

But it was the city beyond that stole her breath.

Isora.

It rose from the dark waters like a vision—towers of spiraling glass and metal, alive with light. Bridges arced between them like webs spun from starlight. Skyways curved through the air, connecting buildings that shimmered with pale fire. It looked like something built by gods, not beings of flesh and blood.

She couldn't look away.

Then, she saw them.

The Yerak.

Lined along the far edge of the platform—hundreds of them—standing in perfect formation. Clad in shades of deep blue and silver, the colors of Karian's house. Their hair black, their skin pale and luminous, their black eyes unreadable. They stood motionless until Karian stepped forward.

And then they knelt.

Every single one of them. Without hesitation. Knees to the ground. Heads bowed. No eye contact. No movement. It was a silence so total it felt like the world had held its breath.

Leonie swallowed hard. A chill skittered down her spine.

This wasn't mere respect.

It was reverence.

They treated him like a god.

Karian said nothing. Gave no acknowledgment. He simply walked, and they stayed bowed, as though he were a force of nature passing through—a storm, a star, a myth.

And she was walking beside him.

Her hands curled at her sides. Her steps faltered. She couldn't make sense of it—the man who had murmured her name like a prayer... was this . A being worshipped by an entire people. Feared. Obeyed. Her knees wanted to buckle. Her brain screamed at her to run.

But she kept walking.

Because he had shown her his face.

Because he had let her see the man beneath the god.

And she didn't know what terrified her more—that he had power over millions... or that he might already have power over her .

They reached the edge of the platform, where a sleek craft awaited them—hovering, silent. Smooth as glass, sharp as a blade. It looked like it could slice the sky apart. A ramp extended without a sound.

Karian gestured for her to enter.

She hesitated, just for a heartbeat.

Then she stepped inside.

The interior was stunning. Pale metal that wasn't quite metal. Soft curves. Glowing blue lights that pulsed like distant stars. The seat molded beneath her like it had been made for her body. She sank into it, stunned by the quiet comfort of it all.

He followed. Sat beside her.

Close.

The door closed with a soft hiss, sealing them into the quiet together. The hum of the engine deepened, and the craft rose, gliding away from the platform like a bird in flight.

Below, Isora glittered like a thousand diamonds scattered across black velvet.

She watched it grow smaller, more distant, as they climbed.

Beside her, Karian said nothing.

But his presence filled the cabin like heat. Like gravity.

She didn't look at him.

But she felt him.

And in the silence, as they soared into the stars, she finally understood:

She would never truly be free of him.

And, terrifyingly...

She wasn't sure she wanted to be

Nineteen

The silence in the hovering craft was thick, but not uncomfortable. Not anymore.

They ascended smoothly into Luxar's skies, the city of Isora now just a blur of lights below, growing more distant by the second. Leonie sat beside Karian, her hands resting in her lap, her heart trying to calm itself. Every now and then, she snuck a glance at him.

He was masked again, the silver contours of the strange faceplate catching the glow of the craft's soft lighting. It rendered him unreadable once more, impassive. Regal. Alien.

But she had seen what was beneath it.

She had seen the pale beauty of his face. His eyes like black glass. The way his hair had spilled around his shoulders, sleek and shimmering. She hadn't expected him to be beautiful. Powerful, terrifying—yes. But beautiful?

It unsettled her more than she cared to admit.

The silence stretched until he lifted one gloved hand and held it out to her. Resting on his palm was the translator again—smooth and silver, like a flattened pebble.

His voice came through it, low and sure.

"I can see you are curious," he said. "You may ask me anything you wish to know."

That surprised her. For a second, she blinked at him, trying to gauge if it was a trick.

But there was no mockery in his posture. No threat.

So she swallowed, nodded once, and asked the first question that had been gnawing at her since the moment she laid eyes on him.

“What are you?” she asked, voice quiet. “Exactly?”

He regarded her for a moment before answering.

“I am Marak ,” came the reply, rich and clear. “There are only ever seven of us alive at one time. We are born, not made. A Marak is not chosen—we are simply... born differently . It happens once every century, perhaps less. Always at random.”

She watched him carefully, trying to make sense of it.

“Seven. So you’re... like a king?”

“No.” He tilted his head slightly. “More than that. We are sovereigns, yes—but also weapons. Shields. Each Marak commands a territory of Luxar. Mine is Malvar—the greatest, the most vast. We are born to rule, to protect, to fight. Until we die... and another takes our place.”

It was hard to comprehend. A species that created rulers from birth. No elections. No families passing down power. Just fate. Biology.

“And the others? The ones who bowed to you—Yerak?”

He nodded once.

“They are our people. Our warriors, our workers. Our blood-kin. But not Marak. Not like me.”

She processed that slowly. A being born to lead, to dominate... to never be challenged. It was terrifying, in a way. But also lonely.

He watched her with interest, as though measuring her reaction.

Then, she asked the question she had really wanted to know since the beginning. The one she had been afraid to ask aloud, for fear of what the answer might be.

“What about me?” she asked quietly. “What have you envisioned for me? What do you want with me?”

For a moment, he said nothing.

Then the translator hummed again, and his answer came—simple, stark, and nothing like what she had expected.

“Pleasure,” he said.

Her breath caught.

He turned to face her fully. Still masked, still unreadable. But there was something in the air between them—electric and tense.

“I want your pleasure. Your trust. Your submission, yes... but not your fear.”

Leonie stared at him, stunned.

“I have watched you. Studied your kind. Long have I desired what you

represent—what I cannot have with my own people. Intimacy. Vulnerability. Touch. We Marak... we cannot feel such things with Yerak. We are forbidden from even trying.”

She said nothing, her mouth slightly dry.

His voice, translated as always, remained steady.

“You are not here as a servant, Leonie. Nor as a pet. I want you to want to be here. With me.”

She didn’t know what to say. The floor might as well have dropped out beneath her.

He wanted her. Not just physically, though there was clearly that. But wanted her in some deeper, stranger way. For connection. For something his kind didn’t even allow themselves to feel .

And he had chosen her.

Out of all the beings in the universe, he had chosen her .

She looked out the window, her heart drumming like thunder. They were high above the city now, stars all around them, the ocean far below.

The moons watched silently.

And beside her sat the most powerful being on this planet.

Leonie inhaled, trying to steady herself.

Because now, she had a choice to make.

Twenty

“P leasure ,” she echoed at last, the word strange on her tongue. It felt like she’d never really said it before—like it belonged to someone else’s vocabulary. Someone more daring, more reckless.

Her voice sounded too loud in the small, luxurious craft.

She let the word hang in the air a moment, staring at Karian, trying to process everything that had just been said. He was still watching her, perfectly still, as if he didn’t need to breathe like a normal being.

Pleasure.

Her mind flicked back—unwillingly, painfully—to Earth. To the men she’d known. Julian, then Mark. The whirlwind of beginnings, the burn of endings. Brief, intense things, those relationships. Nights of tangled sheets and whispered promises that evaporated by morning. They’d said the right things—until they didn’t.

Sex. That was all it had really been. A distraction. A game.

And now... this alien wanted the same?

Her fists clenched in her lap.

Was that all she was again? Desired. Acquired. Kept?

She felt a sharp spike of anger rise in her chest, tangled with something else—something hotter, more dangerous.

Powerless.

But when she looked at him again—his tall, imposing frame, his regal black-and-silver armor that shimmered with every movement, the way his tentacles moved with eerie grace even in stillness—her outrage cracked.

And something else slipped in.

Curiosity.

Even now, even with her heart pounding and her mind screaming don't , part of her couldn't stop wondering what it would be like—to be touched by him. Not just his hands, but those other limbs too. To feel their strength, their strangeness. Would it hurt? Would it thrill?

Could something that terrifying... be sensual ?

Her cheeks flushed hot, but she didn't look away.

Karian, still as stone, tilted his head slightly. Almost imperceptibly. She wondered if he could read her thoughts somehow. Then, in that deep, velvet voice of his—filtered through the translator—he spoke.

“I see your mind races. You wonder what I mean, what I intend. You question what I am capable of.”

She said nothing.

“I have studied your kind in detail. Extensively,” he said. “Human physiology. Neural architecture. Sensory thresholds. You are fragile, yes—but exquisitely sensitive. Responsive. Beautifully built for pleasure.”

His words—scientific and seductive all at once—landed in her gut like a weight.

“I will do everything in my power,” he continued, “to ensure you experience pleasure beyond your wildest imaginings. Everything. ”

She stared at him, heart hammering.

His voice was low and deliberate, and it did something to her—curled around her thoughts like smoke. It was the voice of someone who knew what power he held, not just physically, but sensually. A voice meant to seduce without even trying.

And the worst part was... it worked.

Part of her wanted to believe him. To imagine that someone could want her that deeply, that completely. Not just to use her, but to devote themselves to her pleasure. To know her body better than she did.

But another part recoiled.

Her voice trembled when she finally spoke.

“Is that all I am to you?” she asked. “Pampered. Kept. A toy for your pleasure, nothing more?”

He didn’t flinch. Didn’t react.

But the weight of her question hung between them.

She looked away, biting her lip. “I mean,” she added under her breath, “there are worse things...”

She hadn’t meant to say it aloud.

But it was true, wasn’t it?

There were worse fates than being claimed by a powerful being who, so far, hadn’t harmed her. Who offered softness where she expected cruelty. Who spoke of pleasure like a promise.

And yet.

It maddened her. The not knowing. The imbalance of power. The way he watched her like she was both a mystery and a prize.

“I don’t understand how I can talk to you like this,” she whispered, half to herself.

Because she was talking back. Challenging him.

He was terrifying. And still, she defied him with her questions, her doubts.

And he let her.

Karian didn’t speak. Not immediately.

But his silence didn’t feel threatening. It felt... patient. As if he were waiting for her to understand something. Something important.

And maybe, part of her was beginning to.

Twenty-One

He watched her closely, his eyes drinking in every flicker of expression on her face—the narrowing of her eyes, the tension in her jaw, the tremble in her hands that she tried to hide. Her emotions flared around her like an aura. Fear. Anger. Longing. A quiet defiance.

Fascinating.

The Majarin had long since evolved beyond overt emotional displays. Even the other Marak were trained from infancy to temper their passions, to suppress instinct in favor of calculated reason. But she —this human female—burned with raw emotion.

Unhidden. Untamed.

And now that he'd seen it up close, Karian was beginning to understand: Leonie was far more intelligent than he had initially credited. She was not some simple creature to be tamed with silks and sensual words. She was aware—sharply aware—of her predicament, and already, she was calculating how to survive it. How to retain what was hers: her mind, her culture, her sense of self.

She had spirit.

It complicated things.

Keeping her would not be a matter of comfort and opulence alone. She would require stimulation. Purpose. Autonomy—at least the illusion of it. If he wasn't careful, she

might grow resentful. Rebellious. She might try to resist him in ways he wouldn't expect.

But it didn't matter.

She was his now.

Earth would never see her again. She just didn't know that yet.

He could feel her looking at him, expectant. Still processing his declaration. Still wondering what her place was here, on Luxar. What he wanted from her.

So he asked, his voice low, steady. "What do you require to be... happy here?"

Her gaze snapped to him, sharp. And for once, he could not decipher her expression. It was something layered—dark and cool, touched by bitterness, but with the faintest glint of reluctant respect.

"Let me think about it," she said. Her voice carried weight. A decision still forming. "I'll tell you after I've had time to think."

He inclined his head, accepting that—for now.

"But first," she added, "you need to teach me. Your language. Your culture. Your customs. What's expected of me in this place."

Karian blinked slowly. Her voice did not tremble. Her request—no, demand—was made with full awareness of her position. Not as an equal. Not yet. But as someone who refused to be ruled by ignorance. It impressed him.

And intrigued him.

He could sense it then, clearly: part of her still dreamed of returning to her home world. Still fantasized that this might somehow be undone. That one day, she would wake up in her bed on Earth, and this would be nothing more than a vivid nightmare.

But another part of her was already adapting. Making peace with the unthinkable. She had not broken—she had adjusted . That, more than anything, made her worthy.

He spoke slowly, with deliberate calm. “You will have that knowledge. My language, my culture, my world—I will teach you everything. And in return, you will give me what I desire.”

She didn’t flinch. But he could feel the pulse of resistance still fluttering inside her.

“I can be patient, Leonie,” he said. “You are safe here. Nothing will harm you. No one will defy you. You will be honored. Worshipped. Treated as a goddess.”

He leaned in slightly, lowering his voice.

“But you must give yourself to me. To my needs.”

Something in him stirred then. His body. His blood.

Patience.

He had always prided himself on it. He had waited years to crush the Tixan. He had waited through decades of isolation to reclaim control of Malvar. But now—now he burned.

His control frayed with every heartbeat.

Was it the scent of her skin? The way she looked at him without trembling? The way

she challenged him, instead of crumpling?

Majarin were not immune to desire. Their biology had not shed its primal edges. And Karian, for all his dominance and divinity, was not immune to need.

She was here. Close. And every second he waited only fed the storm inside him.

He rose from his seat in the transport craft, towering above her. His voice was calm, but charged with tension.

“I will take you to the Inner Sanctum.”

She blinked, uncertain.

“There,” he said, “you will understand. You will feel what it means to belong here. To belong to me.”

His tentacles moved, slow and deliberate beneath his robes, restrained—for now.

She stared at him, and for a moment, he swore he saw the flicker of something dangerous in her gaze.

Not fear.

Anticipation.

Twenty-Two

“Come,” Karian said, his voice like silk over steel as the craft shuddered slightly beneath their feet.

Without hesitation, he reached for her hand.

The gesture shouldn’t have meant anything. He was still wearing his glove—sleek, black, finely woven into his elaborate attire—but even through that barrier, she could feel his heat. Not just warmth. Heat. Like touching something alive with power beneath its surface.

And then... something stirred inside her.

She must be losing her mind.

Because instead of pulling away, instead of recoiling at the touch of this alien warlord, she let him take her hand.

From terror, from the chaos of her abduction, to this —being led like a guest, like a consort—Leonie could hardly comprehend the shift. The contradiction of it left her dizzy.

She should hate him.

She should still be afraid.

But somehow... she wasn't.

The ship docked with an imperceptible hum, a marvel of grace and power. No jolt, no rattle. Just an elegant halt, like the world itself paused at Karian's command.

The ramp lowered with a slow exhale of air, revealing the interior of the palace.

Her breath caught in her throat.

It was floating. Floating . A palace suspended in the sky, not tethered to anything her Earth-born mind could comprehend. The view beyond the dock was breathtaking—stars like scattered crystals, two glowing moons casting a silver sheen over an endless ocean far below.

As they descended the ramp together, she glanced at Karian beside her.

He was masked again. Dressed in black and silver, a living shadow gliding beside her, every inch a king. Or a god.

She glanced around. His servants—Yerak, she'd learned—stood at attention. Heads bowed. No one met his gaze. The air was thick with reverence... or fear.

They worship him, she thought, stunned. He rules over this place like something divine.

A chill brushed her arms, and she wasn't sure if it came from the breeze or from the dawning realisation that she had no real idea how powerful this being truly was.

And yet... he had shown her his face.

And taken her hand.

She walked beside him in silence, awed by the architecture, the glittering halls and glass-paneled corridors glowing with a soft, internal luminescence. Everything felt ethereal, like stepping into the heart of a living star.

Leonie struggled to speak. There were no words for this.

Back on Earth, things had boundaries. Logic. Structure. The impossible didn't exist.

Here, everything she saw defied what she'd believed about the universe. Her world had suddenly become small. Primitive. Dust.

She looked at Karian again, drawn—as always—to the movements of his tentacles. They didn't repulse her now. They were... graceful. Flowing. Beautiful, even. Alive with intelligence.

Just like the rest of him.

And that terrified her most of all.

He was a conqueror. A killer. A being feared across star systems.

And yet... she was starting to feel something.

Not just attraction. Curiosity. Wonder. Sympathy.

The way his people bowed but never spoke. The way the Yerak kept their distance. The way no one ever dared meet his eyes.

He lived in a kingdom above the clouds, but he was utterly alone in it.

For a moment—just a moment—Leonie felt sorry for him.

At last, they arrived at a door. No, not a door. Something more fluid. It shimmered like silk in water before unraveling into mist at his approach.

He led her through it.

And she stepped into a wonderland.

Twenty-Three

The door dissolved behind them like mist in the wind, and Leonie stepped into something out of a dream.

Karian's Inner Sanctum.

It was a world of glass, water, and living light.

Strange, translucent flora curled up walls of crystal. Pools of perfectly still water mirrored the stars above, and floating lights—bioluminescent creatures—drifted lazily through the air or shimmered across the surfaces like living constellations. Soft, fragrant breezes drifted through, stirred by no discernible source, carrying a scent that was floral, citrusy... and entirely unearthly.

She found herself unable to breathe for a moment.

There was no sound but the faint hum of distant water and her own heartbeat, too loud in her ears.

High above, through a ceiling of seamless glass, the galaxy sprawled in all its glory—two moons, endless stars, nebulae swirling in impossible colors. For one staggering instant, she felt like she was drifting in space, suspended between worlds.

Karian led her through the marvel with slow, deliberate steps, saying nothing. She followed, silent, overwhelmed. She was too full to speak.

He brought her through a low, arching passage, into a smaller chamber. The walls here were opaque—milk-glass and softly glowing—and the air felt warmer. Closer. More intimate.

At the center of the room lay what could only be described as a bed, though that word felt crude for something so beautiful. It was shaped like an open shell, luminous and organic, resting in a shallow basin of water that shimmered with faint light.

The bed was covered in layers of silk-like fabric, in shades of aquamarine, blue, and soft opal white. It looked impossibly soft, luxurious, almost sacred.

She stared. “This is where you sleep?” she asked, using the translator still resting in his palm.

He inclined his head. “Yes.”

His voice was lower now. Less formal. And for the first time since she’d met him, it carried something close to amusement.

Leonie blinked at him.

The difference was stark. The godlike figure she’d seen outside, masked and cold, feared and revered, had shifted into something else here. He wasn’t exactly softer—but... more real. The distance he maintained so carefully with the rest of the world had slipped, just a little.

Like the room, he’d let his guard down.

They moved slowly into the chamber, and then—just as they reached the edge of the strange, iridescent bed—he stopped.

Turned to face her.

He was so close. So tall. The way his shadow fell across her made her shiver.

His body radiated power. Strength. Control.

And yet, he simply stood there, waiting.

Her gaze traveled to the mask.

And then the words came before she could think to stop them. “Can I... take it off?”

His obsidian eyes met hers. For a long moment, he said nothing.

Then he nodded once.

Her heart stuttered.

She lifted trembling hands toward his face. Closer now than she'd ever dared. Her fingers found the edge of the mask, cool and smooth, and carefully, she pulled it away.

The mask slipped free with a soft hiss, and she finally saw him.

He'd already revealed himself to her once, but that had been just a brief encounter, and she'd been too shocked to truly register what she saw.

Now, in the silence and stillness of this secret, inner chamber, she really saw him.

He was exquisite.

Beautiful in a way no human man had ever been. Pale as moonlight, skin flawless and faintly iridescent. His black eyes held galaxies within them. His ears were pointed, elegant. His hair was long and black as space, falling like silk over his shoulders.

She sucked in a breath.

“I didn’t expect you to be...” Her voice faltered. “Beautiful.”

His gaze didn’t waver. “You did not think my kind could be?”

“I... don’t know what I thought.”

She felt small beneath that gaze. Exposed. But not in danger. Not this time.

Just seen.

His expression was unreadable for a beat longer—then, ever so slightly, his lips curved.

Not quite a smile.

But something close.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Twenty-Four

She gasped as one of his tentacles slipped beneath her dress and traced the line of her thigh. The sensation was unlike anything she'd ever felt—warm, firm, impossibly smooth—and filled with intention.

And then, something in him snapped.

There was a sharp sound—fabric tearing—and the world tilted.

Her dress was gone.

One moment she was clothed, the next she stood naked in the glow of the bioluminescent chamber, stripped bare before him. Her skin prickled with awareness, with vulnerability. Every inch of her was exposed, her breath shallow, her heart galloping.

He stared at her like a starving man.

Then—something changed.

A pulse of light flickered across his face.

Faint, iridescent markings appeared, almost like glowing tattoos, curling along his high cheekbones and the edges of his jaw. Pale blue, almost the color of ice—but warmer. Alive. They shimmered like breath caught in motion, like something sacred being revealed.

Her breath caught. She didn't need a translator to know what it meant.

He was aroused.

His tentacles moved then—not frantic, not violent, but slow, deliberate. One wrapped around her calf. Another around her hips. Two more coiled around her arms, lifting her, holding her effortlessly. Within seconds, she was suspended in the air, enveloped entirely in his limbs.

Trapped.

She couldn't move.

But he was careful. Gentle.

As if he understood her fear and sought to soothe it through touch.

The sensation of being held like that—powerless, weightless, encased in strength—was unspeakably erotic. Her breath came in gasps, her lips parted, her spine arched with sensation.

He growled low in his throat—a sound so primal, so deeply male that it vibrated through her like thunder. She looked down at him—this godlike being, now raw and exposed, wild-eyed and shaking.

He was no longer untouchable.

He was no longer a god.

He was just a man. A male. A creature filled with need.

And he had her.

He could have done anything. Claimed her. Taken her.

But instead... he worshipped her.

One tentacle slid between her legs, exploring her gently, reverently, with slow, languid strokes that made her cry out. Another trailed down her spine, sending shivers up through her skull. A third coiled around her breast, teasing, testing, learning the way her body responded.

She gasped again—louder this time.

“Leonie,” he whispered. He didn’t need the translator. The way he said her name—it was reverent. Sacred. A prayer.

Pleasure built within her like a rising tide, and she surrendered to it.

To him.

To this impossible, surreal, overwhelming moment.

And all the while, the soft blue light of his markings pulsed in rhythm with her breath.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Twenty-Five

She had unmasked him.

The moment her trembling fingers lifted the ancient obsidian alloy from his face, something shifted. Not just in the air between them—but within him. Deep, primal.

It was sacrilege. Forbidden.

No being, not even the High Council, not even the most elite of the Yerak caste, dared gaze upon the face of a Marak. It was custom. Law. Worship. The face of a ruler was not a thing to be seen. It was to be revered, imagined, feared.

And yet, this small, delicate creature—a human—had disarmed him so easily.

Karian stood utterly still, watching her.

Her expression was reverent. Her awe was unfeigned. She saw him.

Not just his power. Not his title. She saw him.

And the weight of that truth settled into his bones like heat.

He had expected her to flinch. To avert her eyes. Instead, she looked upon him with something dangerously close to wonder.

Her scent flooded his senses. Sweet. Clean. Vibrant. A melody no Majarin female

had ever carried. The bioluminescent light around them refracted through the waves of her hair, painting her skin in pale blues and golds. Her lips parted slightly, her breath quickened.

Karian's blood thickened. His arousal surged. It was instantaneous, brutal.

He was erect. His tentacles stirred of their own accord, sleek appendages twitching just beneath his garments. Primed. Aware.

The urge to claim her, to strip away those strange Earth-made fabrics and see her naked and vulnerable beneath him, rose like a tidal force.

She was the most fragile thing he'd ever seen. And the most stunning.

He could snap her in a breath—yet he wanted to worship her with every inch of his being. He had taken galaxies. Ended lives with a thought.

But this one woman?—

This tiny, lost thing?—

She had undone him with her gaze.

And in this moment, she was not pulling away.

She was not trembling in fear.

She was still.

Open.

Willing.

He stepped closer, letting his hand rise slowly—slow enough that even a being of her inferior reflexes could stop him if she chose.

She didn't.

His fingers brushed her cheek.

"You do not understand yet what it means," he said quietly, voice thick with heat, "for a Marak to be unmasked in another's presence."

Her pupils dilated. Her breath hitched.

He could take her. Now. Here. And she would yield.

But not yet. Not in haste.

She deserved more than force.

She deserved to want it.

And he would make sure she did.

Every part of her.

He would not take. He would seduce.

And she would never wish for Earth again.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:50 pm

Twenty-Six

Leonie couldn't look away.

He stood before her like a living statue carved from moonlight and shadow, his features regal, alien, and achingly beautiful. The pale, luminous skin, the obsidian eyes with no whites, the silken black hair that fell past his shoulders—he didn't just look like a god.

He was one.

And he was looking at her as though she were a miracle.

Heat flared within her. It made no sense—none of this made sense—but it was real. The way he looked at her. The way he held himself still, as though one wrong move might shatter the moment.

She swallowed hard, heart thundering, and raised her hand again—this time not to explore his face, but to touch his chest. Even through his tunic, he radiated heat. Strength. Restraint.

“I want to feel you,” she said, voice low, breathy. “All of you.”

His black eyes widened slightly, and for the first time, she saw something like uncertainty flicker across his features.

She reached down and took his hand... and then deliberately moved it to her waist.

"Touch me."

And then, almost shyly, almost teasingly, she whispered, "With the others, too."

For a second, he didn't move. It was as if she'd frozen him in time.

And then his tentacles stirred—slowly, reverently—rising from beneath the folds of his robes. Seven in total. They moved with grace, like extensions of his thoughts, and when the first one coiled gently around her wrist, she gasped.

It didn't feel slimy. Or cold. Or wrong.

It felt... exquisite. Like warm silk wrapped in electric heat.

Another one slid around her waist. Another brushed lightly over her shoulder, then her collarbone, circling her neck without pressure, as though learning her shape. It was overwhelming—and yet not at all frightening. She felt enclosed, cradled, worshipped.

A strange thrill pulsed through her, stronger than anything she'd ever known. Karian, for all his power, seemed... captivated. Helpless.

That helplessness—his vulnerability in this moment—made her feel something she hadn't expected: control.

She had undone him.

How could she—a human, a captive, someone far from everything she'd known—do this to a being like him?

And as one of his tentacles slid slowly under the hem of her dress, teasing her thigh,

her skin erupted in goosebumps.

She knew what was coming.

And she didn't stop him.

Twenty-Seven

She writhed in the air, breathless, trembling, utterly helpless in the cocoon of his limbs. The smooth press of his tentacles stroked her with devastating precision—like he knew her better than she knew herself. Every motion was careful, slow, exacting... but devastatingly effective.

Her body was no longer hers. It was his instrument now.

And he played it masterfully.

She could barely keep her eyes open, but when she managed, she saw him—still fully clothed, still wrapped in that regal ensemble of black and silver silks, his shoulders straight, his mask discarded, those glowing blue markings on his skin pulsing brighter with every sound she made.

And the strangest thing happened.

Slits opened near the sides of his neck—gills. They flared open softly, and she felt it—he was inhaling her.

Not through his nose. Not through his mouth.

Through those strange, delicate ridges on his neck, he was drinking in her scent like it was the most intoxicating thing he'd ever experienced. His eyes half-closed, and his grip on her tightened just slightly, reverently.

A fresh wave of arousal tore through her.

God. She wanted to see him. All of him.

She wanted him naked, to see what he truly was beneath the silk and mystery. But her lips wouldn't form the words. Her throat could only gasp. Moan. Whisper broken syllables.

And he?—

He responded like he heard every unspoken thought.

The tentacle between her legs moved with more certainty now, curling and pressing against the most sensitive part of her, applying just the right pressure, the right rhythm. Another coiled tightly around her thighs, parting her gently, holding her open for him.

Her hands, free only in the sense that they were lifted above her head, trembled. Her entire body quaked as pleasure built, molten and hot, deep in her core. Her skin was flushed, slick with sweat, her hair clinging to her neck.

And all the while, he said nothing.

Only his glowing eyes met hers. Only the sound of his breath through his gills. Only the slow, steady, precise movements of his tentacles—relentless in their worship.

She reached the edge fast.

Faster than she'd ever imagined.

And when he gave a subtle, final stroke—pressing perfectly, holding her just

right—she shattered.

Came apart in his arms.

Cried out his name without realizing she knew it.

Her body spasmed, suspended in the air, powerless, undone. And he held her there, firmly, protectively, until the last tremor faded.

Only then did he speak, voice low, thick with something primal.

“I want to see your face when you look at me like that again.”

Her heart pounded. She blinked. Tears sprang to her eyes—not from sadness. From the intensity. From the raw, overwhelming everything.

And she whispered, “Then take off your clothes.”

Twenty-Eight

Still held in his unyielding grasp, Leonie watched as Karian reached for the fastenings at his chest. His silken robes, so intricate and intimidating, now seemed only a barrier between her and the full truth of him.

And he knew it.

His hands moved slowly, deliberately, as if savoring her gaze. Each movement of his long fingers sent a ripple of fabric sliding away from his luminous skin. He was unveiling himself not just as a ruler, not as a warrior, but as a being meant to be seen—meant to be desired.

His chest emerged first, sculpted and pale like polished stone, but alive with subtle movement—his breath deep and slow. The strange markings she'd glimpsed before now glowed brighter, swirling in patterns of cerulean blue that danced across his shoulders, down his arms, and curled along the planes of his abdomen like living ink.

She couldn't look away.

Leonie felt suspended in more than just the physical sense—trapped in the gravity of him. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears. Her body still trembled, hypersensitive from the pleasure he'd just given her.

And he was far from finished.

He growled—low, guttural, primal. The sound vibrated through the air and through

her, and something about it made her feel wanted in a way no one on Earth ever had. His gills flared again, drinking her in. And she found herself aroused all over again, as if those gills were tasting her emotions, feeding off her desire.

The last of his robe vanished.

She gasped.

His body was breathtaking. Alien, yes—but achingly beautiful. His skin gleamed faintly, the intricate blue patterns continuing down his hips, framing what lay beneath. His anatomy wasn't quite human. She hadn't expected it to be.

But the sight of him, fully aroused, still stole her breath.

At his core, he bore a thick, ridged shaft—obsidian-dark, pulsing faintly with luminous veins of blue. Around it, delicate, supple tentacles—seven of them—shifted and twined in an almost hypnotic rhythm. They pulsed as if reacting to her, tasting the air between them.

The combination was nothing she could have imagined.

Exotic. Fearsome. Stunning.

Her mouth parted, but no words came. Heat curled low in her belly. She stared—helplessly fascinated.

And Karian... he watched her watch him.

He looked utterly pleased.

Like a god being worshipped, his form bathed in the glow of his own power, and

hers.

And somehow, she wanted him even more.

Twenty-Nine

He lifted her higher with a fluid grace, his tentacles tightening their hold, and yet... they didn't hurt. They were strong, yes, but soft, like living silk—each one wrapping around her limbs with exquisite control. One around each wrist. One coiled just above each ankle. He held her open, suspended in the air, a goddess in offering.

She gasped, the helplessness of it mingling with something hotter. Something darker.

Never had she imagined submission could feel like this—like power.

Her body arched instinctively toward him, needing more. He moved beneath her, his black eyes locked on hers, glowing faintly, the markings along his cheeks pulsing like starlight. His expression was unreadable—half worship, half hunger.

Then he lowered his head.

And everything changed.

She cried out—not in fear, not even in surprise, but in overwhelming sensation as his mouth touched her. Alien and yet somehow intuitive, he moved with a precision that made her legs tremble, if they'd been free to move at all. His tongue—longer, hotter than any human's—slid against her with devastating expertise.

She had no words. Just gasps. Just the sound of her own breathing echoing through the glass chamber.

Her fingers curled uselessly against the air as wave after wave coursed through her, deeper and sharper each time. It was as if he could sense everything she felt and used it to drive her further. His tentacles flexed slightly, not to restrain, but to match her rising rhythm.

He was relentless.

Reverent.

And when her release came, it stole her breath entirely—leaving her boneless and trembling in his grasp, light bursting behind her closed eyes, a strangled moan escaping her lips.

She had never... not like this. Never even imagined it was possible.

And still, he did not let go.

Cradled in his limbs, she felt the steady rise and fall of his breath against her thigh. He was tasting her like a delicacy. Like something sacred.

And it wasn't over.

Not yet.

Her body was spent, but her mind—her heart—was burning now, full of questions. Full of wonder. Full of him.

Thirty

As he trembled in his grasp, her body still pulsing with the aftershocks of what he had given her. Her taste lingered on his tongue, a sweetness unlike anything he had known—warm, complex, utterly addictive. He hadn't known such pleasure existed. He hadn't known he was capable of it.

Not as a Marak.

Not as a being created for power, not for want.

But now, he was undone.

Every instinct within him screamed to claim her. Not as property. Not as a prize.

As his.

And not even she understood what she had become to him. She believed she had surrendered—he could see it in her eyes, in the helpless tremble of her body suspended in his hold. But the truth was darker, deeper, far more dangerous.

It was he who belonged to her now.

The realisation struck him like lightning. A terrible, beautiful revelation.

He would never let her go.

Her warmth, her scent, her soul—she had pierced through every cold layer of control he had ever constructed. For the first time in his long, exalted existence, he felt alive .

With a thought, his lower garments dissolved into nothing. He lowered her slowly, reverently, until her bare skin hovered just above his, his tentacles adjusting to cradle her with exquisite care.

He looked into her eyes.

She didn't flinch.

That alone nearly undid him.

He pressed his brow to hers—Majarin intimacy. A sacred gesture. One no other being had ever received from him. And then, in the space between breath and motion, he moved—finally, completely—into the heart of the fire he'd kindled.

Her soft gasp became a part of him.

The final tether of restraint snapped.

She wrapped around him like she was made for it. He found himself lost in the moment, lost in her.

Each movement fed something ancient and aching within him. She was so small , so impossibly delicate beneath the strength of his body, yet she took him— welcomed him—with a fierceness that shattered his final reservations.

This wasn't conquest.

It was communion.

And when she moaned his name—his true name, not the title the stars knew—he buried his face in the curve of her neck, utterly consumed.

His human. His surrender.

His forever .

Thirty-One

She had no words.

Even if she'd had them, she couldn't have spoken. All that left her lips was breathless sound—soft gasps, broken cries, the kind born from something deeper than sensation, something primordial .

Karian was inside her, around her, everywhere.

She had never felt anything like it—couldn't have imagined it in her wildest dreams, not even in the haze of lust that sometimes overtook her on lonely nights back on Earth. This wasn't lust. It was something far more elemental.

His body moved with devastating control, but it was the delicate caress of the smaller tendrils—curious, gentle, and yet insistent—that undid her completely. They circled her most sensitive places, stroked and teased with an alien grace, as if he knew her better than she knew herself.

And when they found that perfect rhythm...

She shattered.

Her body convulsed in waves of pleasure that rolled through her like a tide—overwhelming, relentless, divine. She sobbed his name. She didn't even care how loud, how vulnerable, how utterly exposed she sounded.

There was no space for shame. Only awe.

The ecstasy stole her thoughts, scattered them like stardust across the vaulted ceiling of his sanctum. All she could do was feel .

She didn't know if it was minutes or hours later when she floated back down from that blissful edge, cradled still in his silken limbs, his massive form pressing into hers with quiet, reverent power. Her skin glowed with sweat and satisfaction. She couldn't move. Didn't want to.

He held her as if she were the rarest, most precious thing in the universe.

And for one strange, surreal, staggering moment...

She believed him.

She belonged to him now.

And somehow—impossibly—he belonged to her too.

Thirty-Two

She lay still in the cradle of his arms, limbs entwined with his, the silken sheets cool against her damp skin. The shell-like bed curved protectively around them, an enclosure of shimmering aquamarine that glowed faintly in the dim light of the sanctum. Outside the curved glass, the stars hung suspended in the velvet night, twin moons casting their pale silver glow.

Karian didn't move. His chest rose and fell slowly, rhythmically. Asleep? She couldn't be sure.

Majarin physiology remained a mystery to her, even now—especially now. But his hold around her, with his strong arms and ever-present, coiled tentacles, felt natural. Instinctive. As if some part of him refused to let her go even in unconsciousness.

She didn't mind. Not at all.

Her cheek rested against the warmth of his chest. The fading glow of the intricate blue markings still shimmered faintly beneath her fingers, beautiful and strange. They pulsed with life, delicate and hypnotic, like constellations etched into his skin.

He was magnificent.

She couldn't deny it.

Powerful. Fearsome. Alien.

And yet, in this moment, lying against him, she felt something she hadn't felt in what seemed like forever.

Safe.

No one could hurt her here—not with Karian wrapped around her like a living shield. Not when she'd seen what he could do. Not when she knew what he was.

The Marak.

One of seven.

Ruler of this vast, incomprehensible world.

And now... he had claimed her .

She should have been terrified. Some part of her was , still. But it was a distant echo now. Drowned beneath the memory of his touch, the deep, guttural sounds he made when she gave herself to him, the way he'd held her afterward as if she were something rare, delicate, sacred.

She sighed softly.

Could this truly be real? This surreal palace in the sky, the stars beyond the windows, the impossible creature curled around her as if she were his mate?

It felt like a dream. The kind you wake from with tears in your eyes, trying to claw your way back into sleep.

But this time, she didn't have to wake up.

For the first time since her abduction... since the auction... since the fear —she didn't want to go back.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Thirty-Three

Leonie had stopped counting the days. Time passed strangely in the floating palace above Luxar, untethered to the rhythms of Earth. The suns rose and set, and the moons shimmered through the enormous glass windows of her quarters. The seasons changed—if they could be called that—but her world had settled into a rhythm, predictable and plush.

Each morning, she awoke in silken sheets in her private quarters—grand, opulent, carved into the sky. Nuak or one of her silent Yerak attendants would arrive to offer her an assortment of delicacies, none of which resembled Earth food but were crafted with aesthetic precision. The clothes prepared for her were exquisite: sheer, weightless materials that shimmered with alien light. She had everything she could want.

Except... she didn't.

At first, learning the Majarin Tongue had filled her days with purpose. Karian taught her each evening in his Inner Sanctum, guiding her mind with strange drugs that sent her thoughts soaring, words sinking in like drops of dye in water. His voice—low and commanding—wove into her, and she had found herself craving those lessons for more than just language.

Now she could speak with him. Fluently. Easily. The translator stone was no longer necessary.

But that connection, that brief illusion of closeness, only made the distance between

them more apparent.

Karian remained a mystery.

During the day, he was gone. She didn't know where. Affairs of governance, she assumed. After all, he was the Marak—ruler of the largest territory on Luxar, a being revered like a god. The Yerak never said anything. They answered only what was required, always polite, always reserved, always slightly afraid of her.

She was his possession, after all.

In the evenings, Karian would come for her. And her body still ached for him the moment she saw him. She was no less drawn to him. His voice, his scent, his touch—these were addictive. He made her feel worshiped. Wanted. No man—human or otherwise—had ever known how to touch her like that.

But tonight, when the door opened and she heard his familiar voice, part of her recoiled.

“Come,” he said, standing tall and regal in the doorway, his long silver-black robes fluttering with his movement.

She stood but didn't move toward him immediately. Her gaze drifted out the window instead, to the stars and moons. Her chest ached with the sharp, unwelcome memory of Earth—of bitter coffee and warm croissants, of Sunday mornings with Alfie curled at her feet. Of grass beneath her toes and the breeze through the trees in her neighborhood park.

Karian said nothing, but she felt his gaze sweep over her.

“Something troubles you.”

She didn't answer right away. Then, slowly, she turned to face him.

"I miss my world," she said, the words simple in Majarin now. "The small things. The smell of rain. My dog. Real bread."

His expression didn't change. Not exactly. But something in the angle of his head shifted, almost imperceptibly.

"You are well cared for."

"I know." She swallowed the bitterness rising in her throat. "Everything here is perfect. Too perfect. I want... I don't know what I want." She crossed her arms. "To feel human again, maybe. Not... kept."

He took a step toward her, his presence filling the room, and yet she didn't retreat.

"I do not keep you in chains."

"No," she said. "Just silk and pleasure and a palace in the sky. Forgive me if that's still a kind of cage."

His eyes narrowed slightly—not in anger, but in something deeper. Perhaps thought. Perhaps guilt. She didn't know.

"I never intended to make you feel imprisoned."

She looked down, suddenly exhausted. "I don't even know if I'm angry at you... or just at everything. I didn't choose this. But I'm trying to live it."

Silence stretched between them.

Then he extended his hand. Not to command, but to offer.

“Will you come tonight?” he asked, softer now. “You don’t have to. Not if you do not wish it.”

And that... surprised her.

She looked at his hand, then into his eyes. For the first time, she saw a flicker of vulnerability there. Not much. But enough.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Not tonight. I think I need... time.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. Then nodded once and stepped back.

“As you wish, Leonie. ”

He said her name like it was sacred. And then he was gone, the door sliding shut behind him with a hiss.

Leonie exhaled shakily. She sat down on the edge of her bed, hands in her lap.

She didn’t know what she wanted. But for the first time, she felt like maybe—just maybe—he was listening.

And that made all the difference.

Thirty-Four

She sat in the center of the chamber, surrounded by silks that shimmered like water, staring at nothing.

The room was beautiful. Everything was beautiful here. The furniture was sculpted from strange metals that glowed faintly, the walls breathed with slow pulses of color, and from the wide, crystalline windows, she could see the sky of Luxar darkening into an impossible cascade of violet and indigo. Twin moons hovered overhead, casting ethereal light into her quarters.

But it felt hollow.

The grandeur pressed down on her like a weight, suffocating in its perfection. She lay there, motionless, letting her resentment curdle in her stomach like spoiled wine. She wanted to want this. She wanted to want him. But tonight, something inside her cracked.

And still, she went to him.

Because he had offered her a choice. And if she said nothing, if she didn't take the chance to speak—then she was choosing silence. She refused that.

She left her chamber.

The polished corridors glistened under soft light, windows giving way to the glittering cities of Luxar far below—cities she'd never walked in, filled with people

she'd never met. The Yerak moved silently through the halls, never looking at her directly. Always bowing. Always distant.

She was Karian's... what? His concubine? His pet? His possession?

And all this time, she hadn't stepped beyond the floating palace that shimmered above it all like a mirage.

He had told her it was too dangerous. That other Marak had enemies, that she could be used against him. She believed him. But it didn't make her feel less caged.

She reached the entrance of the Inner Sanctum and paused for a breath. Her heart beat harder than she expected.

Inside, Karian stood in the antechamber, motionless, unmasked. His black eyes fixed on her. He was a statue brought to life, exquisite and unreadable, and gods help her, he was still the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

He tilted his head, a small shift, but his gaze never left hers. "You came."

"Yes," she said.

Silence stretched between them like drawn wire.

"Before," he said, "when I first brought you here, I asked you what you needed to be happy. You never answered me."

"I didn't know what to say," Leonie replied. "I still don't."

He said nothing.

“But there’s one thing I do know I need.”

His jaw tightened.

“Tell me. I will do anything for you.”

She hesitated—then stepped forward, spine straight, voice steady. “When I was abducted from Earth—by the green aliens?—”

“The Dukkar,” he interrupted, his voice sharp, his eyes narrowing.

She nodded. “They took me without permission. Hurt me. Threw me into a cage. I didn’t even get to say goodbye. I left behind my whole life. My world. And... my dog. His name is Alfie.”

His expression changed. For a moment, the facade cracked, and she saw something raw behind it. Rage. Pain.

“I didn’t know,” he said, voice low and dangerous.

“I didn’t think you did.”

The glow of the Inner Sanctum’s walls cast blue shadows across his face. The glowing markings on his skin, usually dim, flickered faintly with emotion.

“Where is he now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “But if there’s any chance... if there’s any way... I want him back.”

Karian’s eyes burned. “The Dukkar will answer for what they did to you. That I

promise.”

“I don’t want revenge,” Leonie said. “I want Alfie .”

He stepped toward her, towering, cloaked in power. And yet, when he reached her, he knelt—lowering his head in a gesture she didn’t understand.

“I will find him,” Karian said. “Your Alfie. I swear it by the blood of my kind.”

Leonie swallowed hard. The heat in her chest curled with something else now—something soft. Something dangerous.

Hope.

Thirty-Five

The chamber was quiet, save for the hum of distant water flowing through the living walls.

Karian stood motionless at the edge of his sanctum, the words she'd spoken still echoing inside him.

I want Alfie.

Such a simple request. Such a human request.

He should have anticipated it. He should have asked. Instead, he'd brought her here, wrapped her in silks and pleasure, as if those things could undo the trauma of being torn from everything she'd known. It shamed him. Not because she accused him, but because she hadn't. She had merely asked—without fury, without threat.

She is not Majarin, he reminded himself. She is human. And she belonged to a world.

And yet, he had taken her.

Not just her body.

Her future. Her past. Her choices.

He would never return her—not now. Not ever. But he could give her something of what she had lost. He would scour the galaxy for her creature, this “Alfie,” and bring

it back to her. If she wished for other humans, he would take them too, as long as they did not hurt her. Let her build a small Earth here, among the stars, if that was what she needed to stay.

And still...

He turned when he felt her presence.

She was there, standing at the archway of the sanctum, her figure wrapped in a gown so soft and sheer it clung to her curves like mist. It shimmered under the pale light, shifting between translucent shades of silver and pearl.

The scent of her struck him like a tide.

He swallowed hard, his gills flaring instinctively.

“Come here,” he said.

She obeyed.

As she stepped into his arms, he wrapped his tentacles around her slowly, luxuriously, savoring every inch of her skin beneath the fabric. He stroked her back, the gown slipping aside like breath against her body. Her warmth pressed into him. Her heartbeat, steady and human, sang through his nerves.

She moaned softly as his caresses deepened, and the sound unraveled him.

His cock stirred, the markings across his body beginning to glow faintly once more.

She tilted her face up to his, eyes languid with pleasure, mouth slightly parted in invitation. His hunger surged.

One of his smaller tentacles slid forward, brushing her lips.

She opened.

Took him in.

The sight of her—his human—sucking gently, eyes never leaving his, turned his blood molten. His muscles tensed. He could feel the pressure building already, not just between his legs but deeper—in the place where his power lived. The vast, violent force that churned within him. The one he had never dared reveal.

The seas were already stirring.

He could sense it in the undertides, the vibration in the stone beneath his palace. A ripple of energy radiating outward—dangerous, destructive.

He had to keep control.

You cannot lose yourself, he told himself. You are the Marak.

And yet—her mouth was so soft. So willing. Her hands now stroked along his sides, nails grazing the glowing markings that responded to her touch like lightning to metal.

He growled, deep and guttural, curling his tentacles tighter around her body, lifting her effortlessly until her feet left the floor. She gasped around him, the sound vibrating through his flesh.

The seas cracked against the reefs.

He reined himself in with force of will alone, withdrawing the rising tide of his gift.

Not yet. Not here.

He would not let his madness bring ruin to Luxar's bounty. The Yerak harvested the deep. They needed calm waters. Not storms conjured by a Marak undone by desire.

But stars help him, he was drowning.

Day by day, her hold on him grew stronger. He had taken her.

But it was she who owned him now.

Thirty-Six

There was something in the air.

It clung to her skin like static, shimmered beneath the cool light of the sanctum, and crackled in Karian's touch.

He hadn't said anything—not with words—but his body did. His grip was firmer tonight. His tentacles, usually slow and reverent, now moved with precision and control. Possessive. Not cruel. Never cruel. But sure. Commanding.

And she... liked it.

He kissed her with that same control. No longer the careful, curious alien who marveled at her mouth. This time, he devoured her.

His lips were demanding, his tongue insistent. His teeth grazed her lower lip, and she gasped into him, her pulse skipping. She tried to reach up, to touch his face—but he caught her wrists gently and pinned them above her head, wrapped in the silk of his tentacles.

Her back arched as he lifted her again, carried her effortlessly to his bed—the vast shell-like structure that cradled their bodies as though the palace itself were watching over them. The sheets were already warm. And scented. They smelled like him.

The moment she hit the bed, he was on her. Around her.

His growls were louder this time. Rougher. Deep sounds that rumbled in his chest and made her body vibrate in response. His markings were already glowing again—those intricate blue lines crawling over his chest, swirling, pulsing like starlight in a living map.

But it was his eyes that struck her.

Obsidian black, no light in them tonight. Just... storm.

It was like staring into the night sky before lightning tore it open.

She felt the storm inside him—radiating from his body in waves. It didn't frighten her, not exactly, but it thrilled her. It made her stomach flip, made her breath catch, made her thighs tremble with anticipation.

He kissed her again—rougher this time, mouth crashing against hers, tongue invading, exploring, claiming. She whimpered, her resistance already crumbling under the force of him.

He's different tonight.

And she liked it.

Liked the strength in him. The command. The fire. She had always known he was powerful—he was the Marak of this place, of this entire world. But now, that power was touching her, covering her, pulling her into him like a tide that would never release her.

His tentacles wrapped around her body, spreading her wide, opening her, holding her completely under his control.

She surrendered willingly.

Moaning, writhing beneath him, her heart hammering like thunder in her chest, she felt him slide into her with a force that knocked the breath from her lungs.

But he held her.

Never too rough. Just... deeper. More intense. He grunted with each thrust, and the dark in his eyes flared.

Somewhere far away, the wind howled through the palace's walls.

But here, in his arms, in his bed, she was wrapped in the eye of the storm.

She let herself be claimed by him, surrendering to the strange rhythm of their movements, her breath catching as the heat between them grew unbearable. His strength was a constant—arms, legs, and tentacles wrapped around her like living silk, holding her with an authority that sent a tremor through her.

Karian was different tonight.

Still gentle. Still reverent.

But this time, there was an edge.

He kissed her deeply, and something in the way his mouth moved against hers—hungry, commanding, almost desperate—sent a shiver down her spine. She felt it in his body, the tightness in his muscles, the way he held her a little too firmly. Not to harm. Never that. But as if he was losing some inner battle. As if he needed her more than air.

The tension coiled tighter when he moved within her again, their bodies aligned in perfect rhythm, guided by instinct and something more—something ancient and raw. She cried out, not from pain, but from the shock of such intense pleasure. His smaller, sensitive tendrils brushed over her with exquisite precision, and she felt herself coming undone again.

His mouth descended to her neck, warm and searching. He kissed her softly, then with more pressure—and then, suddenly, a sharpness. A nip. Not painful, but jarring enough to make her gasp.

Had he... bitten her?

There was a brief sting, followed by a rush of heat—tingling, spreading like fire through her blood. Her heart pounded. Her mind blurred. She couldn't tell where her body ended and his began.

Outside, through the transparent domed ceiling above his bed, she saw the first spirals of cloud gathering in the otherwise clear Luxari sky.

A storm was coming.

She felt it deep in her core as Karian let out a low, guttural sound against her throat—a sound that shook her, not with fear, but awe. The Marak was unraveling. And she was the reason.

When they reached their peak together, something in the world above seemed to respond. The stars dimmed behind fast-moving clouds. The shimmering sky darkened to violet. And for one breathless moment, she felt the entire universe press in close—watching, bearing witness.

Karian didn't speak.

He simply held her afterwards, his heart thundering against her back, one great tentacle curled protectively around her midsection. Another brushed the side of her leg in slow, soothing arcs. She didn't need words.

Because in this moment, she understood:

Whatever he'd awakened inside her, she had done the same to him.

And neither of them would ever be the same again.

Thirty-Seven

She lay against him, soft and warm, her body a perfect counterpoint to his own. The storm still rumbled distantly, a low, sullen echo of the one that had passed—both in the sky and in his blood. His arms and tentacles curled around her protectively, reverently. She was so small. So human. And yet, somehow, she had unraveled him.

He was the Marak. Ruler of Luxar. Sovereign of the skies and the seas. He should have felt powerful.

Instead, as he watched her eyelids flutter with the last remnants of bliss, he felt something dangerously close to...vulnerability.

“I will not let you be sad,” he said, his voice low, resonating from his chest. “Not here. Not with me.”

She blinked up at him, her lashes damp, her lips parted with something he didn’t quite know how to name. Trust, maybe. Or the early flickers of affection. It made his hearts stutter.

“I don’t want to be sad,” she murmured. “But I miss him. I miss my dog.”

He smoothed a hand down her hair, and another tentacle curled softly around her waist.

“Tell me how to find him,” he said. “This...Alfie.”

She hesitated, chewing her lip, then said, “He might be at a pound. A shelter. Or someone might have taken him in. We could check online—on social media. He’s microchipped.”

He frowned. “These words mean little to me. A ‘pound’? What kind of holding facility is this? And what is...a chip?”

She smiled faintly, the ghost of amusement beneath her grief. “It’s a tiny implant under his skin. It has information. His ID. His home. If someone scans it, they’ll know he’s mine.”

Ah. An Earthling form of tagging. Not unlike the aquatic tracking the Yerak used on deep-sea harvesters. Still, the thought of this ‘Alfie’ wandering alone—untended—irked him.

“Can you not simply take another creature?” he asked.

Her expression changed instantly. “No. I want my dog.”

He heard the finality in her tone. The sharpness. The rawness. It wasn’t about the dog. It was about what had been taken from her. Without consent. Without warning.

He almost winced.

Then he said, “Would you prefer I bring others from your planet here? Humans, for companionship?”

She recoiled. “No. You can’t just take people. That’s not how it works.”

Her horror was genuine. And that, perhaps, was what decided him.

“There is only one solution, then,” he said.

She looked up at him, wary. “What?”

He met her eyes, his obsidian gaze unwavering. “I will take you back to your planet. You will stand beside me. And we will retrieve your creature. Together.”

She gaped at him, stunned. Then whispered, “You’d do that?”

“I will do anything for you,” he said. “You are mine. And that means your pain is mine to resolve.”

She didn’t answer. But the look in her eyes was answer enough.

He would take her home. Not to stay, but to reclaim a piece of her soul.

Even if it meant setting foot on a primitive world that knew nothing of beings like him.

Even if it meant risking exposure.

For her, he would.

Thirty-Eight

The summit station drifted in Luxar's upper orbit, a black ring of alloy and mindstone carved from ancient asteroid husks. It was neutral ground—sacred, unclaimed, bound by long-ago oaths sworn between rivals.

Karian arrived in silence, his cloak trailing behind him like a shadow of the deep. His ship had docked without escort. No procession. No announcements. He did not need ceremony to assert power.

The Circle waited. The chamber was round, its walls paneled with living obsidian that absorbed the heat and sound of emotion. The ceiling opened to the stars beyond, letting their cold gaze bear witness to this meeting.

Three other Marak had gathered.

Vakkar , swathed in crimson and plated gold, sat lazily in his highbacked chair, his crown of spiked horns glinting in the artificial light. His smirk cut across his dark face like a scar.

Akeran , the oldest, bore bone-white armor fused to his flesh, the result of ancient war injuries. His eyes were like twin slits of ice, dispassionate and razor-sharp.

Isen , robed in dark teal, elegant and still, rested his elongated chin on one long, clawed finger. Unlike the others, his expression was thoughtful rather than hostile.

They said nothing at first.

Then Vakkar broke the silence.

“So. It’s true. The Marak of Malvar has taken a human as a consort.” His voice slithered with envy. “Is she soft? Delicate? Curious how the weakest species so easily tamed the coldest of us.”

Karian did not sit.

“I took her from the Dukkar slavers,” he said. “They captured her illegally. She was sold in chains.”

“And you kept her?” Akeran’s voice sharpened. “You claim it wasn’t abduction, yet you did not return her to her people.”

“She is no longer their subject,” Karian said calmly. “She belongs with me.”

Isen leaned forward. “What is she like, Karian? This... Le-o-nie.” He tasted her name slowly. “Do they truly feel emotion as we do? Or is it all mimicry? Flesh responding to impulse?”

“Emotions are real to them,” Karian said. “Sometimes more real than our own.”

“Hmph.” Vakkar sneered. “Then perhaps I should acquire one. They sound entertaining. Fragile. Beautiful. I hear they cry during copulation.”

A cold wind stirred the chamber—though there were no vents. Karian’s tentacles tensed.

Akeran turned toward Isen. “Curious that you ask so gently. You are thinking of following him down this path?”

Isen's lips curled faintly. "I am curious. If one human can bring the mighty Karian to heel, what might two or three do for the rest of us?"

Karian's voice was low, but it silenced them all. "She has not tamed me. But she has earned my loyalty."

Vakkar rolled his eyes. "Loyalty. Is that what we're calling it now? You leave Luxar. You descend to a primitive planet. All for a pet."

"She wants her dog," Akeran said flatly. "A creature. A beast. You risk exposing our existence to the Consulate over a dog."

Karian's hands flexed. "She was torn from her world. I will give back what was taken. You speak of exposure. I speak of reparation."

Vakkar leaned forward. "And if I wanted one of my own? What then? Shall I send ships? Collect a few hundred humans from Earth? A harvest, perhaps?"

"No," Karian said, his voice darker now. "You will not take a single human unless they choose to come. Willingly. Enthusiastically."

"Willingly?" Akeran laughed, sharp and cruel. "And what will you do if we don't listen? Raise your voice? Appeal to our conscience?"

The chamber shuddered.

A low, ominous hum resonated from the floor. The obsidian panels vibrated with a deep, growing tremor. Overhead, the stars seemed to dim.

The Marak froze.

A shadow rippled across the ceiling, and for a heartbeat, the illusion of the stars cracked—revealing Karian’s telekinetic force, stretched and straining like a storm barely held at bay.

“I will do more than raise my voice,” Karian said quietly. “I will unmake your ships. One by one. I will drown your thrones beneath the tides. I will disrupt the very oceans that feed your people.”

He let the threat hang in the air, his control just barely pulled back.

Silence.

Isen was the first to bow his head.

Akeran muttered, “So be it.”

Vakkar’s jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

Karian stepped back from the table. “She will return to Earth. With me. To retrieve her creature. And when we return, let no being touch her. Or they will know my wrath.”

Then he left them, the air still vibrating from his presence, and the stars whispering his name.

Thirty-Nine

Leonie woke to soft, golden light spilling through the translucent shell of her bedroom dome. The shimmering towers of Luxar glinted in the morning haze beyond the windows, casting long shadows over the cloud-covered planet below. It was quiet—eerily so.

Today. They were going to Earth.

She sat up slowly, brushing strands of hair from her face. Her heart fluttered with disbelief. She had asked Karian for something impossible—and he'd said yes. He would take her back. Not forever. But long enough to find Alfie.

She stood, legs still bare from the night, silk nightdress clinging to her hips. A warm bath, she thought. Maybe breakfast. Something light before departure. She padded toward the basin.

But then—movement.

From the corner of her eye.

She turned.

Nuak.

The head servant stood at the edge of the chamber, still and silent as ever—except her usual placid expression was gone. Her eyes were too wide. Fixed. Unblinking. Her

lips were parted slightly, her breath harsh.

And in her hand...

A dagger. Long, glinting, black as volcanic glass.

“Nuak?” Leonie barely got the name out.

Nuak didn’t answer.

She lunged.

Leonie’s instincts kicked in. She dropped backward, rolling off the bed just as the dagger pierced the pillows where her chest had been. A scream ripped from her throat as she hit the floor, scrambled back—bare feet slipping on the smooth tile.

Nuak turned, fast. Too fast.

She came at her again.

Leonie kicked out, wild and desperate. Her foot connected with Nuak’s torso—hard. The servant stumbled back with a grunt, crashing into the low table. Glass shattered.

Leonie bolted to her feet, heart pounding, body trembling with adrenaline. She had no weapon. No shield. She backed away toward the open arch of the hallway.

But Nuak recovered.

“I will not allow the Marak to fall,” the servant hissed suddenly, her voice trembling, cracking with emotion. “He is unmade by you. You will bring ruin to Luxar.”

“W-What are you talking about?!”

But there was no answer.

Nuak lunged again.

And then?—

A thunderous sound cracked through the chamber. A wave of pressure like an invisible storm ripped through the air.

Nuak froze mid-strike, the dagger suspended inches from Leonie’s face.

Karian.

He stood in the entrance, larger than life, tentacles already extended, his eyes glowing like obsidian stars. His aura was molten with fury—so intense it made the walls hum.

One motion of his hand—and Nuak’s body jerked violently backward, pinned against the far wall. The dagger clattered to the floor.

She choked on her breath, stunned.

Leonie collapsed to her knees, gasping.

Karian crossed the room in three strides, crouching beside her, his arms and limbs encircling her protectively. His voice was low, ragged.

“She will not touch you again.”

“What—what just happened?” she managed. “Why would she?—”

“She is not Yerak anymore,” he said. “She was compromised.”

His voice broke slightly. “One of the Marak... must have gotten to her.”

Leonie shivered in his embrace. Her trip to Earth had just become far more dangerous than she ever expected.

Forty

Leonie stood shakily, still pressed close to Karian's side, her pulse hammering. Nuak remained pinned to the wall by some invisible force Karian had summoned, her limbs splayed unnaturally, mouth tight with pain. The dagger lay glinting on the floor like some discarded truth.

Karian's rage was a living thing.

His markings shimmered with wild, shifting light. His gills flared with every breath. Even his tentacles had gone taut, coiled with tension, twitching at the ends. He was beautiful and terrible, like a storm made flesh.

She could feel it—a power roiling just beneath his skin, barely held in check.

He raised his hand slowly.

"She tried to kill you," he said, voice like thunder smoothed by silk. "For that, she dies."

Nuak didn't beg. She didn't cry. Her face remained eerily calm, even though her chest heaved, her eyes wide with pain. But Leonie could see it—beneath that serenity—there was fear. Maybe even regret.

"Wait." Leonie touched Karian's arm, stepping in front of him, between him and Nuak.

He blinked, as if noticing her anew. "You would stop me?" His voice was incredulous. Soft, but dangerous.

She swallowed. "Yes. I am."

"You saw what she did. What she meant to do."

"I did." She nodded. "But killing her won't fix what's wrong. It won't take back what happened. It'll just make you into someone who kills his own people—someone they can call monstrous."

His jaw flexed. His eyes searched hers, storm-dark and unreadable.

She placed her palm flat against his chest, feeling the deep thrum of his heart. "You said you would do anything for me."

The words hung in the air.

He went still. And then—inch by inch—the storm began to recede.

The markings on his skin dimmed. His tentacles loosened. The weight in the room lifted.

With a flick of his hand, the invisible force holding Nuak vanished.

She dropped to the ground, gasping, coughing, one hand braced on the floor. Her eyes snapped up—not to Karian, but to Leonie.

She looked... stunned.

"You spared me," Nuak said hoarsely. "You..."

"You're not my enemy," Leonie said quietly, still watching her. "But next time you raise a hand to me, I won't stop him."

Nuak's jaw clenched, and she gave a single, stiff nod. Not thanks—but perhaps recognition.

Karian said nothing. He only wrapped Leonie in his arms again and pulled her close, pressing his lips to her forehead.

Then, Karian stepped forward, towering over the fallen servant. "You have committed a treasonous act," he said, his voice returning to its imperious, formal cadence. "You attempted to murder one under my protection."

Nuak's chin lifted, and at last, she spoke. "She is changing you," she said quietly.

"Yes," Karian answered. "She is."

He raised one hand and gestured to the side. At once, two Yerak guards entered the chamber. Silent, masked, alert. Karian pointed at Nuak.

"Take her. She will live. She will be questioned. And she will answer for her actions."

The guards moved to obey, lifting Nuak to her feet and escorting her out.

Leonie watched her go, pulse still fluttering in her throat.

Karian turned back to her, drawing her close, wrapping his tentacled limbs around her protectively. "I would have ended her for you," he murmured, brushing his lips against her forehead. "I still might. But for now, your word is enough."

She leaned into his embrace, shaken, but oddly comforted.

For the first time, she realized the extent of his power—not just to destroy, but to choose not to . And she had been the reason for that choice.

Forty-One

The hum of the ship was a steady, soothing thrum beneath Leonie's bare feet as she stood at the edge of the viewing pane in the Marak's private chambers. The stars shimmered outside like tiny needles sewn into the black velvet of space, and ahead, pulsing with unnatural light, loomed the wormhole—an enormous whirl of iridescent energy, swirling like a living storm.

This ship, a sleek leviathan carved of metal and bioluminescent alloy, was unlike anything she could have ever imagined. No human-made craft could endure what lay ahead. Karian's people—advanced, ancient, secretive—were among the few in the known galaxy who had unlocked safe passage through these violent thresholds of space.

They would be on Earth soon. The thought felt surreal.

She turned from the viewing pane and looked at him.

Karian sat on the reclining platform at the center of the chamber, his long frame draped in loose, silken garments the color of midnight. The blue markings on his chest pulsed faintly with a slow rhythm, dimmed now in the absence of arousal, but still beautiful. His tentacles were relaxed, some coiled around the base of the throne-like seat, others lazily extended across the floor.

This was the Marak's sanctuary. None dared to enter this place but her.

He watched her, his gaze steady. "You're quiet," he said.

Leonie sat beside him, curling her legs beneath her. “I was just thinking about Earth,” she murmured. “It’s strange. I never thought I’d see it again.”

He reached out and wrapped one of his larger tentacles loosely around her waist, pulling her closer with the ease of someone utterly at home with her. “Tell me about it.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “It’s beautiful. The planet itself. Blue and green, full of life. My city—London—is chaotic and crowded. But it has its charm. Mornings smell like fresh bread and car fumes. The air’s cold. People hurry everywhere.”

“And the humans there?” he asked.

“They’re complicated.” She sighed. “Most are good. Kind. They want to love, to connect. But there’s also pain. Poverty. Crime. People hurt each other for no reason. There’s war. Hatred. Selfishness. We’re a mess, honestly.”

Karian was quiet for a while, his gaze distant. “You live surrounded by imperfection and still find beauty in it,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s what makes us human. Our imperfection. It’s what gives us feeling. We break, and we heal. That’s where our art comes from. Our love. Our anger.”

His obsidian eyes narrowed slightly. “On Luxar, I engineered peace. I imposed my will, stripped chaos from the equation. Crime is nearly nonexistent. Poverty was erased by force. No one goes hungry. But sometimes, I wonder what we sacrificed to achieve that order.”

She looked up at him. “Are you regretting it?”

He shook his head. “No. It was necessary. Without my rule, Luxar would have fallen into civil war. The Yerak needed a strong hand. But...”

“But?”

“I look at you,” he said slowly, “and I see something my world has lost. Emotion. Messiness. Fragility. You fight to feel, even when it hurts. And that... is beginning to feel more powerful than control.”

Leonie didn’t know what to say. She reached out and touched his cheek, gently.

“You’re not who I thought you were when I first met you,” she whispered.

He caught her hand in his, pressed a kiss to her palm. “Nor are you. You were a possession. Now, you are... something else.”

The ship gave a subtle jolt, and the stars outside twisted violently.

“We’re entering the wormhole,” Karian said, his voice calm.

She curled closer to him as the cosmos stretched and bent outside, and the ship dove into madness.

They sat in silence as space unraveled.

And through it all, she held tightly to the one being who had once taken her—and was now becoming someone she might one day choose.

Forty-Two

The stars had disappeared.

Leonie pressed her palm to the glass of the viewing port, but there was nothing now but swirling light and impossible shadows. The wormhole was a tunnel of chaos—space warped and shrieking, the laws of physics bent into a shimmering cyclone that pulsed and twisted around them like a living thing.

She swallowed. Her throat was dry. The sight made her feel queasy, like she was tumbling in place.

“It’s not real,” she whispered to herself. “Just light. Just motion.”

From behind her, strong arms wrapped around her waist. She startled, even though she should have expected him. She always felt his presence before he touched her, a press of quiet gravity that stole her breath.

“Do not be afraid,” Karian murmured, his voice a low purr against the shell of her ear.

She leaned back against his chest, letting herself be gathered into him. His heat was immediate, grounding. One of his larger tentacles slid around her thigh, drawing her closer. Another coiled loosely around her arm.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” she admitted.

“I have,” he said. “Many times. It cannot harm you while you are with me.”

She tilted her head to look up at him. “You’re really not even a little bothered?”

He didn’t answer with words. His tentacle tightened around her gently, and he bent to kiss the nape of her neck—slow, deliberate, and just a little possessive. She shivered.

The air in the chamber felt warmer now.

Leonie became aware of how close they stood, how very little fabric separated her from his body. The soft gown she wore was sheer, almost weightless. Karian’s long fingers slid over the exposed skin of her hip, stroking idly.

The ship trembled again, subtly. A sound like thunder echoed through the hull, distant and low. But here, in the Marak’s private chamber, everything was still.

His tentacles began to move—slowly, deliberately.

One curled around her waist, dipping lower. Another traced along her inner thigh, barely brushing. She gasped as one slipped under her gown, teasing the soft flesh at her center with maddening patience.

“Karian...” she breathed, half-protest, half-invitation.

“Distraction,” he said, his voice full of wicked amusement. “You’re afraid. I would rather you focus on me.”

“Oh, I am.”

She turned her head and caught his mouth with hers. He kissed her deeply, hungrily, and the feel of his lips—always warm, always commanding—sent a fresh wave of

heat spiraling through her.

Another tentacle slid up her spine, curling lightly around her chest. Her nipples hardened instantly against the delicate fabric. He hummed in satisfaction, deep in his throat.

“You respond so beautifully,” he whispered.

Her breath came faster. Her body, already conditioned to his touch, grew slick with anticipation. His tentacle that had teased between her thighs pressed more firmly now, parting her with exquisite slowness, the ridged texture just enough to make her gasp.

They sank down together onto the platform behind them—his bed, if such a thing could be called that. Pillowed and shell-like, it cradled them in layers of silk and heat.

He devoured her, slowly, playfully, never breaking eye contact as his tentacles wrapped around her limbs, spreading her open to his touch.

The wormhole raged outside, but inside...

Inside, there was only them.

And Leonie forgot her fear entirely.

Forty-Three

She had thought space would be cold.

That hurtling through a wormhole—through a ribbon of compressed time and gravitational madness—would make her feel small, frightened, or even numb. But wrapped in Karian's arms, surrounded by the low pulse of his breath and the faint, bioluminescent glow of his skin, Leonie felt too much .

He had tucked her against his chest in their private chamber, the Marak's sanctuary where no one else dared tread. The wormhole tunnel spun in impossible spirals beyond the reinforced walls—colors she couldn't name, lights that moved like living things—but all she could feel was him .

Karian.

His limbs were coiled around her like cords of safety and hunger all at once. One arm beneath her neck. A leg hooked over hers. His tentacles, slow and sinuous, cradled her body in shifting patterns, each touch a silent reminder that she was his. One of them gently looped around her waist, another brushed the curve of her thigh, teasing the thin fabric of the diaphanous gown he'd insisted she wear.

She tried to slow her breathing, to focus on the wormhole, on Earth—on anything.

But he moved , just slightly, and her breath caught. A single tentacle slipped higher, stroked across her ribs with maddening delicacy. The pulse in her throat jumped.

“You’re afraid,” he said, low in her ear. Not mocking. Just observing.

She swallowed. “I’m not.”

“Your heart says otherwise.”

“Maybe it’s not the wormhole.”

He made a low, amused sound and let the tentacle at her waist slip lower. Over the swell of her hips, between her thighs. She gasped softly as it pressed into her heat—just enough to make her ache, not enough to satisfy.

Another followed. A more delicate tendril, warm and impossibly gentle, traced her inner lips in maddening strokes. She felt herself throb under his touch, every nerve alight.

He knew her now. Every sound she made, every flicker of tension, every rise of breath.

“You distract me,” she whispered, her face heating.

“Good,” he said. “I prefer that to fear.”

She turned to look at him. His obsidian eyes shimmered faintly in the dim light. One tentacle slid up her side to brush her cheek, then twined into her hair.

He kissed her slowly, deeply, with a hunger that was barely leashed. The soft suction on her clit became a rhythm now, as another tentacle slid partway inside her, stroking her with slow, careful precision.

Leonie whimpered against his mouth.

“I don’t understand how you do this to me,” she breathed.

He growled softly, shifting above her, pressing her deeper into the bedding. “You do the same to me.”

His touch grew more insistent, more possessive. She arched under him, her hips rocking helplessly into the rhythm. Every brush of his tentacles made her tremble. They coiled around her legs, her arms—restraining her in silk and fire.

She was falling apart.

As her climax built, she tried to hold back. To think. To remember Earth, Alfie, the world she’d left behind. But all she could feel was him—all heat and shadows and strength—and herself unraveling in his grasp.

When it came, the release was blinding. A sound escaped her throat—half cry, half plea—as her whole body clenched, then dissolved into his embrace. He held her as she trembled, his limbs wrapping tighter, anchoring her to him.

She collapsed against his chest, panting. One of his hands stroked her hair, the motion strangely tender for someone so dangerous.

And still, even in the afterglow, her thoughts wouldn’t settle.

“I’m going home,” she said, her voice hoarse. “I can’t believe it. Earth.”

He was silent for a while. His gills flared softly as he breathed, his glowing skin dimming slightly.

But then: “Do you still wish to?”

She turned in his grasp. “Of course.”

“But will you return with me?”

Her heart twisted.

She didn’t answer. Not because she didn’t know, but because the answer scared her.

This... thing between them—it wasn’t a fling. Not a dream. It had grown roots in her. Deep ones.

Even if she returned to Earth, even if she found Alfie , how could she ever be content again? How could she walk through her old neighborhood, drink coffee, watch movies... knowing this existed? Knowing he did?

Karian cupped her face. “You are mine now, Leonie. And I am yours.”

She exhaled shakily. “I don’t think I could leave you. Even if I wanted to.”

One of his tentacles curled around her wrist. “You don’t.”

She let out a breathless laugh, half-tearful.

“No,” she whispered. “I don’t.”

And in the silence between them—between the pull of stars and the fire of their bodies—Leonie realized something devastatingly true.

She was going home. But she’d already found where she belonged.

Forty-Four

E arth.

Her home.

It hung just beyond the ship's viewing dome, a luminous blue sphere marbled with white. So familiar, so achingly beautiful it made her throat tighten. Leonie stood silently at the edge of the Marak's private deck, unable to look away. There it was—her planet. The one she thought she'd never see again. Her fingers curled slightly against the cool railing, her heart thudding loud in her chest.

Behind her, Karian approached with his usual silent grace. His presence pressed against her back before she even felt his touch—a low hum in the air, the distinct shift of space around him.

"I told you I would bring you back," he said, his voice low, deep, utterly calm. "And I have."

She turned to him slowly, her gaze drifting up his tall, alien frame. His skin shimmered with an internal glow, the black markings of his power visible now that he was unmasked and fully himself.

"You're not going to look like that down there, right?" she asked, half-teasing, half-nervous.

"I'm many things, little human," Karian replied, raising a hand. "But I am not

careless.”

A flicker of silver light passed over his body as he activated a small device at his belt. In a blink, his inhuman features dulled. His eyes turned to a dark, penetrating brown. His skin lightened just enough to pass. The markings faded beneath the illusion. His tentacles retracted fully—somewhere, folded into his form, hidden by advanced tech she still didn’t understand.

In his place stood a striking, tall man with an intense, otherworldly presence that no human would quite be able to place. Not unless they looked too closely.

He tilted his head. “Acceptable?”

Leonie blinked, taking in his new image. “You look... hot,” she said honestly, then bit her lip. “A little dangerous. Still definitely not from around here.”

A glint of amusement flickered across his features. “That will serve us well.”

He extended his hand. She took it.

As they began walking toward the ship’s descent bay, Karian's grip on her hand tightened, just slightly. Protective. Possessive.

“I hope you’re not planning to let me go off on my own,” she said, already knowing the answer.

“Never,” he said. “You are the Marak’s now. That makes you a target. Even here. Perhaps especially here.”

She frowned. “Why especially?”

“This planet is largely unguarded. Chaotic. The Dukkar could be watching, even now. And others, who would harm me by harming you.” His voice hardened. “You will not leave my side. Not until Alfie is found.”

A thrill of fear passed through her, tempered only by his calm authority. There was no arguing with Karian when he was in this mode—cold, calculated, but laced with something else. Something... personal .

Still, as they reached the final chamber before descent, a question burned on her tongue. She stopped walking.

“Karian?”

He paused beside her, his illusion-glamoured face unreadable.

“I need to know something. Before we land.”

He waited.

She drew a breath. “What am I to you, exactly? Your concubine? A pet? A plaything?” Her tone didn’t hold accusation, only curiosity—and maybe a hint of fear.

His jaw tensed. He looked away for a moment, as if trying to gather words from a language that didn’t quite suit them.

Then, quietly, he said, “A Marak does not take a companion. He takes soldiers. Advisors. Generals. Occasionally, pleasure slaves.” His gaze returned to hers. “But never... a mate.”

Leonie’s breath caught.

His voice lowered further, almost reverent. “What you are to me, little human, is something new. Something unspoken in our traditions. Something I am still discovering.”

They stood in silence. Earth spun slowly in the viewing glass. Somewhere down there, her old life waited—her neighborhood, the smells of city streets, the dog who had once curled beside her on the couch.

And yet... Karian was holding her hand like he would never let go.

Something new.

Her heart ached with the weight of it.

“I guess we’ll find out what I am,” she said softly. “Together.”

His fingers curled more tightly around hers.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Together.”

Forty-Five

E arth.

So this was the world that made her.

From the upper atmosphere, it looked unremarkable—blue oceans, clouds swirling in layered motion, cities etched into the land like fungal growths. But the moment they broke through the sky in the cloaked descent vessel, Karian realized it was anything but ordinary.

Noise. It struck him like a blow—sound in every pitch, every direction. Honking, shouting, rhythmic thuds, erratic buzzing. The city was a cacophony of creatures too used to chaos to care about it.

The air stung his lungs. Not from poison, though it smelled like low-grade combustion, rust, grease. No, it was the life in it that stung. Vibrant and unpredictable.

Shepherd's Bush, she called it. The name meant nothing. Just a crude combination of sounds. But Leonie had whispered it with reverence.

Buildings rose too close together. Electric signs flickered in garish colors. The roads shimmered with water and oil, smeared by moving boxes with light eyes—vehicles. Small humans hurried along the paths, bundled in thick coats, emitting vapor from their mouths in the chill. Nothing seemed structured. It was a miracle they didn't collapse under the weight of their disorganization.

Karian narrowed his eyes as they walked, both cloaked in simulated human skins. He bore the guise of a tall man with close-cropped hair and severe features, wrapped in dark fabric shaped like what his analysts called a “coat.” Leonie had insisted it looked fashionable. He felt like he was wrapped in the pelt of a prey animal.

She, on the other hand... looked radiant in her long woven black dress and chestnut coat, hair pulled back, cheeks flushed from the cold.

This was her habitat. And she had adapted to it like water to its bowl.

The streets led to a narrow building with rusted railings. Concrete stairs, choked with soggy leaves, led up to a dull green door.

She stopped in front of it, hesitating. Her breath hitched.

“No key,” she murmured. “I didn’t think to bring it...”

He watched her fumble at the handle, her fingers trembling. The lock held fast.

Her face twisted with frustration—an expression he was growing too used to seeing on her, and one he wanted to erase. He stepped forward, raising one hand to the lock.

A slight flick of his fingers. A nudge of power.

The mechanism within clicked and yielded.

She gasped. “Wait, did you just...?”

He gave a slight tilt of his head. “A minor application of will. A lock like this poses no challenge.”

She blinked. “That’s cheating.”

“Efficiency,” he corrected her. “Primitive security does not deserve reverence.”

They entered the dwelling.

The air inside was close and stale, still heavy with the ghost of her scent—faint floral traces, skin-warmed fabrics, something sweet he could never name. Her home. Or what had once been.

It was so small. Cramped.

There were objects everywhere—random shapes and mismatched forms. Nothing uniform. Nothing streamlined. A squat table sat beneath a window. Shelves overflowed with bent spines of what he knew were “books,” the primitive storage form for information. Colorful glass objects sat uselessly on ledges. There were pillows on the floor. A dish on the ground.

The floor creaked beneath his steps. He scanned the apartment, noting everything. The dust. The scent of time. The... personality of it.

This was not a dwelling built for survival.

It was built for memory.

He paused near a round glass orb resting on a cluttered shelf. Inside it, tiny artificial structures sat in a landscape of pale grains—white flakes frozen mid-suspension. He turned it in his hand. The grains fluttered like miniature snowstorms. Pointless. Beautiful.

He tilted his head.

A city, he realized slowly. A tiny one, under crystal. Perhaps a totem?

He did not know why it made him feel something he could not name.

“Gone,” Leonie muttered from another room. Her voice sounded strained. “My computer’s gone. The police must’ve taken it. Or someone broke in...”

He crossed the room in two strides. “What does this mean? Is your search impeded?”

“I need to get online,” she said, voice tight. “If I can log into my socials, I might find a lead on Alfie. Maybe someone posted about him.”

“Use one of your strange glass panels to summon the information, then.”

“I can’t. Mine’s gone.”

She hesitated. “I’m going to try my neighbor. I think she’ll let me use her laptop.”

“No,” Karian said instantly, stepping in front of her. “You are not leaving my sight.”

“They’ll panic if they see you,” she said softly. “Please. It’s just across the hall. I’ll be quick.”

He stared down at her, his illusion hiding the storm of instinct roiling beneath. Her presence so close, her voice so soft—and yet the danger outside these walls unknown.

But she was resolute.

He stepped back, jaw clenched. “Ten minutes. No longer.”

She nodded and touched his chest in thanks. That gesture—such a small, human

thing—made something flutter inside him.

She slipped out the door.

He waited until her footsteps faded, then turned back toward her living space.

The room was silent again, save the distant murmur of street noise. He moved slowly, examining more of her world.

A collection of square photographs was pinned to a board. Her, smiling. With other humans. Holding a small creature— the dog, likely—its tongue lolling from its mouth.

A cup still sat on a side table, half full of what he guessed had once been liquid. There was a tattered blanket over the couch. He sat, slowly, sinking into the old velvet cushions, and the scent of her enveloped him.

None of it made sense.

And yet it all did.

It was ugly. Imperfect. Cluttered and vulnerable.

And it was hers .

He picked up a tiny, molded ceramic figure shaped like an animal with large ears. It served no purpose. Yet it had a place of honor on the shelf.

All around him were artifacts of a life he could not have imagined. Memories in fabric. Attachments in glass and paint and wool.

And he had taken her from this.

He clenched his fists in his lap.

If anyone touched her out there...

If anyone made her afraid ...

He would not intervene with mercy.

He would remind this strange, chaotic world that she was his.

Forty-Six

The hallway hadn't changed, but everything about it felt different. Dimmer. Closer. As if her building had aged without her, exhaling dust and memories with each step she took.

She reached Alice's door and paused, her knuckles hovering. What was she even doing? Lying. Inventing. Pretending to still belong here.

She knocked.

It took only seconds before the door creaked open.

Alice blinked at her from behind thick glasses. Her face went pale.

"Leonie?"

"Hi," she said, offering a small, uncertain smile.

Alice's hand flew to her chest. "Oh my God . Leonie—where the hell have you been?"

The older woman reached out without waiting, pulling Leonie into a hug that smelled of lavender fabric softener and boiled potatoes. It was grounding. Human. And Leonie had to close her eyes to keep from falling apart.

"I thought you were dead, " Alice said shakily. "They declared you missing. You

vanished—your flat was searched, everything?—”

“I know,” Leonie interrupted gently, drawing back. Her throat was tight, but she forced the words out. “It was... sudden. An emergency. I had to go to Australia. My grandmother—she got very ill. I needed to care for her.”

Alice’s face twisted in disbelief. “For three months ? Without calling anyone? No email?”

Leonie winced. “It was rural. Remote. And things happened so fast—I know it sounds bad. I’m sorry. I really am.”

It wasn’t a lie that hurt—it was the truth that she couldn’t tell.

“If you’re in some sort of trouble,” Alice said, voice lowering. “I can help you. I won’t tell anyone.”

Leonie’s heart twisted. These people—ordinary and flawed—had still looked for her. Hoped for her. Cared.

“No trouble,” she lied with a smile. “Just bad timing and bad luck.”

Alice’s frown didn’t leave, but she nodded slowly. “Well. You gave us all a scare.”

Leonie took a breath. “Would it be alright if I used your computer?”

A pause.

Then, a gesture toward the small kitchen table. “Same password as before. Just open the fox thing.”

Leonie sat down at the familiar battered laptop. The keys clacked beneath her fingers as she logged in to her social media accounts. The pages loaded slowly, but when they did, her breath hitched.

Notifications.

Dozens.

Hundreds.

Messages on every platform. Friends. Coworkers. Uni mates she hadn't spoken to in years. People asking where she'd gone. If she was okay. If she was alive.

We're worried about you.

Please come back.

Have you seen Alfie?

Her eyes stung. She scrolled quickly, heart racing. So many people. And she hadn't been able to reach out to a single one.

Not then.

But maybe now.

She glanced over at Alice. "Do you know what happened to Alfie? I mean—did anyone see him after I left?"

Alice cocked her head. "You said something about a sitter, right?"

“Yes. I left him with someone. But then they just... went dark. I couldn’t get in contact. I was so worried.”

“That’s strange,” Alice said, brows drawing together. “Because Alfie showed up here. About a week after you went missing. Just waiting outside your door.”

Leonie’s pulse jumped. “He did?”

Alice nodded. “He wouldn’t budge. Poor little guy. We fed him. Waited for the police to do something, but they didn’t know what to do with a dog. And none of us wanted to turn him in. Just in case.”

Leonie’s hands clenched over the edge of the table. “Where is he now?”

“Darius took him in. You remember him, right? Lives upstairs. Bit of a loner, but kind-hearted. He’s been walking Alfie every morning, feeding him. Says Alfie sleeps by the window, still looking out.”

Something in Leonie cracked open.

Her dog had waited for her.

Her neighbors had protected him.

These flawed, chaotic humans—so often selfish, messy, imperfect—had cared for her life when she wasn’t here to do it herself.

“I can’t believe it,” she whispered. “Thank you. Thank you for that.”

Alice softened. “You were one of the good ones. None of us forgot.”

Leonie glanced at the glowing screen. Her friends were still out there. Her life was still out there.

“I’m not staying,” she said quietly. “I’ll go see Darius and get Alfie. And then I’ll go to the police, ask them to close the case.”

“You’re not staying?” Alice echoed. “Where are you going?”

“Australia,” Leonie answered. “My grandmother still needs me. And... I need a fresh start.”

It sounded paper-thin even to her ears.

Alice didn’t press, though her eyes remained sharp and skeptical. “Well. You should at least take care of your things.”

“I will. Just a few days.”

Leonie stood and gave the laptop one last look.

She would need a new computer. A proper one. She had to find a way to write back. To explain things in some form—maybe not now, but eventually.

Surely, she thought, Karian can do that for me. With all his power, all his technology—surely he can get me something as simple as a connection.

Some thread that would bind her to this world, even when she left it again.

As she stepped out into the stairwell, her hands trembling, she felt the weight of everything. Every memory in this place, every kindness. And also every goodbye waiting to be said.

She wasn't sure which hurt more.

Forty-Seven

She barely heard Alice's parting words as she flew up the stairwell, heart pounding, boots thudding against worn concrete steps. Her breath came hard and fast, fogging in the cold air.

Alfie.

Three months. Three impossible, surreal months—and he was here. Just upstairs. Just on the other side of a door.

She reached the landing and knocked—then thought better of it and knocked harder.

After a few seconds, the door opened. A tall man filled the frame, wiping his hands on a rag. He wore grease-streaked blue overalls, and the smell of engine oil and cigarettes wafted out with him.

Darius blinked, his mouth slowly falling open. "...Leonie?"

Her name came out low, like he couldn't believe his eyes.

She nodded, throat tight. "Hey."

He looked her over—worn, pale, her coat rich and out of place in this old hallway—and said, "Nah, this ain't real. You're meant to be gone. Disappeared."

"I was," she said, breathless. "But I'm here now."

A scuffle of nails on linoleum rang out from inside, followed by a familiar bark.

And then Alfie was there.

The little mutt launched himself at her like a comet—furrer, a bit leaner, but alive and whole. His front paws thudded against her chest as he licked her chin, nose, cheeks, whimpering frantically like he couldn't believe it either.

Leonie sank to her knees. "Oh my God, Alfie—baby—oh, I missed you so much?—"

She buried her face in his fur. He smelled like dust and mechanic grease and something faintly floral. Someone had bathed him. Loved him.

Her eyes welled with tears as he covered her in licks, his tail a blur of joy.

Behind them, Darius leaned against the doorframe, arms folded, watching.

"I told that lil' thing to stop waiting by the window," he muttered, softer than before. "But he wouldn't listen. Like he knew."

Leonie looked up, wiping her eyes. "You looked after him."

Darius gave a small shrug. "Didn't think I was a dog person, yeah? But I dunno. He grew on me. He'd stare out at your flat like he was waiting for a signal or something."

"I can't thank you enough," she whispered.

He nodded. "I didn't have the heart to send him off. Not when he clearly had someone."

Leonie stood, Alfie cradled in her arms, still wriggling with joy. “I’m going to take him now. I need to.”

“Of course,” Darius said, though there was a flicker of sadness in his eyes. “He’s yours. Always was.”

She hesitated. “You should get one of your own. There’s plenty of rescues in need of homes.”

He chuckled. “Don’t start. I’ve already been thinkin’ about it.”

There was a moment—strange and warm—where things almost felt normal. Her dog in her arms. Her neighbor gently teasing. The hallway creaking with the old sounds of life.

Then the air changed.

He was behind her.

She didn’t need to turn. She felt it in her spine, in the pressure shift of the hallway, in Alfie’s slight growl as his ears twitched back.

Darius’s posture straightened. His eyes sharpened. “And who’s this?”

Leonie turned slowly. Karian filled the narrow hallway with his broad-shouldered frame, dressed in a long, sleek coat that shimmered just slightly wrong under the lights. His disguise still held—his features smooth, his form human—but there was something... off. Unplaceable.

Like he didn’t quite belong in this world of chipped paint and damp air.

Karian's eyes flicked from her to Darius, unreadable. "I heard raised voices," he said, voice smooth, rich. "I came to ensure you were safe."

Darius stepped forward, subtly angling himself between Karian and Leonie. "You with him?" he asked her quietly.

Leonie hesitated—just for a heartbeat. Then nodded. "Yeah. I am."

Darius didn't look away from Karian. "He your boyfriend or somethin'?"

Karian tilted his head, amused. "Something like that."

Darius frowned. "You sure you're alright, Lee? You've been gone three months. Show up outta nowhere. Now you're leavin' again with some guy nobody's seen before?"

"I'm alright," she said, gently. "I promise."

Darius didn't look convinced, but he didn't press.

"You ever need help," he muttered, stepping back, "you know where I am."

"I know," she said, clutching Alfie close. "Thank you. For everything."

With one last glance, she followed Karian back down the stairs, Alfie curled in her arms like a piece of her soul restored. Behind her, Darius stood in the doorway, watching, uncertain.

And as she descended into the cold evening, surrounded by the echoes of her past, she felt both sadness and elation.

Forty-Eight

The invisible ship shimmered faintly in the alley behind her old building—just a breath against the wind, a wrinkle in the air. No one else could see it. To her, it was a surreal shimmer at the edge of perception, cloaked in impossibility. Alfie, cradled tightly in her arms, gave a nervous whine as they stepped aboard. The ramp hissed shut behind them, sealing off the cold London air.

Home.

Or what passed for it now.

She stood still for a moment in the entry chamber, breathing heavily. The familiar hum of Majarin technology filled the quiet. The soft light. The gentle vibration underfoot. The scent—clean, metallic, with that subtle trace of Karian's presence, something wild and rich she hadn't known she'd missed.

Karian stood beside her, silent. Watching.

Alfie squirmed, tail wagging in tight, anxious circles, and she knelt to set him down. He began exploring immediately, nose to the sleek floor, ears flicking at the strange sounds.

Leonie straightened and turned to Karian.

She didn't touch him. Not yet.

Her voice came out soft, but sure. “I’m not going back to being locked away.”

His gaze flicked to hers. He said nothing.

“I’ll come with you,” she continued. “Back to Luxar. But I have demands.”

Karian’s brow lifted, intrigued. “Demands?”

She folded her arms. “I want to visit Earth again. Occasionally. I want a computer—or something that lets me stay in contact with people here. I’ll say I’m in Australia, but I’ll be on Luxar. I need to be able to reach my friends. To not vanish again.”

He considered this, slowly. “And?”

“I want Alfie with me, always,” she added. “No cages. No containment. He stays by my side.”

“Of course,” Karian said, without hesitation. “He is yours. He will be protected.”

Leonie nodded once, but she wasn’t finished. “And I want more than just your palace. I want to walk your streets. I want to meet your people. Talk to the Majarin. Understand the Yerak, even if they terrify me a little. I won’t live in a box—even a golden one.”

That made him pause.

“I won’t be some distant, veiled thing people whisper about,” she said, her voice gaining strength. “I want to be part of your world. Not just your secret.”

Karian’s eyes gleamed in the low light, unreadable. Then, slowly, he stepped toward

her. His voice, when it came, was low and quiet.

“You ask a great deal.”

“I know.”

“You want freedom.” His mouth curved faintly. “From a creature known for chains.”

She met his gaze unflinching. “You offered me a choice, once. I’m taking it.”

He studied her for a long moment. She saw the tension in his shoulders. The way his jaw clenched and released. Then—he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “But I will set boundaries. For your safety.”

Leonie opened her mouth to protest, but he held up a hand.

“You will not leave the palace without guards. You will obey my warnings when it comes to people or places I deem dangerous. You will never step into a wormhole gate without my knowledge. And if I tell you to run, you run.”

A silence passed between them.

Then she nodded. “Alright. I can do that.”

Something shifted in his face. He stepped closer and gently lifted his hand to her cheek, fingers brushing against her skin like a whisper.

“You are... maddening,” he murmured.

“And you’re impossible.”

His mouth twitched. “You don’t fear me anymore.”

“I still do,” she admitted. “Sometimes.”

“Good,” he said softly, and his eyes darkened. “Because you will never be able to leave me. Not truly.”

“I know,” she said. Her voice trembled, but not from fear. “That’s why I’m asking for these things. Because I’m staying.”

A breathless silence passed between them.

Then he touched the clasp at his throat and let the disguise fall away.

The projection shimmered and vanished like dust in the air.

His alien form stood before her—tall, iridescent, vast in a way the human body couldn’t contain. His skin rippled with hues like oil on water, his tendrils uncoiling slowly behind him in a gentle arc. His face—majestic, unfamiliar, beautiful—held only one constant: his gaze. Still his. Still Karian.

Leonie’s breath caught.

She stepped toward him, heart stuttering, gaze tracing the impossible lines of his true self. He was still the creature who had taken her. The being who had consumed her world, shattered her reality.

And now... he was hers.

“I can’t escape you,” she whispered, voice hoarse.

“No,” Karian said, drawing her gently into his arms. “You never will.”

Wrapped in his warmth, in the shimmering strangeness of him, she pressed her face against his chest. Alfie’s quiet paws padded nearby, circling, then curling beside her feet.

The stars waited.

But tonight, here, in this impossible space between worlds, she finally felt something close to peace.

Forty-Nine

Earth spun below him, small and strange and beautiful in its cluttered chaos. From the cloaked vessel floating silently in low orbit, Karian studied the surface through the wraparound viewing deck. So much life. So much unpredictability.

Leonie had spoken of it with affection and disdain in equal measure. Now, standing above it—its noise and fragility laid bare—he understood why.

It reminded him of her.

A chime echoed through the bridge—sharp, alert.

He turned, senses narrowing. The security weave shimmered with a sudden disturbance. The outer perimeter of his fleet—stationed in stealth formation around Earth—had triggered a proximity breach.

Karian moved fast, voice resonant as he commanded his ship. “Origin of the incursion.”

“Unregistered vessel,” the Yerak officer replied flatly. “Configuration matches known patterns from Cruxar’s fleet.”

Karian’s expression darkened.

Cruxar. The seventh Marak. Ruthless, decadent, twisted. A collector of lives and territories. One of the few Karian had never fully trusted to uphold the Majarin

accord.

And now he'd come sniffing toward Earth.

Karian summoned the image to the holodisplay. The vessel floated nearby, arrogant and uncloaked, adorned with Cruxar's gaudy signature: ridged plating, bright crimson flares, a visual taunt. A statement. I'm here, and I do not hide.

But Karian always planned ahead.

He touched the control panel and initiated full-scale uncloak protocol. One by one, his ships flickered into view across the Earth's upper orbit. Dozens of them—interceptor-class vessels, heavy cruisers, orbital sentinels. Enough to darken the sky if one knew where to look.

Cruxar's ship stuttered in response. The predator had just become the prey.

A holo-channel opened moments later. Cruxar's face bloomed into view—sharply ridged, eyes gleaming with amused disdain.

“Karian,” he drawled. “So the rumors are true. You've taken a human to your bed.”

Karian did not flinch. “State your purpose.”

“Oh, don't be dull. I came to see the creature myself. The woman who's tamed the iron Marak.” Cruxar sneered. “And perhaps collect a few more of her kind. This planet is teeming with them. Soft, delicate things. So eager to please when frightened.”

The silence that followed was taut, vibrating.

“You will not touch them,” Karian said quietly.

Cruxar laughed. “You can’t hoard them all, Karian. Surely you don’t expect to keep an entire planet of playthings to yourself?”

“I expect,” Karian said, “that if you try, you will not leave this orbit alive.”

A beat. Then Karian activated the override sequence. Dozens more of his ships came online, their power signatures crackling like storms in space. Cruxar’s smile faltered.

“You’ve gone mad,” he muttered.

“No. I have chosen. ” Karian leaned forward, eyes glowing with deadly calm. “Earth is now under my protection. Any threat to its people is a threat to my dominion. And I do not tolerate threats.”

Cruxar’s image fizzled into static as the channel cut.

Karian turned to the Yerak. “Prepare the war fleet. Track every vessel in Cruxar’s formation. No survivors.”

Fifty

The battle regalia was ancient.

Karian stood at the heart of the Varkaal's command chamber, still as stone. All around him, the obsidian floors caught the glow of shifting red lights, casting his towering silhouette across the walls like a living shadow. The air was thick with tension—coiled like a predator just before the strike. The hum of energy through the walls, the low resonance of the engines beneath, the disciplined silence of the Yerak—it all built toward a single moment.

His armor was black as the void between galaxies, etched in burning silver that mapped his history—victories, conquests, oaths taken and broken. His pauldrons curved high and cruel, like the wings of a predator bird mid-flight. Behind him, a living cloak made of nano-fibres shimmered and hissed with kinetic energy, alive with whispered war chants in the old tongue.

His mask was jagged metal and unreadable light. Cold, expressionless. It bore no face, no humanity—only command. Only fear.

He had not worn this since the siege of Thrannos, when he cracked a coalition of thirteen systems in two weeks.

This was not the side of himself he wanted Leonie to see.

But this was the version the galaxy obeyed.

He stood at the command dais, hands clasped behind his back, unmoving. Around him, the Yerak moved with silent efficiency, executing commands without question. They knew the tempo of conquest. They had followed him through worse.

Across the holoviewer, the Severance , Cruxar's flagship, buckled inward and then burst apart in silence. The core rupture flared for a split-second—bright, sterile, final.

Cruxar, the Seventh Marak, was dead.

“Confirm,” Karian said, his voice like tempered glass.

A Yerak commander stepped forward. “Severance destroyed. No escape signatures. No surviving auxiliary craft. Cruxar is eliminated. His fleets have scattered or fallen. You are now Steward of the Seventh Domain.”

Karian gave a slow, single nod.

The treaty was broken now—intentionally, publicly. The galaxy's fragile equilibrium shattered. But no challenge would come. Not immediately.

“The others?” he asked.

“Observing. With caution.”

They would watch. They would weigh their odds. But they would not act.

Because they had seen.

They had seen what he could do. How quickly he had erased Cruxar. How thoroughly. The speed, the precision, the scale—none of the Marak could rival his fleets. His shipyards, his armies, his will. He had always prepared for more than was

needed. Because he knew how fragile respect could be if not reinforced with power.

Let them whisper. Let them convene in secret. Let them dare.

He would crush the next who rose. And the next.

They would bend.

He turned away from the holoviewer. “Deploy occupation fleets to the key worlds. Begin reconditioning of the administrative castes. All state communications now issue from Luxar.”

“Yes, Marak.”

“And Earth,” he said, more quietly.

The Yerak stilled. “Defensive perimeter already expanding. Shall we begin cultural neutralization protocols?”

“No,” he said. “They are to be left untouched.”

A beat of silence. The crew did not question, but he could sense the confusion.

“Station my black-flag fleet around the system. Earth is mine now. Let the galaxy know it. There will be no raids. No abductions. No contact unless I authorize it.”

They obeyed, of course. But none could understand.

Only he knew what Earth meant.

Only he knew that everything—every order, every battle, every shattered treaty—had

been for her.

She would hear about this, of course. She would know Cruxar was gone, and that it was he who had done it. She would guess at the scale.

But she would never see the mask. Never hear the silence before a kill order. Never feel the way the Varkaal pulsed with anticipation of destruction.

He would shield her from this part of him. As much as he could.

Let her think it was political. Let her believe it was cold necessity. He would allow the truth to be softened, stripped down into something less monstrous. She could know he was powerful. But not this powerful. Not this ruthless.

Because if she ever truly saw what he could become... she might fear him.

And she was the only thing in the universe he could not afford to lose.

He turned toward the wide viewport. Earth hung in the dark like a glimmering seed, small and trembling, suspended in a web of stars. So chaotic. So primitive. So unremarkable.

But for her... he would guard it like a god.

“Prepare transmissions to the Five,” he said, not looking back. “Show them Cruxar’s last breath. Let them see the ease of it. Let them taste their own mortality.”

“And if they respond with protest?” the Yerak asked softly.

He smiled behind the mask.

“They won’t.”

Fifty-One

The clock beside her bed ticked in a slow, pulsing rhythm—Majarin-made, but altered for her. Twelve-hour cycle, numerals adjusted to the Terran system. She'd found it oddly comforting. As though a piece of Earth had been embedded into the grandeur of Luxar.

Three weeks had passed since their return. She could count the days now.

Leonie sat at her sleek, obsidian-hued desk, fingers brushing across the glowing interface of her new computer. The Majarin had adapted it for her, complete with encryption layers she couldn't begin to understand—but it worked. She could email. She could scroll. She could talk to her friends back home.

And what strange things they told her.

"Aliens, Leonie," one of them had written. "Ships in the sky. It was all over social media for two days. Military said it was atmospheric interference. But people saw things. They panicked. Then, poof. Everything went quiet. Covered up, probably. I swear, it was real."

She stared at the message a long while.

It didn't take a genius to piece together the truth.

She didn't know what Karian had done—not exactly—but she knew him. He wouldn't let anything happen to Earth. Not while she lived.

Still, a chill lingered. Power like his didn't move quietly. Whatever storm he had unleashed in the skies of her world, he had shrouded it in shadow before it could fall on her doorstep.

She closed the message, leaned back, and pressed her hand to her chest, where her heartbeat still quickened.

A soft chime echoed through the room. The doors opened.

Karian stepped in, tall and impossible, all shadowed grace and majesty. He had foregone his armor tonight. The lines of his robe shimmered faintly in the dim lights, embroidered with the symbols of his house. He was, as ever, arresting.

"Evening," she said, rising to meet him.

He didn't speak at first—only moved to her, his steps soundless, his presence overwhelming. When he took her hand in his, the warmth of his skin calmed the restless tangle in her stomach.

"You're troubled," he said.

She looked up at him. "You were on Earth. Weren't you?"

He didn't answer. His dark eyes only searched hers with unreadable depth.

"You did something," she continued. "People saw... things."

"I did what was necessary," he said quietly.

That was all.

She sighed, resting her head briefly against his chest. His heart beat differently—slower, deeper, like a pulse echoing from the core of the world.

"I just wish I knew what you were protecting me from," she murmured.

"Too much," he replied. And then, before she could press further, his tone shifted. "Come with me."

He led her through the spiraled corridors of his tower to the chambers she rarely entered—his Inner Sanctum. They opened without a word, responding to his presence alone. The room inside was vast, warm, and fragrant with alien incense. Pillars soared like trees to the high ceiling, and curved windows revealed the night skies of Luxar.

Leonie turned to him in confusion. "Why are we here?"

"You are not returning to your chambers," he said. "They are no longer yours."

Her brow furrowed. "Then where?—?"

"These are your chambers now. Mine. Ours."

The words stunned her into silence.

"You will live here," he continued, voice low and reverent. "There will be no more separation between us. You are to dwell at my side—in truth, in presence, and in name."

Her lips parted. "Karian, are you saying...?"

He stepped closer, cupping her face in one clawed hand. "There has only been one other instance of this. Over a millennium ago. A Marak... choosing a mate. Declaring

it to the stars."

Her pulse thundered.

"And now, it will be known again," he said. "You are to be my Marakin."

Leonie felt her knees weaken. His arms wrapped around her instantly, catching her, holding her tight to his body. The weight of what he'd said slammed into her like a wave. Not a concubine. Not a captive. A mate.

His.

Forever.

Karian leaned down and kissed her deeply, with a heat that left her breathless. She melted into him, unable to hold back the swell of longing, the gravity that had always drawn her to him.

He would declare her to his people. To the universe.

And she would stand beside him, not as property, but as a partner.

She let herself go completely, surrendering to his touch, to the certainty in his voice, to the future she had once thought stolen—but had instead been rewritten in stars.

Fifty-Two

She stood at the threshold of his Inner Sanctum, barely breathing.

The room was unlike any other on Luxar. Where the rest of the palace was carved in brilliant obsidian and starlit crystal, this chamber pulsed with something softer, deeper. The walls were curved, alive almost—veins of golden energy glowing faintly beneath smooth, dark surfaces. The air was thick with a sweet, smoky scent, like crushed petals and fire.

It felt ancient. Sacred. Like she'd stepped into the heart of a god.

And Karian was waiting for her.

He stood before the low-lit dais, haloed in quiet radiance. His dark robes, etched with silver thread, fell in flawless lines from his broad shoulders. The crest at his brow glinted with power. But it was his eyes—those burning, inhuman eyes—that held her fast. They blazed with something that unsettled and aroused her all at once.

Possession. Reverence. Hunger.

He raised a hand in invitation. She crossed the room, her steps soft against the velvet flooring, her breath shallow. She could feel her pulse echoing in her throat, in her fingertips.

“You are certain,” he said, his voice low, reverent. “Once you cross this line, there is no going back.”

She didn't speak. She placed her hand in his.

He moved slowly, always watching her—waiting for any flicker of hesitation. When none came, he stepped behind her and lifted his hands to her shoulders. The straps of her silken dress trembled under his touch. He slid them down, inch by inch, until the pale blue fabric slipped from her like a sigh, whispering against her skin as it fell.

The cool air kissed her bare flesh. She stood exposed before him, and yet never had she felt more seen. More wanted.

He circled around her, fingers trailing across her collarbone, down her arms. The heat of his skin was electric. She reached for him in return, undoing the fastenings of his robe, revealing the sculpted, alien form beneath—muscles ridged with power, skin that shimmered with a faint iridescence under the chamber's light.

She pressed her hands to him, letting herself feel the solidity of his body, the strange strength of it. It was like touching thunder. And yet he trembled under her touch.

When his tentacles emerged, it was not sudden. It was like watching silk unfurl. They rose from his back and sides with fluid grace, caressing her without urgency, wrapping her in a kind of living embrace. The first touch made her gasp—a brush against her lower spine, another curling around her wrist. They were warm, textured, and far more delicate than they appeared.

They moved with purpose, teasing the curve of her hips, the soft insides of her thighs, circling and retreating in maddening rhythm. She arched into him, a sound escaping her lips she didn't recognize as her own.

He studied her every reaction. He knew exactly where she would tremble. Where she would melt.

His mouth found the hollow of her neck, his hands splayed against the small of her back, pulling her closer. “You are mine,” he breathed against her skin. “But more than that—you are my match.”

She closed her eyes, letting herself drown in sensation. Her mind, her body, her soul—they were all tangled up in him now. He coaxed her to the edge, slowly, reverently, as though worshipping her unraveling.

And when she shattered in his arms, it was with his name on her lips, her body held firm in his embrace as if he’d known all along this was where she belonged.

He lowered her gently onto the soft platform at the heart of the chamber, cradling her against him. His tentacles withdrew, brushing her skin like a whispered promise.

For a long while, they lay together, their heartbeats slowly syncing.

She looked up at him—at the alien who had abducted her, who now held her so gently, so fiercely—and whispered, “I can’t go back to who I was before you.”

He didn’t speak. He only wrapped her closer, the shadows of the Sanctum curling around them like a vow.

Fifty-Three

The light in the private dining chamber was low and golden, pulsing softly in imitation of the twin suns beneath the Luxari skies. The domed ceiling shifted with ambient hues of violet and deep blue, casting delicate warmth over the obsidian walls.

It was quiet. Still.

Karian sat across from her, wrapped in the silence that so often followed their mornings together.

Leonie was eating—her breakfast procured from Earth by his logistics network with unnecessary haste, as if some part of him feared she might wilt without it. She didn't know the effort it had taken to get her that coffee. Those pastries. Those little things from a distant blue planet.

But as he watched her now—sitting comfortably in his sanctum, her fingers delicate as she held the flaky, fruit-filled pastry, her lips curved in subtle pleasure with each bite—he knew he would have done it a thousand times over just to see her like this.

Human food was strange to him. Cloyingly sweet. Lacking any vibratory energy or biochemical potency. Nothing more than nostalgic decadence. But she loved it. And that was enough.

He himself ate from darker bowls—obsidian dishes laced with living etchings that pulsed faintly in his presence. Raw flesh of Sualk, still warm, lay neatly alongside the

pale ribbons of Kolik, a translucent meat known for its density and regenerative qualities. He sliced methodically, eating without mess, without pause.

Beside his meal sat a single, radiant Oulia crystal, pulsing with internal light. He lifted it gently, fingers gliding across the smooth facets. Within, the raw energy shimmered—deep-ocean power harvested from places so pressurized, even Yerak bone would collapse like paper.

Only the Marak could retrieve them. Only he could breathe that depth.

He inhaled the luminous energy, drawing it slowly into his lungs. It entered his bloodstream like fire and calm all at once.

When he lowered the gem, Leonie was watching him.

"You don't have to hide it, you know," she said with a small smile. "I've seen way weirder things lately."

He inclined his head slightly. "Still... some rituals are not easy to witness."

"You're the one drinking a rock," she teased.

He allowed the corner of his mouth to lift—barely. But she saw it.

"I've been thinking," she said after a moment. "About the mate-bond."

He looked up fully. She set her cup down and met his gaze without flinching.

"I'll accept it," she said softly. "But I don't want the fanfare. No shining banners or bowing masses. I don't want to be worshipped like some divine creature. That's not who I am."

“You are divine to me,” he said.

“I want to be human,” she insisted. “Respected, yes. But as Leonie. As me . Not as an ideal.”

He studied her for a long moment, then inclined his head.

“It will be as you say. No ceremonies. No public adoration. Only truth.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly, and she smiled again—soft, but full of something fierce. He loved that about her.

“I’ve been walking among the Yerak,” she added. “With the guards. I’ve seen how they live. How they work. How they fear you.”

“They should,” he said simply.

“But do they need to?” she asked. “I mean... all the time?”

She leaned forward. “They work themselves to exhaustion. I saw children pulled from their games because of training cycles. You give them everything—shelter, safety, food, structure—but not time.”

“They do not ask for time,” he replied. “They were not bred to.”

“That doesn’t mean they don’t need it.”

Karian sat in silence.

He felt the weight of her words echo in him—not like thunder, but like dripping water against stone. Small, persistent, undeniable.

She wasn't wrong.

"They could have more," she said gently. "More time. A bit more freedom. I know you can't change everything. I know your rule is about balance and security. But small things add up."

Her eyes searched his, wary and hopeful.

After a moment, he sat back.

"We will reduce their working schedules by ten percent," he said.

Leonie blinked. "Wait—really?"

He nodded once. "It will be implemented immediately. The shipyards and mines will adjust. It is a sacrifice—but one I am willing to make."

He watched the way her face lit up. That rare, glowing joy. But then, something else: a sly little grin tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Clever girl.

"You'll ask for more," he said softly.

She didn't deny it. Just sipped her coffee and arched one dark brow, eyes full of promise.

"And you'll give it," she murmured, "eventually."

He exhaled, quiet amusement blooming beneath his stern expression.

"Yes," he said. "Eventually."

And to his own surprise, the thought did not bother him.

It pleased him.