



Calyx (Ka'atari Warriors #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She had no intention of leaving the lab. Then she stole a spaceship.

Chemist Razili prefers logic over risk and samples over standoffs, but when the Scozid-neutralizing compound she's developing keeps falling apart at the molecular level, she makes a desperate choice: travel to a planet deep in Scozid territory and get what she needs herself. She doesn't plan on taking a copilot. She really doesn't plan on hijacking a fighter owned by the massive, infuriating Trelox who won't stop hovering.

Calyx knew the moment he saw her—Razili is his rhun. His perfect match. But until she falls for him, touching her is off the table. He'd rather go mad than risk her walking away. Now they're trapped in a tiny ship, heading toward danger, and sharing a bed. He's trying to stay focused on keeping her safe, keeping his pants on, and getting her brilliant, snarky self to fall in love with him. His nanites are trying to climb her like a tree.

Between malfunctioning ships, alien space bats, and a dangerously romantic field trip to the edge of enemy space, this mission is exactly what happens when a nerd tries to be the main character.

This novella is the seventh in the Ka'atari Warriors series. It has a guaranteed happily ever after and no cliffhangers, but the story progresses from book to book and the series is best read in order.

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“This is insufficient.”

Razili rolled her eyes. “Of course it’s insufficient. It’s barely a gram.”

“I need no less than five kilograms to manufacture and test a suitable delivery system.”

She spun from her microscope, fists clenched at her sides and took a deep breath.

She unclenched her jaw and stared at the handsome, infuriating, annoying Trelxak lurking in her lab’s doorway.

“I thought Trelxak were supposed to be intelligent. Capable of quick calculations and able to see multiple outcomes for any situation.”

His brows drew down. “That’s correct.”

She cocked a hip against her lab table. “So tell me, Calyx, why you insist on interrupting me several times a day to repeat the same information? Can you not deduce that your actions are, in fact, slowing my progress? That you are hindering the very outcome you wish?”

She smirked in satisfaction as his mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air. She watched as his spine stiffened, his lips thinned, and he gave a curt nod of his chin.

“I shall leave you to your work.”

“That would be a blessing.”

He hesitated, as if he might say more, but then turned and strode out of sight. Razili sighed. Calyx had become a thorn in her side since his assignment to create the delivery system for the Scozid neutralizer she was synthesizing.

She rubbed at her eyes before fitting them into their familiar spots on the eyepieces. The microscope—and the lab surrounding it—were top of the line Denchui tech. Light years beyond what she’d had on Earth. Literally.

Being flung across the universe had been a blessing in disguise.

Instead of a middling chemist doing rote experiments on the United Nations space station Shangris , she was at the forefront of her field.

Earth bound chemists begged for a position in her lab, the stack of applications having grown to precarious dimensions.

Uv’ex, a lovely Chaiteals male who’d served as her mentor on Ladegantu, encouraged her to choose several but the idea overwhelmed her so the pile sat untouched.

As the Scozid threat grew nearer, the Ka’atari had moved their females, young, and elderly—along with the human survivors, their rhun mates and children—to a secure planet named Corix 23.

A fully stocked and equipped lab was waiting for Razili.

She remained largely confined inside the sterile walls, not leaving for more than an hour here and there since.

And those only when one of the other humans forced her to take a break.

She was well aware of what rode on her shoulders.

The ability to defeat an advanced race set on universal domination. A race with no qualms against using other beings in horrible experiments, torturing innocents, and the wholesale destruction of planets.

The Scozid were planning to attack Denchui space, putting everyone at risk. The compound resting on a slide under her microscope neutralized their technology. In effect, when it touched a piece of Scozid tech, it turned that tech into a paperweight.

Another of the humans had stumbled across it, and made her swear to keep its origin secret.

The compound was gruthji saliva. The large, horned animals were sentient, and one had befriended Gabriella.

The gruthji had suffered at the hands of both alliance and Scozid alike.

Razili would not be party to any further mistreatment.

The very idea of harming an animal in the name of science—or for any other reason—made her stomach twist.

There was no way to harvest a large enough amount from the animals without causing immense harm, so she had to figure out a way to synthesize it.

The issue was quasarase, a protein enzyme that worked like kallikrein in human saliva, only instead of producing a vasodilator, it produced a conductor dilator, shutting down a particular piece of technology's ability to create, store, or share any

type of information.

In amateur terms, the ones and zeros just stopped when applied to the type of biomechanical technology the Scozid used.

Quasarase proved difficult to synthesize, and efforts at replication were tedious. Instead of a normal carbon-based chain, quasarase was a mix of carbon and silicate chains woven intricately together. One wrong bond and the entire thing fell apart.

Razili adjusted the microscope's fine focus and cursed. The slide revealed her latest attempt fractured. She yanked it from the stage clips and threw it into the trash. It clinked against the fifty or so slides holding previous attempts with the same outcome.

She was missing something. She needed a fresh approach. She reached over and tapped her tablet, pressing the button to connect to Uv'ex's lab on Ladegantu.

"Razili! So nice to see you."

She smiled and felt her shoulders melt a fraction away from her ears. "Uv'ex, I need your help. I'm trying to synthesize this compound, but the bond is a complicated mash of carbon and silicate. Everything I've tried so far has failed to hold."

He pressed a slender finger to his chin, two of his four eyes closing in thought. "Carbon and silicate, you say?"

She nodded.

His mouth popped open and he spun to a large monitor at the back of the room. His fingers flew across the screen, too fast for Razili to comprehend what he was doing. A few seconds later, the image of a planet shrouded in purple clouds zoomed to the

forefront.

“You may find something of use here, on Dunia Prime.”

Razili leaned forward as if she could get a better view. “Where is it?”

Uv'ex faced her with a frown. “On the edge of Scozid space. Few alliance scientists have been there, but those who have reported most of the native flora and fauna have evolved to have woven carbon and silicate chains.”

“That's perfect! I'll go right away.”

Uv'ex shook his head. “I can't advise that, Razili. You may get a Ka'atari to make the trip and bring back samples, but you shouldn't go there. It's too close to the Scozid homeworld, and with the threat heightened, I worry for your safety.”

“I'll speak to them.” She had no intention of being left behind. This was too important. What if they brought back the wrong thing? Or nothing useable? No, she had to go.

The thought made her want to vomit.

The Scozid race was technologically superior, but they had gained that technological knowledge by enslaving, torturing, and altering whatever they saw fit.

They had no morals and no empathy. They were criminal psychopaths on a galactic scale.

She'd seen first-hand the effects of their cruelty.

Death was a far better option than falling into Scozid hands.

If this compound weren't their best defense—their only defense—against them, she wouldn't even consider the risk.

She thanked her friend and colleague and then cut the connection. No one had ever thought of Razili as bold or forward, and the idea of asking the Ka'atari to take her to Dunia Prime gave her pause. She worried her lip with her teeth and then straightened her spine with a snap.

She couldn't be a wimp. Not in this case.

She put her big girl pants on and went in search of Rahel.

As an elder Ka'atari on Corix 23, he had the authority to greenlight her mission, but more importantly, he was kind to Razili, and she could speak to him more easily than some of the other, more intimidating warriors.

Calyx hadn't gone far when Razili dismissed him from her lab. The effects of rhun wouldn't let him. Even now his naturally hot body rose in temperature. He would strip out of his pants, but the chemist was uncomfortable with nakedness, so he endured.

Her logic was sound. She couldn't very well complete her task with his constant interruptions.

He had tried offering her food or drink when she remained in her lab for long hours, but that was a disaster.

Walking into her lab with a full tray of offerings, she had yelled at him to leave immediately, before he compromised her samples.

That's when he resorted to mission-only conversations, which clearly weren't

working either.

He needed a new excuse to stay nearby. As long as he could smell her, he could keep rhun at bay. He hoped she'd feel it soon, but it was clear she remained unaffected.

That he annoyed her was also clear.

He refused to pressure her, so he kept the reason for his constant presence to himself. His nanites may be screaming at him to fulfill rhun , but he remained in control—for now.

Eventually, his control would slip, but he would tell her well before that happened.

He heard the click of her heels on the floor before watching her rush through the door and down the hall. He followed her, keeping a reasonable distance in case she turned and caught him. He needn't have worried; she never looked back.

She ducked into the elder's hall and came right back out.

Then she checked the mess hall. Whatever, or whoever, she sought wasn't there either.

His heart skipped a beat. What if she was looking for him?

That was a high probability, but not a certainty.

He was contemplating the pros and cons of revealing himself when she turned and her eyes snagged on him.

"Calyx, have you seen Rahel?"

He refused to acknowledge the disappointment that flooded his body. “I have not.”

She sagged and it took all his strength not to reach out and comfort her.

“The elders usually gather in the recreation area at this time of day.”

She perked up and gave him a smile that stunned him for several seconds. He registered her call of “Thanks!” thrown over her shoulder as she hurried away. He had to jog to catch up to her. When he entered the rec room, she was already deep in conversation with the elder.

Her hands alternated between being clasped in front of her and smoothing the front of her garment. She spoke too softly for him to overhear their conversation, but he could see the Azar getting agitated. As his volume increased, Razili shrank.

Rahel roared, “No!”

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Calyx was across the room without knowing how he got there. He stood between Razili and Rahel, ready to defend her.

She stepped out from behind him and took a deep breath. Her lips trembled as she spoke, but her voice was sure and he couldn't be more proud of her.

“Rahel, it's imperative that I go. I will take every precaution, but I need to see what's there. I need to test items to find what I'm looking for. It's too important to leave to chance.”

The elder's silver stripes flashed in the bright light despite being dulled with age. “Did you okay this plan of hers?”

Calyx looked between the Azar and Razili. “I'm not aware of any plan.”

Rahel crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Well, go ahead. Tell him.”

He saw her wince, but she smoothed her features before looking him in the eyes. “I need to go to Dunia Prime.”

A lightning bolt striking him would have felt better than the shock his nanites sent through his system. “No.”

Her brows slashed and a muscle in her jaw ticked.

“Look, I'm going, with or without your help.

” She turned back to Rahel. “There has to be some way to make it safer. We stay on the far side of the planet. Only scout a small area at a time. Set up perimeters.” She threw up her hands.

“I don’t know! Do whatever you military people do, but either way, I. Am. Going.”

She stormed away, leaving Calyx in shock. He’d never seen her so confrontational. He knew a lot was riding on her synthesis of the compound, but perhaps she was being pushed too hard. Rahel chuckled behind him.

“The ones who appear calm on the surface always have hidden depths.” He slapped his palm on Calyx’s shoulder. “The way she is treated will determine whether that fire is stoked, or doused.”

Calyx didn’t want to douse her fire. She’d been magnificent, standing up to two warriors twice her size. Her eyes flashed, her brown skin taking on a lovely pink hue. His cock filled, but he suppressed it. He’d take care of it later, as he’d done since he’d first seen Razili.

He jogged back to her lab. Empty. He turned and traced the familiar route to her rooms. Those were empty as well. On the verge of panic, he tore into the hangar bay.

Movement near his fighter caught his eye. Razili carried a small bag he assumed held her clothing and a large case he knew contained lab equipment. She struggled up the entrance ramp, her head darting in every direction.

After several, long minutes, she managed to get herself and her cases inside.

He wasn’t going to read anything into the fact that she’d chosen his fighter to steal.

He slipped in behind her, hiding himself behind a wall of storage.

She muttered to herself as she stared at the control panel.

He watched her wince and reach a finger as far from herself as possible to push a button.

Did she think the craft would explode if she chose wrong?

How in the stars did she think she would get the fighter off the deck? Much less into space?

Her entire body deflated in relief when the entrance ramp engaged and ascended, closing them in. She sat in the captain's chair and he moved closer.

"Okay, step one finished. Now, how do I turn this thing on?" Her voice was low and she nibbled on her bottom lip as she scrutinized the control panel.

Her finger ran down the rows and columns of switches and lights in left to right, up to down, systematic fashion.

She reached the end and sank into the chair with a groan of frustration. "Why can't there be a 'start' button?"

She started inspecting the control panel again, lingering on each longer this time, as if 'start' might appear beneath her finger.

Calyx put her out of her misery. "You won't find a button labeled 'start'."

She whirled and skittered out of the chair, her hand held to her chest, eyes wide in panic. "Calyx, you scared the shit out of me!"

"I apologize."

She groaned again, and his cock took notice.

“You’re not sorry. You’re here to stop me.” She turned her big, brown eyes to him. “I have to go. Don’t you understand?”

“I understand you’re under tremendous pressure, and you’ve been unsuccessful so far. I understand you believe you will find what you need for success on Dunia Prime.”

She nodded, which made the long braid she wore when she worked swing behind her.

“What I don’t understand,” he continued, “is why you feel you have to go. I’d be happy to gather what you need.” It would kill him, being away from her for that long, given rhun already wracked his body, but he would do it to keep her safe.

She stepped toward him and laid her hand on his forearm. The touch sent a shock through his system and short-circuited his brain. He fought to hear what she said.

“That’s just it. I don’t know what I’ll need. I have to go, because it’s the only way I’ll be sure I have the right samples.”

He moved away from her touch and into the co-pilot’s chair. His brain still came back online with difficulty. Scenarios, outcomes, and pitfalls ran through him in a cascade. She waited. After a few minutes, he nodded.

“We’ll go.”

She grinned, and he held out his hand.

“There are conditions.”

“Of course! Name them.”

“We’ll go alone—just the two of us. A small party is easier to hide, easier to maneuver, and easier to retreat if necessary.”

He waited for her nod of agreement.

“You will do as I say at all times.”

This nod was slower in coming.

“If I say we leave, it means right then. Not after you finish gathering a sample. Right. Then.”

She sighed. “Fine. But unless we’re in danger, I say when we leave. I don’t know how long I’ll need.”

He held his hand out to shake hers, a human custom that was quickly being adopted by Denchui space. “Agreed.”

She took it, another bolt of lightning searing through his nanites.

“Agreed.”

She moved behind the co-pilot’s chair, waiting for him to sit at the controls. He switched chairs, careful to avoid touching her again. Dunia Prime was four cycles away. He’d just willingly trapped himself inside a small ship with his rhun— who he couldn’t yet claim—for four cycles.

He let his head drop back and released a groan.

“What’s wrong?”

He snapped his head up and focused on getting them clearance and waking the craft to fly. He told her, “Nothing.”

Everything .

She couldn’t believe he’d agreed to take her. It wasn’t until they had left the surface of Corix 23, and he could no longer ditch her that she relaxed.

“You were worried I’d turn around?”

Why did he sound hurt? “It’s not like you volunteered.”

“No, but I told you in the hangar I would take you.”

She sighed and rubbed her temples. “Look, I know you don’t like me, and this isn’t your idea of a vacation, but it’s important that I go.”

He stared at her. She couldn’t work out what he was thinking.

His face was blank, but his eyes held a spark of something.

Amusement? Maybe he just had indigestion.

Who could tell with cyborgs? She wasn’t a nervous talker.

She was more the wallflower type. But something about the way he looked at her made her need to fill the silence. She determined to wait him out.

“I don’t dislike you, Razili.”

Oh. “That’s good.” She slumped in her seat. “I just thought since I’d been mean to you...”

He had that look again. Like he was computing the answer to the question of life.

“I have no record of you being unpleasant to me.”

She resisted rolling her eyes. Barely. She’d seen Trelxak have emotions, or at the very least, mimic them. So why did Calyx seem like he had no concept of the idea? No record of her...? Who talked like that? “When I told you to leave me alone? Repeatedly.”

He shook his head. “That was not mean, Razili. You were pointing out a flaw in my behavior.”

She rubbed her temples again. There was no point in trying to explain it. They’d be talking in circles the whole way to Dunia Prime.

“Are you ill?”

“What?” She knew she looked a little rundown after spending so many hours in the lab, but she didn’t think she looked sick.

“You keep rubbing your head. I’ve heard Willow talk of headaches and observed her making the same motions when she’s afflicted.”

She smiled. “No, I don’t have migraines like Willow. I’m just tired.” If there was one thing cyborgs were good at, it was observation. She’d need to remember that when they reached the planet. That talent would be useful.

“You should rest.”

He made his way to the back of the small craft. Without hesitation, he reached a hidden latch, pulled a lever, and a bed lowered from the wall. She gaped at it, and then at him. “How did you know that was there?”

A smile skated across his lips. “This is my fighter, Razili.”

She groaned. Of course, out of all the ships in the hangar, she’d choose his.

She should be grateful they wouldn’t need to figure out where everything was stored. She stared down at the bed, made up with blankets and pillows. He was undoing straps she assumed kept everything in place when it was stored inside the wall.

She wasn’t contemplating thread counts, though. “Is there another?”

His brows scrunched together. “Another what?”

“Bed.” She waved her hand at it.

“Is this one not acceptable?”

“No, it’s not that. It looks very comfortable. It’s just, where will you sleep?” It was a good-sized bed, spanning almost the entire width of the ship, but with how big he was, there’s no way they could share. Not without touching, anyway.

“On the outside edge, in case I am needed.”

“With me?” She didn’t realize her voice could hit that pitch.

“Yes, of course.” He paused to look around, but there were no other horizontal surfaces. “Where else?”

She couldn't complain. She'd stolen his ship, and instead of getting mad, he'd agreed to take her.

Against the elder's wishes, too. She pursed her lips and nodded.

"Okay." She could do this. They were both adults.

She just needed to ignore her racing heart and the way her skin warmed thinking about him lying so close to her.

Effectively boxing her in. She'd be trapped against the bulkhead. Unless she wanted to climb over him.

"Are you sure you're not ill?"

A bark of laughter erupted from her. "I'm sure." Her skin had to be five shades of red.

He nodded. "You need rest."

She really did. The stress and excitement of the day had exhausted her.

She pulled her small bag onto the bed and dug through it until she found her pajamas.

The worn flannel bottoms still showed the pattern of sheep.

Her sleep shirt was from her graduate school days.

The university logo stretched across her chest.

She looked around as if she expected a changing room to pop out of nowhere. "Um,

Calyx?”

He turned from the captain’s chair. “Yes?”

“Is there a bathroom?” If she made it to the planet without spontaneously combusting from embarrassment, it would be a miracle.

Another press of his hand against the opposite bulkhead, and a tiny rectangular room revealed itself. It was large enough for the Trelxak, so there was plenty of room for her to change, brush her teeth, and pee. She chuckled softly to herself as she stepped out.

Calyx raised an eyebrow at her in question.

“I was just thinking how stupid I was. What would I have done if you weren’t with me?”

“You’re incredibly intelligent, Razili. You would have figured it out.”

She smiled at the compliment, but his attention was back on the forward viewing screen. She climbed into the bed, burrowed beneath the blankets, and scooted as close to the wall as possible.

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He made her uncomfortable. It was the only explanation for the flush on her cheeks and the hesitation when she talked with him. He scanned all the knowledge available to him to find strategies to make her at ease in his presence.

Projecting nonchalance, talking about inane topics, and humor were the most widely mentioned.

Calyx reclined in the pilot's seat, the hum of the fighter's engine a comforting backdrop to the silence that had fallen.

His eyes sought Razili's sleeping form time and again.

He rubbed his eyes. He didn't need much sleep.

He could certainly stay awake until the next day.

She would appreciate that. He could sleep while she was awake, negating the need for them to share the bed.

He would lie with her for just a moment. He lied to himself with ease; the bitter truth strained at the fastening of his pants. He slipped under the covers with her as quietly as he could. She sighed and rolled toward him, tucking herself into his side. He didn't dare breathe.

She felt good there.

Almost too good.

He closed his eyes and stifled a groan. His nanites were going crazy, urging him to touch her, to take her as his rhun and ease the tension in his cock.

Everything in him reached for her, but he locked his muscles.

He counted the rivets in the metal above him.

He sifted through databases with any mention of Dunia Prime. Neither distraction worked for long.

It was torture to be close to her, but he was loath to get up.

He startled when her hand slid up and over his chest. She faced him, and he scrutinized her expression for anything that might tell him she was waking up. There was nothing. She was relaxed and breathed evenly.

Then she curled fully toward him and moved her leg over his. Her thigh stopped just shy of his dick, which was throbbing to an almost painful degree. If he moved, she would wake. He took a deep breath and commanded his nanites to settle.

The heat of her sank into him. He clenched his fists as he fought the urge to claim his mate.

Rhun was not something he could ignore forever. The longer he delayed, the more difficult it would be. He needed to anchor his thoughts to anything but the intoxicating woman nestled against him.

Calyx eased his mind into a state of meditation, a practice taught to warriors in training.

He focused on the rhythm of his breathing, the flow of oxygen in and out of his lungs,

the steady beat of his heart.

He imagined his nanites as a calm sea, their usual frenetic activity slowing to a soothing ebb and flow.

Hours passed, and the nanites settled. The discomfort in his groin subsided to a dull ache.

Razili shifted in her sleep, her breath hitching for a moment before resuming its peaceful cadence.

Her hand, which had been resting on his chest, slid further to lie curled against his shoulder.

The intimacy of the gesture made his breath catch, and a hopeful part of him dared to believe that rhun wasn't as one-sided as he feared.

A warning chime from the controls caused her eyes to flutter open. He watched realization dawn in her eyes as she noted her position, wrapped around him.

She gasped and lunged up, almost hitting her head on the side of the ship. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to ..."

He smiled and patted her leg where it still rested on his. "It's alright."

The chime sounded again and he sighed. He unfolded from the bed, his muscles stiff from holding himself so rigid. The control panel was lit with warnings. The air recycling system was malfunctioning. With Razili's presence, he'd forgotten to make sure they'd completed the scheduled repair.

Razili moved to stand near his elbow. "What's wrong?"

“The air purification system has an error. It’s why my fighter was on the deck instead of stored in a hangar. It was waiting to be repaired.”

Razili groaned. “I had to pick the bum one, didn’t I?”

He chuckled. “I have a workaround.” He turned to face her. “But I’ll need your help. I’m too big to fit into the maintenance shaft.”

She was shaking her head before he finished. “I’m not a mechanic, Calyx. I don’t know the first thing about repairing a spaceship.”

“It’s not difficult, and I’ll walk you through every step.”

Her eyes darted from the warning lights to him and back again. He watched her spine stiffen and she nodded. “Okay then. Tell me what to do.”

He grinned. “You aren’t claustrophobic, are you?”

What kind of question was that? Oh, the maintenance shaft must be small. “Not so far.”

Calyx tilted his head at her. “Not so far?”

She nodded. “It’s something my family says when there’s no absolute answer. If I say no, but I haven’t experienced being squeezed into something as small as this shaft might be, and I find I actually am claustrophobic in that circumstance, then my answer was false.”

He nodded. “A scientific approach to things that have variables or unknowns.”

She grinned. “Exactly.”

He accepted her answer and opened a cabinet. He retrieved a white box that was open on two sides and handed it to her. “A replacement filter. Once you swap the old one for this one, the system will reset.”

“Okay. Take the old one out, put the new one in. That sounds simple enough.” Her confidence grew. She could do this. They wouldn’t suffocate to death because she made a poor vehicle choice.

He walked past her and opened a small door. “This is the maintenance shaft. You’ll need to take a left at the first junction.”

She bent down and maybe she was a little claustrophobic because that space seemed tiny.

She shook her free hand out and took a deep breath.

She could do this. Just had to reframe it as a pleasant walk in the park.

A very small park. “Will I have to back all the way out? How will I hear your instructions once I make the turn?”

He pinned a small communicator to her top. She was still in her pajamas. “Should I change?”

“There’s no need. The maintenance areas are clean and that fabric might ease your way through.”

Right. Because her sleep shirt was worn with age and slippery. She hadn’t packed for having a roommate. Her pajamas were the most comfortable she owned—the pants and tee worn to perfection.

“As for backing out,” he continued, “the area where the filter is located should be large enough for you to turn around.”

Okay, she could do this. If she kept telling herself, it might stick.

On her stomach, she slithered into the shaft.

It had a slight downward angle, which forced her to use her hand as a brake against the artificial gravity.

The image of her sliding headfirst willy nilly into the unknown spiked her anxiety.

The communicator on her shirt chirped. “You’re doing great. Almost to the first junction.”

She took as big a breath as the cramped space allowed. “I turn left, correct?”

“Correct.”

She put the replacement filter into her right hand in anticipation of the turn. The junction was slightly bigger than the entrance shaft, and as she made the turn, she was happy to note that tunnel was larger.

“Where to now?”

Calyx’s voice steadied her nerves. She didn’t want to examine that too closely. She just wanted him to keep talking.

“About three meters in, you’ll see a panel on your left. Push on it and after depressing slightly, it should pop out.”

She found the panel right where he said it'd be and popped it open. Pulling it further caused it to block almost the entire width of the tunnel. She scooted onto her knees to free her hands.

"It's open, but I don't see anything that looks like the part you gave me."

"You should see a small red panel on the right-hand side."

"Okay, yep."

"Take a breath, Razili."

She wasn't hiding her panic as well as she thought, then. She took a deep breath.

"Red panel. I see it."

"Press with one finger on the upper near corner. It should pop open."

The little door sprang open with a clack, and Razili screamed. She could hear Calyx calling to her but his words didn't register until her heart descended from her throat.

"...happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." She cleared her throat. "Just startled me, that's all." She tilted forward to peer into the hole behind the now open door. "I see the filter!"

"Great! All you need to do is slide it out and put in the replacement. Then close everything back up."

She could do this. She reached into the opening and tugged. The filter slid free and she slumped in relief when the new one went easily into place. She closed everything up, making sure both panels were secure. Calyx was right, and she could turn around

in the small passage.

The way back wasn't as easy as the way in. She was fighting the artificial gravity that wanted to pull her back down. One hand wasn't enough to pull her forward and keep her from sliding back after she made the turn. She wedged the old filter under her chest to free both of her hands.

She grinned when Calyx came into sight. The way he crouched to look down the shaft had to be uncomfortable. When she was close enough, he reached for her. She took his hand and he tugged.

Both of them were confused when she came to an abrupt halt just shy of the opening.

"Oh! I had to put the old filter under me to crawl back up." He kept one of her hands while she rooted beneath her with the other.

She bent her elbow at an extreme angle, but she still couldn't pull the part free.

Her back was lodged against the top of the shaft and every breath jammed her tight against the sides.

Breaths which became more rapid. "Calyx?"

"It's okay."

"It's not okay! I'm stuck!"

She panicked. Her heart pounded in her ears and all other sounds muffled as she stared at him. She watched his eyes dart around her and the tunnel. Could almost see his nanites doing calculations. Then he leaned in...

And kissed her.

It was the solution with the greatest chance of success. That was true. She exhaled, and he felt her breath whoosh across his cheek. The exhalation gave him enough room to pull the filter from under her. As soon as he threw it aside, he tugged her free.

He intended to end the kiss, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on, and he was lost. His nanites screamed and rejoiced.

Every nerve ending in his groin was fixated on his cock pressing against her soft body.

On instinct, one of his hands traveled down her back and pulled her into him.

She gasped and leaned back. Stars only knew how he had the strength not to chase her perfect lips, lay her on the bunk and get her naked, but he managed. Just.

“Th... Thank you.”

Her cheeks flamed. He should be contrite. He shouldn't have kissed her without consent. But if she hated it, why was she thanking him?

She chuckled nervously. “I guess I am claustrophobic, after all.”

Her arms were still around his neck. He wanted them permanently fused there. He almost whined when she let go, then stepped away.

“Sorry, I know you just distracted me to get me out and I really appreciate it. I didn't mean to hang on you like a spider monkey.”

“Never apologize for touching me, Razili.”

Her head whipped up. He could see a question form in her eyes but before it reached her lips, she pursed them and nodded.

“I apologize for taking advantage of the situation, but I don’t regret the kiss.”

“Oh.” She looked everywhere but at him.

He sighed and ran his palms down his thighs. After a glance at the control panel showed him the new filter reset worked, he straightened his spine. His nanites were going crazy after the brief touch of their lips and he calculated the chance of splitting his pants at more than zero.

He had to tell her. “Razili—”

“Can we just forget it ever happened? I’m so embarrassed.”

“You have no reason to be embarrassed.”

“I got myself stuck in a maintenance shaft! I’d say that’s reason enough.”

“Razili, you’re my rhun .”

Of all the ways he’d imagined her reacting, freezing like a statue with a horrified look on her face wasn’t one of them. She came unstuck moments later, her head shaking so furiously that her hair whipped around her in a cloud. “No. I can’t be. You don’t like me.”

“I thought I explained that wasn’t the case.”

“But... but... how? When? What... what does this mean?”

Her questions arranged themselves in logical order in his mind. “It means that I do like you. Very much. I’ve been using excuses to stay near your lab.” He looked away. “It isn’t as hard if I’m near you.”

She snickered, the laugh high-pitched and slightly manic. She waved her hand at his crotch. “That’s a lie.”

His lips twitched, but he managed to keep a straight face.

“I mean emotionally. That is hard no matter if you’re near or I’m just thinking of you.

” He shook his head to get back on track.

“I knew the second time I walked into your lab. I waited in the hope you’d come to reciprocate the feeling, but I see now that was an error. I should have told you then.”

“You should have, yes.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. He watched her eyes flare wide. “Is that why you agreed to take me to Dunia Prime? Because you knew we’d be alone?”

He couldn’t deny that was part of his reasoning. “Not entirely. Your determination was obvious. If not me, then you’d find another way to get there, and I wouldn’t—couldn’t let anyone else be responsible for your safety.”

“Oh.” She deflated a bit. “So what happens now?”

“Nothing you don’t consent to. It will become harder for me to resist fulfilling rhun as time passes, but I will.”

She stood silent for a few minutes with her eyes cast to the floor. He gave her space to think. It was the least he could do.

“I read up on rhun when the others started pairing up, but I haven’t studied it extensively. Is it true that once rhun is triggered, it’s an imperative to be fulfilled?”

He nodded.

“And what happens if it isn’t?”

“Madness. Death.” He could actually feel his nanites pinging around his system. Would she reject him? Was that why she asked?

“And fulfilling rhun , that entails... what, exactly?”

He would feel better about this conversation if she’d look at him. This wasn’t about him feeling better, though. “Us having sex.”

“I thought it was a pregnancy requirement?”

“Ultimately, that’s the goal. But the physical aspects of rhun are satisfied with copulation.”

She nodded and he held his breath.

“So we have sex and you feel better? No more madness and death?”

“That is correct.”

He felt like a pinned insect when her eyes met his.

“Okay then. Let’s have sex.”

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She was a scientist, and she would approach this with science.

He was in distress. She could ease that distress by having sex with him.

It wasn't a simple case of him wanting in her pants.

It was a biological function. Or something.

Her brief research into the subject revealed that even the Molzaed were confused about how rhun ultimately worked.

The logic was simple.

So why did he look like she'd kicked his puppy?

"What's the matter?" All the blood drained from her face. "Oh stars. I stink, don't I? Or you don't find me attractive? Why would rhun pair people who weren't attracted to each other? That makes no sense."

"Razili."

She halted the stream of words flowing out of her. "Yes?"

"You do not stink, and I am wildly, desperately attracted to you. My hesitation is that I never wanted to force you."

She breathed out through her teeth like air escaping a balloon. "Pssh. You aren't

forcing me. I came to the most logical conclusion. We should have sex. Rhun will be fulfilled and you'll feel better."

Razili watched Calyx's expression shift from unreadable to... something else. Silence stretched between them.

"Razili," he said, his tone modulated like he was speaking to an unstable explosive. "I do not want you to agree to this simply because it is the most efficient solution."

Her brows pulled together. "Why else would I?"

The muscles in his jaw flexed.

Something new entered his gaze. It wasn't irritation, or frustration, or even the restraint he always had. This was something deeper.

"You are my rhun ." His voice was quiet. "Not an obligation. Not an equation to be solved."

She opened her mouth to fire back, but he stepped closer—so close she had to tip her head back to meet his gaze.

"You are not an experiment, Razili."

Her heart stuttered. Her hands curled into fists, nails pressing into her palms.

Because what was she supposed to say to that? It was an experiment. If it wasn't...
"Then what is this?"

Calyx exhaled sharply, the muscles in his broad shoulders shifting. " Rhun , written in the stars, fate. Call it what you will."

Her stomach clenched. “I don’t believe in fate.”

“I know.” His gaze swept over her face.

She turned away. She needed to breathe without his presence caging her. She took two steps before his voice stopped her.

“You wish to solve this as quickly as possible, to rid us of its weight,” he said, softer now. “But that is not how rhun works.”

She spun. “Oh? And how does it work, Calyx? Are we just supposed to surrender? To let it consume us?”

His gaze darkened. Yes.

Although unspoken, she felt the word anyway. A phantom pressure in the air. Stars help her.

Because she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to resist it.

Calyx watched her, patient. Steady. A controlled storm. She wondered if he ever broke.

She needed distance, perspective. Some kind of control.

She cast her gaze about the small ship, looking for any escape.

Of course, there was none. She cleared her throat, forcing her voice into some semblance of neutrality.

“So we don’t have sex. And we just... what?”

Focus on the mission while you struggle against this? ”

A flicker of something passed through his gaze. Then he nodded, ever the logical warrior. “Yes.”

“Until when? I assume there’s an expiration date on your ability to control this.”

“Until you are ready.”

She snorted and shook her head. “What if that doesn’t happen?

You can’t rely on me ‘being ready,’ whatever that means.

There’s no logic in this, Calyx. What you’re struggling with will distract me, and I won’t be able to focus.

I don’t understand why the idea of having sex with me is so repugnant that you’d rather deal with the increasing effects of rhun than sleep with me. ”

He was across the small ship in two strides, crowding her against the hull.

He leaned in further to bring his head eye level with hers.

“The idea of sex with you is so far from repugnant it’s laughable.

I want you with the fire of a thousand supernovas.

The mere touch of your skin on mine,”—he ran his fingers down the exposed skin of her arm, and she shivered—“is exquisite torture I would gladly bear every second of every day. I won’t sleep with you—not because I don’t want to, because every cell and nanite in me wants to—but because I don’t just want your body, Razili. I want all

of you. I want your heart.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath that she felt in her toes.

“Because you already have mine.”

The swift rush of cold air replaced his heat when he turned and strode to the captain’s chair—putting as much distance between them as the small ship allowed.

The loss tugged at something in her belly. Logically, she was more than ready to have sex with him to ease his suffering. She wasn’t sure about everything else. He wanted all of her—which was more than she was willing to give.

She would respect his decision, even though she felt like it left them in a weird sort of limbo.

But despite everything—despite his resolve, despite her logic—her body ached for him to turn back.

Calyx sat rigid in the captain’s chair, his hands clenching the armrests so hard he dented the material. His nanites were a cacophony of alerts and recalibrations, trying to contain the war raging within him.

He wanted her with a ferocity that threatened to shatter his carefully maintained control. Every instinct, every enhanced function of his body screamed for her—urging him to close the distance, to take what was his.

But she was not ready.

That mattered more than the gnawing need that turned every moment into agony. His fingers twitched against the controls. A distraction. He needed a distraction. He ran a

diagnostic on the ship's systems, double-checked their trajectory, their shield integrity, anything that might distract him.

It didn't work.

Behind him, Razili's breath came in uneven bursts. He could hear the way she shifted, restless, agitated. If he turned, if he looked into her dark eyes, he wasn't sure his resolve would hold. He was a warrior. He had endured physical and mental pain. But resisting rhun —resisting her—was worse.

"You're too quiet," Razili muttered behind him. She covered her uncertainty with impatience. "Brooding isn't going to make this easier."

He exhaled. "What would you have me do, Razili?"

"Something. Anything. Talk, argue, build something. I don't care. Just don't sit there acting like you're resigned to dying a slow death from rhun deprivation."

He turned and met her gaze. She stood with her arms crossed, a stance that didn't hide her vulnerability.

He could ease this tension in a thousand different ways. Instead, he said, "Tell me why you don't believe in fate."

She hesitated. "Because fate is an excuse to justify things people don't want to fight against."

Calyx tilted his head. "And yet, you fight this."

She scowled. "Because it's not fate. It's biology. Chemistry. Hormones and nanites and whatever else your species evolved to make sure you don't die out. That's not

destiny. That's programming."

His jaw clenched. "Biological programming means nothing when it comes to rhun . Rhun doesn't end with sex.

That's one component, yes, but not the only one.

There are a few who can fulfill rhun through the conception of a child and then walk away.

" He stood, but kept his distance. "I am not among them. What I feel for you supersedes biology. If we have sex—when we have sex—neither of us will walk away."

Her breath hitched. Just for a moment. Just long enough for him to notice.

Silence stretched again, charged and humming between them. Then she exhaled sharply, breaking whatever moment had tried to form. "I need to sleep."

Calyx nodded. "Then sleep."

She hesitated, staring at him like she wanted to say something else, but finally turned toward the small bunk. He listened to the rustle of fabric as she lay down, heard the slow, deliberate breaths she took to calm herself.

Calyx sat and closed his eyes, gripping the armrests once more. He would not touch her. Not until she wanted him to.

But stars help him. They had two more cycles before they reached Dunia Prime. His nanites helpfully calculated the time in various increments. None of which seemed small.

Eventually, her breaths became slower and deeper, and he knew she'd fallen into sleep. His muscles relaxed. He would need sleep, eventually, but not yet. He pulled up all the information available on Dunia Prime. The planet was small, but full of life. What form that life took was anyone's guess.

In orbit around a sun on the outskirts of Scozid territory, no one in the Denchui Alliance had stepped foot there in over fifty years. The data collection techniques from the last scientists were outdated, but sufficient for Razili to conclude what she needed would exist there—or nowhere.

Since the only defense the Alliance had against Scozid technology depended on Razili synthesizing the compound that neutralized it, her success was pivotal to winning the war.

He used the time she slept to learn all he could about the various lifeforms on the planet, and how they'd been influenced by the Scozid.

The limited data was frustrating.

This mission was less than ideal, but they held an advantage in their small number. They could pivot and adjust faster than a larger group could.

Relying on that to keep Razili safe was out of the question.

He needed more than just 'we move when we need to.' His fighter had cloaking abilities, but they were capable of short bursts only.

They would use it to enter the system and the atmosphere, but it would need to recharge before being viable.

The time to recharge would leave them vulnerable to scans.

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After one more cycle, they'd be close enough to run scans of their own. If they detected any Scozid presence on the planet, they would need to be very careful about where they landed and the areas they searched. It would make the mission more difficult, but not impossible.

If, however, the Scozid were heavily present in all regions of the planet, it would cause them to abort. Razili wouldn't be happy, but he wouldn't gamble with her safety. He hoped her logic would compel her compliance.

As the computer signaled the end of all known data concerning Dunia Prime, he heard her begin to wake.

He could take the coward's path and sleep while she monitored the ship's systems. Or he could face her head on and try to ... what? Woo her? The concept was foreign. Sex was transactional or part of rhun . There was never a need to woo a partner, so he'd never learned how.

Lacking an education was never something that stopped him before, and it wouldn't now. He would just have to learn. That meant he needed to know more about her. Who she was, her likes and dislikes. He needed information. And he would gather it as soon as she was fully awake.

Razili stretched and sat on the edge of the bunk. She wasn't usually an instantly awake person, but she was fully aware of Calyx's presence at the front of the ship. He was magnetic in the way he pulled her to him. She didn't resist. She needed to test both of their limits.

She sat in the co-pilot's seat and watched him for a minute. He was efficient but graceful as he checked the ship's systems.

“We are on track to reach the planet in two cycles.”

“That's good.” Her voice was stiff, and she took a moment to relax. She willed her shoulders away from her ears and tucked her feet next to her in the chair. She tilted her head as she studied him. “What's it like, having nanites?”

His lips quirked in a smile. “Like having an annoying second voice in your head that won't shut up.”

“You can't turn them off?” The very idea of not being at peace in your own mind was horrifying.

“In a manner, yes, I can turn them off. They continue in the background, but we are taught to ignore them and send them to a lower level.” He paused and met her eyes. “What was life like before being thrown into Denchui space?”

She turned to stare out the viewscreen. It showed the vast nothing of space, but it was easier to look at than he was.

“There were only a few chemists on the Shangris . We worked on various experiments, trying to synthesize compounds in zero gravity, seeing how different things reacted to the vacuum of space.” She laughed.

“Remedial stuff now that I've been exposed to the advanced concepts being explored by Denchui scientists, but it was exciting at the time.

” She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Now, I’ve been thrown into the bleeding edge of science.

It’s overwhelming, but putting an Earth perspective on what Denchui scientists are working on has been exciting.

The opportunities for exploration are vast.”

“You don’t look overjoyed by it, though.”

She chuckled. “You’re more perceptive than you let on, Calyx.

The opportunities are exciting, but the overwhelm is real.

So many Earth scientists want to travel to Denchui space, and for the chemists, that means swaying me to invite them.

I’m swamped with applications.” Razili sighed and shifted in her seat.

“I can’t bring myself to go through them.

Every time I think about reading another application, I just… freeze.”

Calyx considered her for a moment. “You fear making the wrong choice.”

“Exactly!” She threw her hands up. “What if I pick someone who’s brilliant but turns out to be awful to work with?

Or someone whose skills don’t complement mine?

Or someone who thinks being far from Earth is an adventure, but decides the reality is too much?

I'm not qualified to make decisions that could change someone's entire life. "

"And yet, you're qualified to create a compound that could save the universe."

She shot him a look. "That's different. That's chemistry. I understand chemistry."

"People can be understood as well, just through different methods of observation."

He leaned forward slightly. "What would make your ideal lab partner?"

Razili's brow furrowed as she considered the question.

"Someone who doesn't talk incessantly but isn't completely silent, either.

Someone who respects boundaries but isn't afraid to challenge my hypotheses.

Someone whose area of study doesn't overlap mine, so we aren't duplicating work.

" She chewed her bottom lip. "Someone who's methodical but not rigid. "

"Someone like me?" There was no pride in his voice, just a simple observation.

She stared at him, startled. "I... I guess you fit that description. But you're an engineer, not a chemist."

He smiled, and her belly flipped. "I'm not applying for the job, Razili. Just trying to understand why you've been so bothered by my presence in your lab."

She felt heat stretch from her face down her chest. "It's partly because you kept interrupting. And partly because you're a distraction."

The admission hung between them. Before he could ask any follow-up questions, she

cleared her throat and looked at the viewscreen. “My inability to pick a lab partner isn’t important right now. We need to focus on Dunia Prime.”

Calyx allowed her the change of subject. “I’ve reviewed all the data we have on the planet. It’s outdated, but better than nothing.”

Razili leaned forward. “What did you find?”

“The planet has been untouched by the Alliance for over fifty years. Scozid used it as a testing ground for early technology, which is why Uv’ex thought it might contain what you need.

” He pulled up a holo-display. “The atmosphere is breathable, but thinner than you’re used to.

The gravity is slightly higher than Corix 23. ”

“And the plant life?” Razili peered at the rotating image of the planet, with its swirling purple clouds.

“Abundant and diverse. Many species exhibit the carbon-silicate bonded structures you mentioned.” He showed her several images of peculiar flora—twisted trees with crystalline foliage, spreading vines with segmented, metallic-looking stems. “These should be our primary targets for collection.”

“They’re beautiful,” she murmured, reaching out as if to touch the hologram.

“Beauty and function often coexist,” Calyx said quietly, watching her face.

She glanced at him, catching something in his tone that made her heart skip. Their eyes held for a moment before she looked away.

“I should prepare my equipment,” she said, rising quickly from her seat. “I’ll be ready to gather samples when we land.”

“Of course.” His voice was controlled again, all business. “I’ll continue monitoring our approach and run scans for Scozid presence.”

As Razili retreated to retrieve her case of lab equipment, she paused, then turned back. “Calyx?”

He looked up from the controls. “Yes?”

“Thank you. For trying to make me... comfortable.”

A small smile touched his lips. “You’re welcome, Razili.”

She nodded once and continued to her equipment. Her hands shook slightly as she began organizing her collection of vials and tools. She told herself it was excitement about the mission, about being closer to solving the compound.

It had nothing to do with the way Calyx looked at her, or how his presence seemed to fill the small ship, or how her skin tingled whenever he was near.

Nothing at all.

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For the second cycle in a row, he didn't sleep. Half the time he monitored the ship's systems. The other half he watched Razili sleep.

She moved often, restless even in her dreams, turning from one side to the other. Once, she'd murmured something about "molecular bonds" that had him suppressing a smile. Even in sleep, her mind worked.

Strategies to protect her once they reached Dunia Prime occupied his thoughts.

Now in long range sensor distance, the limited preliminary data suggested Scozid presence in the system—though it seemed light.

Perhaps a patrol. They had this cycle and half of the next before arrival, enough time for an accurate accounting.

Calyx ran his fingers over the controls, initiating a more thorough long-range scan focused on the planetary system. The data would be crucial for planning their approach. If Scozid craft patrolled the orbital paths, they would need to time their arrival precisely, using the moon's shadow as cover.

Once that was complete, they were in range to scan the planet itself, which would take several hours.

If Scozid forces occupied the surface it made the mission exponentially more difficult.

Despite Razili's determination, he wouldn't risk her life.

The compound was vital, but finding an alternative solution would be necessary if Dunia Prime proved too dangerous.

A soft noise from the bunk drew his attention.

Razili had kicked off the blanket, her sleep clothes twisted around her body.

He'd set the fighter's temperature regulation for himself, and Trelxak ran several degrees hotter than most humans.

He stood quietly, moved to the bunk, and carefully adjusted the cover over her.

She stirred, her eyes fluttering open briefly. "Calyx?"

"Sleep," he murmured. "We have many hours yet before arrival."

"Mmm." Her eyes closed again, but her hand caught his wrist with surprising strength. "You should sleep too."

His nanites sparked at the contact. "I will, soon."

Her grip relaxed as she drifted back into sleep, but the touch lingered on his skin like a burn. He returned to the controls, watching as the scan data trickled in.

Two Scozid vessels in the outer system following a routine patrol pattern. They appeared to be in no hurry, and alone. The Scozid homeworld was still cycles away, and this system's other planets were of no interest to them.

He watched as the scan of the planet itself began.

There were automated defense systems on the planet's northern continent, still active

but showing signs of age and neglect. The southern hemisphere appeared abandoned, with dense vegetation reclaiming what had once been Scozid testing grounds.

It was promising. They could approach from behind the largest moon, use the cloaking technology for the descent, and land in a clearing in the southern region, near where sensors indicated Razili might find what she needed.

The wait for complete scan results was tedious, but necessary. He occupied himself by reviewing the limited scientific data on the planet's flora, comparing it with the compound specifications Razili shared.

“Have you slept at all?”

He turned to find her standing behind his chair, hair disheveled, eyes sharp with concern. He hadn't heard her approach—a sign of being more tired than he'd thought.

“You should be resting.” He dodged her question.

She moved to stand beside him, close enough that he could feel the heat of her body. “I've slept. You didn't answer my question.”

“I have not slept,” he admitted. “But I will once the scans are complete.”

She frowned, studying the displays. “What are we looking at?”

“Preliminary data on Dunia Prime.” He waved at the highlighted areas. “Two Scozid ships in the system, but they appear to be on standard patrol rotation. The northern continent shows active but old defense systems, and the southern hemisphere looks unprotected.”

She leaned closer, her shoulder brushing his as she pointed at a densely vegetated

region. “What’s that?”

“A landing zone. Dense foliage, multiple life forms exhibiting the carbon-silicate structures you described.”

Her eyes lit up. “Perfect. When do we arrive?”

“Another cycle and a half. We’ll have complete scan data in approximately four hours.”

She nodded, then fixed him with a determined look. “Good. That gives you four hours to sleep.”

He blinked, unprepared for her firmness. “I need to monitor—”

“The scans are automated, and you’ve set proximity alerts.” She crossed her arms. “You said yourself we won’t have complete data for four hours. Even Trelxak need rest, Calyx.”

Her concern warmed something in him, even as her proximity made his nanites restless. “Razili—”

“Don’t ‘Razili’ me. If you’re exhausted when we reach the planet, you’ll be compromised.” Her expression softened slightly. “I need you at your best.”

She needed him. Those words hit hard.

He knew when he was defeated. “Two hours,” he conceded.

“Four,” she countered.

“Three,” he offered, “and I’ll sleep immediately.”

She nodded, satisfaction clear in her expression. “Deal.”

Calyx hesitated, then rose from his seat. As he moved past her toward the bunk, he caught a hint of her scent—lab chemicals, sleep-warmth, and something uniquely her. His nanites surged in response.

He lay on the bunk, hyperaware of her presence just meters away. Her scent lingered on the blankets, making it both a comfort and a torment. He closed his eyes, certain sleep would elude him.

Instead, exhaustion claimed him within minutes.

When he woke, the chronometer showed exactly three hours had passed. He sat up, immediately alert, scanning for Razili.

She sat at the controls, legs tucked beneath her, studying the data with such intense focus that she hadn’t noticed he was awake.

A strand of hair had escaped her braid, falling across her cheek.

Her finger traced patterns on the display as she muttered to herself, working through some problem in her methodical way.

The sight struck him with unexpected force. Not just desire—though that was constant—but something deeper. Admiration. Respect. A certainty that this brilliant woman was worth every moment of rhun discomfort.

“Has anything changed?” he asked.

She startled slightly, then turned. “You’re awake.” She gestured to the displays. “The scan data is almost complete. The southern hemisphere looks clear, but there’s increased activity from one of the Scozid vessels.”

He joined her at the controls, careful to maintain distance. “Show me.”

She pulled up the relevant data. “It’s changed course twice in the last hour. The patrol pattern seems less predictable now.”

Calyx frowned, studying the new trajectory. “They may have detected an anomaly. Not us specifically, but something has their attention.”

“Will it affect our approach?”

“Possibly.” He ran calculations, adjusting their planned route. “We’ll need to modify our entry vector and potentially time our approach differently.”

She watched him work; her gaze thoughtful. “Did the sleep help?”

“Yes.” He hesitated, then added, “Thank you for insisting.”

A small smile curved her lips. “I can be stubborn when necessary.”

“I’ve noticed.” He returned her smile briefly before refocusing on the problem. “We’ll need to be extremely precise with our timing now. The window for safe approach has narrowed.”

Razili nodded, her expression growing serious. “Will it work?”

“Yes,” he said with certainty. “But we’ll need to work together.”

“We can do that.” The confidence in her voice matched his own. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

He explained the modified approach plan, showing her what systems she would monitor while he piloted. She moved closer to see the display better, and his breath caught and held her scent. Their eyes met and she swayed toward him. He wanted her to kiss him. He wanted her to initiate contact.

Instead, she blinked and jumped away.

Razili studied the navigational charts and sensor data—from several feet away—as Calyx finished explaining their approach strategy.

She tried to focus, but all she could see was the way his muscles rippled under his shirt.

The subtle way the thin lines of his exterior circuitry reflected the light.

The butterflies that erupted in her belly every time she got too near.

She wanted to kiss him. She wanted him to kiss her.

She wanted more than just a kiss.

But she still wasn't ready to give him her heart. It was laughable, really. Did he think she could will herself to fall in love with him?

With another cycle and a half before they began their approach, the cramped quarters of the fighter seemed to shrink.

He finished laying out the plan, and what part he'd need her to play. It took a second

for her to realize he was done talking.

“Razili?”

She startled and nodded, hoping it was an appropriate response.

“So we have about a day left,” she said, glancing at the chronometer.

“Just sitting here watching the sensors is like watching milk boil, as my grandmother would say. Painfully slow and likely to scald you if you look away at the wrong moment.”

Calyx tilted his head. “I have witnessed milk boiling. The analogy is imprecise. Milk reaches boiling point in approximately—”

“It’s an expression,” she cut in, fighting a smile. “It means this is boring and we need to do something before I count the rivets in the ceiling panels.”

“There are four hundred and seventy-three visible rivets in this cabin.”

She stared at him. “Did you actually count them?”

“No. My nanites did.”

“Of course they did.” She rolled her eyes. “Well, before your nanites catalog the atomic structure of the floor plating, have you ever played Pallanguzhi?”

“I have not.”

“It’s a game my grandmother taught me. Usually played with seeds and a wooden board with cups, but...”—she looked around the cabin, then brightened—“we could

improvise.”

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His expression remained neutral. “You wish to play a game during a high-risk mission?”

“No, I wish to maintain my sanity during the twenty-plus hours we have left trapped in this metal box together.” She stood and began rummaging through the supply cabinets. “Besides, I’m curious if those fancy nanites of yours can help you beat me at a game I’ve played since I was five.”

That got his attention. “A competition, then.”

“Exactly. A friendly competition gives us something to do besides watching you calculate and recalculate our approach vector.” She triumphantly held up a container of nutrition pills. “These will work for pieces.”

Calyx watched her as she arranged small cups in two rows of seven on the chart table.

“The rules are simple.” She put six capsules in each cup except the end ones.

“We take turns picking up all the pieces from one of our cups and distributing them one by one counterclockwise. If your last piece lands in a cup with pieces in it, you pick those up and continue. Your turn ends when your last piece falls into an empty cup.”

He studied her improvised game board with intense focus. “What is the objective?”

“To crush your opponent mercilessly and dance on the ashes of their defeat,” she said solemnly.

His head snapped up, alarm briefly crossing his features.

She burst out laughing. “I’m kidding. The goal is to collect the most pieces by the end.”

He returned her grin. “Your humor is strange.”

She laughed and then demonstrated a few moves. “My grandmother was unbeatable. She claimed it was because she could see the future, but I think she just counted faster than I could.”

Calyx settled across from her, his massive frame somehow fitting into the small space without making her feel crowded. “I accept your challenge.”

“Prepare to be humbled, warrior,” she said with mock seriousness. “My five-year-old self will be avenged for all those losses to Nani.”

They began to play. Razili noticed how delicate he was with the small capsules, as if afraid he might crush them. For someone trained for combat, he had gentle hands.

“Did you always want to be a warrior?”

He contemplated his move. “All Ka’atari receive warrior training. Some choose another path after the initial years,” he replied, studying the board. “As a Trelxak, I am specially suited for calculating outcomes to aid strategy.”

“So no childhood dreams of becoming a dancer or chef or professional Pallanguzhi player?”

His brow furrowed slightly. “No.”

“That was another joke,” she clarified, then softened her tone. “I just meant, did you ever wish for something different?”

He made his move, capturing several of her pieces with a precision that suggested his nanites were indeed calculating optimal strategies. “I never contemplated a different choice. I excel in my role. I find satisfaction in it.”

“What about when you retire from the teams? Will you be an elder warrior?”

He caught her eyes. “I will be whatever allows me to protect those who matter.”

The silence that followed was heavy with implication.

“Wow,” she muttered. “Way to make my question about career choices super intense.”

His lips twitched. “Was that inappropriate?”

“No, just...”—she waved vaguely at the air between them—“a lot.”

“Ah.” He returned his attention to the board. “Your move.”

She stared at the game, trying to concentrate, but her mind kept circling back to his words. He spoke of choice and protection in a way that seemed... deeply personal. Did she matter to him? Did she want to matter to him?

“You’re distracted,” he observed. “Your heart rate has elevated by seven percent.”

“Has anyone ever told you that announcing people’s bodily functions is deeply weird?” She made her move with little thought. “Next, you’ll be telling me my digestive system is making interesting noises.”

“It is, actually. You should eat soon.”

She groaned and dropped her head into her hands. “This is what I get for being stuck in a ship with a walking scanner.”

“Would you prefer I didn’t notice?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t announce it like a ship-wide bulletin.” She looked up to find him watching her with what might have been amusement. “What?”

“You are... unexpected, Razili.”

“Because I don’t enjoy having my stomach gurgles narrated?”

“Because most people are uncomfortable around Trelxak. You were too, initially. But now you joke with me.”

She hadn’t thought of it that way. “I guess I got used to you.”

“Like one gets used to a persistent virus?” There was definitely humor in his voice now.

She gaped at him. “Did you just make a joke?”

“I attempted to.” He captured more of her pieces, his movements precise. “Was it successful?”

“Surprisingly, yes.” She laughed. “There might be hope for you yet.”

Razili relaxed. The game provided structure, a safe framework for interaction that had nothing to do with rhun or the mission or expectations.

When Calyx eventually won—decisively—she groaned dramatically. “Your nanites cheated.”

“They simply calculated probability outcomes,” he said, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. “As did your grandmother, I suspect.”

“Are you comparing what would be a multi-million-credit, military-grade enhancement system if it weren't baked into your biology to my seventy-five-year-old grandmother?”

“Yes. I believe she would be a formidable opponent.”

That startled another laugh out of her. “She would like you.” Razili began resetting the cups. “Best two out of three?”

He nodded, then added, “While we play, perhaps you could explain why humans find bodily functions—and the body itself—embarrassing.”

“Oh stars,” she muttered. “This is going to be an endless cycle if I’m explaining human embarrassment and modesty.” She tilted her head at him. “We’ve been working near each other for months, and I haven’t asked you a single personal question.”

She watched as he captured her pieces. “You were focused on your work. That focus is admirable.”

“It’s also narrow-minded.” She frowned at the board, seeing that she was losing badly, again. “I never thought about who you were beyond the warrior who kept interrupting me.”

A hint of a smile touched his lips. “And now?”

“Now I’m wondering what else I’ve missed.” She made another move, distributing her pieces carefully. “What do you do when you’re not on duty? Do you have hobbies? Friends? Favorite foods?”

He seemed to consider her questions carefully. “I train. I study tactical histories. I spend time with the other Ka’atari warriors.” He paused. “I’m not sure they qualify as hobbies.” He inhaled. “I watch you.”

Heat flooded her. “Because of rhun ?”

“Mostly.”

“What about before rhun ? What did you do then?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “Much the same, though with less distraction.”

“I’m a distraction?” The question slipped out.

“The most compelling one I’ve ever encountered.” His voice was low, matter-of-fact, but the words fluttered through her stomach.

She focused on the game, suddenly aware of how close they were sitting, how the small space created an intimacy that was uncomfortable and... not entirely unwelcome.

“Your move,” she said, her voice slightly higher than usual.

He studied the board, then made a surprisingly sophisticated play that captured nearly half her remaining pieces. “I believe I’m winning. Again.”

“You’re a quick study.” She grinned despite herself.

Of course, Calyx won again. She laughed and reset the cups for a third round.

“Tell me about Ka’atari cuisine. I’ve been eating in the lab so much, I’ve barely tried any of your traditional foods.”

“I would be pleased to,” he said.

As he talked about kilfet and glofilt and various other foods, his voice was a caress. Their conversation flowed and she wondered if loving him would be so hard.

“Razili...” Calyx shook her shoulder as gently as possible. They had laughed and talked for hours before she yawned so big her jaw popped. He’d made her climb into the bunk. She’d made him keep talking until she drifted off. He thought maybe his plan to woo her was working.

But he’d need to put that aside for now. They’d entered Dunia Prime’s system and were lining up for their approach. He needed her to monitor the Scozid ships while he piloted them to the surface.

She blinked and pushed up on one arm, using her other hand to push her braid behind her shoulder. “What time is it?”

“We’re entering Dunia Prime’s system.”

She yelped. “Stars! Why didn’t you wake me earlier?” She scrambled from the bunk, nearly falling on her face in the process.

He caught her and set her on her feet. “You needed the sleep. I woke you when it was necessary.”

“Okay, okay. Let me change and brush my teeth.”

“We have some time.” He smiled as she ran into the refresher cubicle. “Choose a sturdy outfit that covers your skin. We don’t know how we will react to the vegetation—or how it will react to us.”

“Right. Got it.”

He returned to the captain’s chair and glanced at the sensors. The Scozid patrol was still on course, moving away from them. If their luck held, they would slip behind them to the planet’s surface.

He had contingency plans but hoped not to need them.

Razili sat in the copilot’s chair and his breath left his body. She was magnificent. Wrapped head to toe in a formfitting garment that left little to the imagination. She’d coiled her braid into a bun. Her face was serious when she looked at him.

“What?” She smoothed her hair and glanced down at her body.

He managed to croak out, “Nothing.”

“Calyx, you’re looking at me like I grew another head. Just tell me.”

“You are so beautiful. I want to lick every inch of you until you cry my name. I want to suck your clit until you scream.”

He watched the blush rise on her cheeks. She squirmed in the seat. Her fingers fluttered on her thighs.

“Um... not quite sure what to do with that.”

He shook his head and ground his teeth together before he said more inappropriate

things. Like that his cock wept at the sight of her.

He forcibly turned his attention to the viewscreen. “Be sure to tell me if either of the Scozid ships deviate from their path.”

“I will.”

He heard her swallow and clocked her heartbeat as well above normal.

“I think you’re hot, too.”

He swung his head to look at her, but she focused on the display that showed the two Scozid vessels. His nanites rioted in his veins. My rhun pounded through the back of his mind on repeat. His arms moved to yank her into his lap and kiss her senseless.

He yanked them back when her communicator started screeching.

She fumbled it as she pulled it from her collection bag. “Cora?”

She put the tablet on the console where he could also see the other human. Her expression was thunderous, the big preuvret she’d adopted pacing behind her, swishing its tail.

“What in all the stars, Razili?” She yelled.

Calyx winced and instructed his nanites to dull his hearing.

“Rahel has lost his ever-loving mind and wants Kiran to send a fleet of warships after you! Where are you? What do you think you’re doing?” She pointed at Calyx, “and why the fuck is he with you?!”

Razili rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Cora, tell Rahel and Kiran there’s no need to send anyone after us.

We’re going to Dunia Prime. We’re fine. We’ll be in and out in no time.

It’s the only place that might have the compound I need to finish synthesizing the nullifier so he,”—she waved in Calyx’s direction—“can put it into whatever distribution system he’s engineering and all of us can kick Scozid ass.”

Cora deflated. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Razili smiled at her friend. “There are only two Scozid ships in the system and they’re on the other side in a standard patrol pattern. We’ll be in and out before they know we’re here.”

“You better be,” Cora grumbled as she turned to the preuvret. “Okay Torvid. Let’s go threaten to bite heads if they don’t stop yelling at each other.” To Razili, she said, “I don’t know how long I can hold off the cavalry.”

“Just give me as much time as you can, and a head’s up if they start to mobilize before we’re back.”

“Okay. Be careful, Razili. And Calyx?”

He gave the tablet his attention.

“If anything happens to her, Torvid will eat you.”

He nodded. “Understood.” He didn’t relish the idea of being eaten by a preuvret, but the threat was unnecessary. She was his rhun. He would give his life for hers.

The screen went black and silence fell in the cockpit.

Razili mumbled, “I’m sorry. We’ll be in trouble when we get back.”

“Not if you get what you need and we return in one piece.”

She straightened her spine. “Right. And we will. We have to.”

He saw the weight she carried in the tense line of her muscles, the stiffness of her jaw, and the slight tremble in her fingers.

“Our survival does not ride on you alone.”

“I know. You’re the survival dude. I’m the chemist.” She gave him a wobbly smile.

“You misunderstand. The survival of the Denchui Alliance does not depend on you completing the formula.”

She shook her head. “Yes, it does. Without the compound, we have no defense against their technology.”

“Perhaps, but we will find another way. We will keep Earth and the other allied planets safe.”

He saw the tears she blinked away. “I don’t want you to have to. The solution is just out of reach, but I know I can grasp it. I just need something from that damn planet.”

“And you will get it.”

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His confidence buoyed her own.

Then she looked at the display. “Calyx, one of the Scozid ships has changed course.”

His fingers flew over the controls. “What is their new trajectory?”

She swallowed. “They’re coming right at us.”

“What is the intersect point?”

She rattled off the coordinates helpfully provided by the ship’s computer as Calyx cursed.

“Strap in. We’re going to be doing evasive maneuvers.”

She pulled the straps over her shoulders and around her waist. The buckle snapped and instantly she felt trapped. Her shoulders tugged against the restraints with every breath she took.

“It’s okay, Razili. We’re not in trouble yet. The Scozid ship is larger and slower than my fighter, and I planned for this.”

Of course he did. “What’s... um... what’s the plan?” If he kept talking, she might calm down.

“Dunia Prime has several moons. We’re changing course and will tuck behind the one closest to the surface where I’ll engage the cloaking system. Then we’ll land

without detection.”

“Okay,” she nodded and willed her voice to come out stronger, “okay, that sounds like a good plan.”

The look he gave her was one of pure confusion. “Of course it’s a good plan.”

She laughed. Trelxak were nothing if not cocky about their strategic abilities. At times, it was annoying, but right now it was a very good thing.

She was pushed back into her seat as he fired the thrusters and maneuvered them around the moon.

“You know,” she said with a shaky laugh, “I didn’t think I was afraid of anything until I met you.”

He smirked. “You mean your life was boring.”

She laughed and then admitted, “Yes.”

They fell silent as he swung the fighter into position behind the moon.

“Tell me when they reach the rim of the planetary system.”

She glued her eyes to the display, watching the sleek Scozid vessel inch closer to them. A flash of red made her jump. “They’re at the edge of the system.”

A shiver went up her spine as Calyx engaged the cloaking system.

It hummed to life, enveloping the fighter in a shield of invisibility.

“Are we hidden?” Razili whispered, though she knew the Scozid couldn’t hear them.

“Completely,” Calyx replied, his voice steady and reassuring. “Their scanners can’t detect us now.”

On the display, the Scozid ship continued its sweep of the area, moving in a methodical grid pattern that would eventually bring it close to their position.

“They’re searching for us,” she observed.

Calyx nodded. “Standard search protocol. They know something is here somewhere, but I don’t think they know it’s an Alliance vessel.” His hands moved confidently over the controls, making minor adjustments to their position. “But they won’t find us.”

Razili watched as he guided the fighter into the shadow of the moon, using its mass to further shield them from detection. His movements were precise, economical.

The Scozid ship moved closer to the moon, and Razili felt her heart rate spike.

“They’re going to circle the moon, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Calyx said, his eyes never leaving the display. “But we won’t be here when they do.”

When the Scozid were on the opposite side of the moon, he fired the thrusters again, just enough to ease them away from the moon’s shadow. The fighter drifted silently, riding the gravitational currents.

“What are you doing?” Razili gripped the edges of her seat.

“Using their search pattern against them,” he explained. “They expect us to hide. So we’ll drift instead, right through the gaps in their search grid.”

She watched in amazement as the Scozid ship completed its scan of the moon and moved on, passing within kilometers of their position but never detecting them.

“That was scary. They got so close.”

He looked at her, his expression dead serious. “I will never allow you to be harmed.”

That made her pants area tingle. Again. If he didn’t stop saying things like that, she’d need to change her underwear when they landed. And this jumpsuit wasn’t easy to get in and out of.

He turned them toward Dunia Prime, keeping the fighter’s speed low to maintain the cloaking field’s integrity.

“How long until we reach the surface?” she asked.

“We’ll go slow to not regain their notice. About an hour.”

Razili nodded and slowly released her death grip on the seat.

She felt safe with Calyx. She couldn’t remember the last time she truly felt safe. Even on Earth, before she’d joined the Shangris crew, she’d had a level of awareness. The feeling she should always be looking behind her. But with him, she could relax. He would watch her back.

She wanted to have sex with him. Not just to ease his rhun , but because she liked him. She wasn’t in love with him, but the idea that she could be was growing in the back of her mind.

She should be thinking about gathering samples, vetting them for viability and then collecting enough to ensure she could finish synthesizing the compound. Instead, her mind swirled with thoughts of Calyx.

His voice startled her when he spoke again. “We’re approaching the planet.”

Dunia Prime filled the viewscreen, swirled with white clouds and dotted with small landmasses.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

“And more dangerous than we thought,” Calyx replied. “The Scozid outposts in the northern hemisphere appear active, though no less in disrepair.”

“But we’d already planned to land in the south, right?”

He nodded. “We’ll land approximately twelve kilometers from our potential sample site, in a dense area that should conceal the ship.”

The descent was smooth until they hit the atmosphere. Then turbulence rattled the small fighter, and Razili white-knuckled the edges of her seat again.

“Normal atmospheric interference,” Calyx reassured her, his hands steady on the controls. “The cloaking system is still functioning, but it’ll run out soon. We need to land before that happens.”

She tried to nod, but another jolt made her teeth clack together. “Does it always shake this much?”

“No,” he admitted. “This planet has unusually strong ionic disturbances in its upper atmosphere that weren’t mentioned in any of the available knowledge. But that

benefits us—the natural interference provides additional security against detection.”

Calyx guided them through the worst of it like he was on a Sunday drive. Through gaps in the purple clouds, she could see vast stretches of dense, dark green forest.

“Initiating landing sequence,” he announced, toggling several switches. “Prepare for touchdown.”

The fighter descended through the cloud layer. Below them stretched a sea of emerald treetops, unbroken except for occasional clearings and a winding bright purple river that cut through the wilderness.

“It’s gorgeous,” she breathed.

“And isolated,” Calyx added. “Perfect for our purposes.”

He brought the ship down in a small clearing barely large enough to fit the fighter. Tree branches scraped against the hull as they settled, and then the engines powered down, leaving them in near silence broken only by the soft pings of cooling metal.

“We’ve arrived,” he said, unbuckling his harness.

Excitement and nervousness poured through Razili. Now that they were here, the enormity of what they were doing hit her. Unauthorized landing on a restricted planet. Potential confrontation with the Scozid. The pressure of finding the one thing she needed to complete the compound.

“Second thoughts?” Calyx asked, reading her hesitation.

She squared her shoulders. “No. I came here to find the thing I need, and I’m going to get it.”

He offered her the ghost of a smile. “Good. Because I didn’t fly through a Scozid patrol and atmospheric turbulence just to turn around.”

She laughed. “No, I suppose you didn’t.” She unclipped her harness and stood. “What’s our plan now?”

“We gather our equipment, secure the ship, and begin our trek to the sample area.” He turned to a storage compartment and began removing items. She let the sight of his tight ass distract her for a moment before she mentally slapped her cheeks and grabbed her collection bag, stuffing her tablet inside.

“Are we there yet?”

She asked the same question every few minutes. After the fourth time, Calyx figured out she wasn’t asking for their exact position, just assurances that she was doing good and they’d get there soon.

“Almost. Would you like to rest?”

“No,” she grumbled, “I just want to get there.”

Strands of hair had escaped her tight bun and waved around her face. At least the atmosphere was breathable and the surface cool. She couldn’t imagine how miserable she’d be if they’d had to wear air suppliers or if it was oppressively warm.

“Only another few minutes and we’ll reach the clearing.”

“Thank stars.”

When he looked back to check on her, she hiked her bag on her shoulder and gave him a thumbs up and a crooked grin. “Doing great boss!”

His head tilted and she knew he was trying to figure out if she was being genuine or sarcastic. She'd laugh at him, but it would take too much energy.

So far, they hadn't encountered any fauna, just endless stretches of flora.

She'd taken samples of the different types they'd seen, but since the original compound came from the gruthji, she suspected her solution would be found in the fauna.

There had to be animals on the planet. She couldn't imagine the Scozid eliminating them.

Experimenting on them, yes. But you can't experiment without subjects.

Calyx swiped at a branch with his zikal. The long, thin blade cleared their path with ease. His gra?j was strapped to his back, and she hoped they wouldn't need to use the gun.

He lifted the blade to strike at another obstacle when a shadow separated from a nearby tree and flowed over them. She spun, tracking the movement, but she couldn't see anything. There was a shadow, which meant something cast it.

Calyx had also stilled, tracking its movement.

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She watched the shadow stop a few meters behind her, seeing it clearly in the path he'd created. It then turned and before he could even swing his g ra?j into position, it had swooped so low Razili felt her hair wave in its wake.

Her eyes went wide and she froze. "Can you see it? What is it?"

"I don't think it's a threat. I think it's a native animal that's curious about us." He still held the gun ready in front of him.

The shadow buzzed them twice more. On the third pass, she called out softly, "Hello. We won't hurt you." She held her hands out, palm up. The shadow stopped on a nearby branch and made a chittering noise. "Yes," she responded as if she understood it. "It's okay."

The shadow shimmered and fell away, revealing a large avian animal.

"Oh my stars, aren't you gorgeous?" Its head and wings reminded her of a fruit bat, but its breast was feathered, and its legs sported talons like a raptor.

Its black surface flashed iridescent shimmers as it shifted.

"Calyx, have you ever seen anything like it?" She was mesmerized by the creature in front of her.

"It appears to be a cross between an animal called rhurzi and another called shosm . Both found on a planet in a system not far from here."

She gasped. “They did this, didn’t they?” Anger rose, swift and hot. “They engineered it.”

“It seems likely.”

She looked at him; her outrage clear in every muscle of her body.

The manipulation it would take to turn two creatures into a new species would be great.

The two original fauna might not naturally interbreed.

She knew from past research the Scozid favored forced breeding and cruel experiments.

She couldn’t stop thoughts about the ancestors of this beautiful creature being tortured from flooding her mind. “I hate them. They are evil.”

“They have affected most forms of life in the galaxy, true. Some for the worse, some for the better.” He waved his hand at the creature on the branch. “Without them, this creature wouldn’t exist.”

“They play at being gods. In my experience, that is never a good thing.”

The creature chortled and hopped along the branch as they continued on. When it reached the end, it took flight, circling over their heads. On its third pass, it landed on Razili’s shoulder.

She stopped, half afraid and half honored. It cooed and rubbed its head along her cheek in a feline way. She reached up to stroke between its ears and it sighed with a warbling purr.

Calyx grinned at her. “I think it’s adopted you.”

She grinned back. “Then I will name it Irul.”

Calyx tilted his head at her.

When she stopped petting it, it headbutted her for more. She chuckled. “It means darkness in my language.”

“A fitting name for it, then.”

“A bit ironic, I guess, considering its personality seems to be full of light. If nothing else, meeting Irul makes this trip worthwhile.”

They reached the edge of the clearing and Calyx stopped short. He heard Razili gasp behind him. What they’d seen from space as a lush green area teeming with plant life was a barren expanse of green soil.

“What happened here?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

She stepped to walk around him and he put his arm out to stop her. Irul shook on her shoulder, and he nodded to the avian. “Something isn’t right here. We should head back to the ship and find another area.”

She stroked her hand down the creature’s back and nodded. “I’ll just take a sample of the soil, then we can go. I want to know why we saw this area as thriving.”

He acquiesced, but stayed in front of her as she bent to take a sample, noting she donned gloves and was careful as she collected a small bit of soil in a container.

She shouldered her pack with a weary sigh, and he worked to keep a smile off his face. He knew she wasn't looking forward to the walk back. Especially not so soon after they arrived.

The complaints he expected never came, though. She trudged in silence. That was okay. Half his mind focused on their surroundings, scanning for any hint of danger. The other half was lost in thoughts of her.

They reached the fighter after dark. He expected Irul to fly off to its own home... nest... burrow, but it stayed on her shoulder even as she sank on the bunk. It moved to her side only when she flopped backwards.

"I can't believe the whole day was a bust."

"I wouldn't say that. We now know one area not to look."

She rolled her head to the side, her eyes slits as she stared at him. He couldn't help but chuckle.

"How can you make jokes? The whole Denchui Alliance depends on us finding the solution to scaling the tech neutralizing compound!"

"As I said before, if you can't make it work, we will find another way to defeat the Scozid. They will not win, and the burden isn't yours alone to carry."

She groaned and threw her forearm over her eyes.

He left her to rest and initiated a scan of the surrounding area, hoping to find another spot likely to hold what she needed.

As he worked at the controls, Irul flew to perch on the back of the co-pilot's chair.

Even in the low lighting from the console, it was beautiful.

Its head turned to one side, then the other, sending its ears into a dramatic flop.

Razili was right. Its personality was far from dark, but its ability to cloak was impressive.

“I don’t suppose you can show us where to find an area rich in diverse plant life?”

It chittered and cooed, but if it were trying to communicate Calyx didn’t understand.

The scans revealed kilometers of dense forest with no other clearings.

Razili set her microscope on the small table and arranged her supplies before studying the soil.

Her brows crinkled as she worked. He wanted to run his fingertip over her forehead, soothe her tension with his touch.

His cock roared to life, his nanites screaming rhun over and over.

He closed his eyes and inhaled several times.

He managed some semblance of control, but it was weak.

He wasn’t sure how much longer he could wait before he gave in and took her, however she would have him.

He jerked to attention when she spoke.

“It’s dead. Like the soil was sterilized. Not even a hint of bacteria. The chemical

compounds are all over the place. They make no sense.”

“This planet was one big experiment for them. It stands to reason that some of them would fail.”

She shook her head. “This doesn’t seem like a failed experiment. It’s too... deliberate to be an accident. It’s like they intentionally removed every organic component on a microscopic level.”

Without looking away from the eyepieces, she patted the table beside her. Her hand grew close to the open collection container. Before Calyx could warn her, Irul was in the air, grabbing her wrist with his talons and pulling her arm away.

She startled before realizing what must have happened. “It’s that bad?”

Irul chittered at her.

She hummed before pulling on a pair of gloves and carefully carrying the container down the ramp. She turned her back to the wind and Calyx rushed to her side, anticipating what she’d do next. She sprinkled a few grains on a nearby plant.

Instantly, the plant withered, died, and turned to dust, the ground beneath it turning the same shade of green as what was held in the container.

“Fuck. That is not good.” She looked at him with horror in her eyes. “They’ve created a substance that not only kills everything organic, it literally turns it to dust.”

Calyx squatted next to the now barren patch of soil. “They must have a way to neutralize it. Otherwise, this entire planet would be dead.”

“No,” Razili shook her head. “It doesn’t spread, see? Only where the soil touched

was affected.” She gasped and ran back inside, reappearing a moment later. She uncorked a small vial of the viscous liquid that had prompted this mission and poured it on the now dead spot.

They both stumbled back as it sprang to life, the plant they’d watch wither to dust sprouting from the ground. Razili looked at him, her face determined.

“We have to find what I need to synthesize this on a larger scale.”

He frowned and admitted she was right. If they were manufacturing this compound on a large scale to weaponize it, and her substance neutralized it as well as rendering Scozid tech inert... It seemed this material was more than just the best answer to the Scozid problem—it might be the only one.

They hadn’t slept. Razili sat in the co-pilot’s chair with Calyx behind her.

They each faced different halves of the forward screen, both of them running searches.

She’d narrowed the parameters after testing a few nearby plants, including the one brought back to life.

She had a good idea what she was looking for. The problem was finding it.

Several hours ago she’d tested Irul’s skin and saliva on a whim.

It was clear that what she needed wouldn’t be found in the fauna.

She wasn’t sure how the gruthji developed an antidote to Scozid tech, but this planet’s fauna had wildly different chemical compositions.

Flora would be the key to synthesize it on a grander scale.

She stroked Irul's belly as she scanned the monitors. Her testing revealed it to be female, and she had flopped onto her back in Razili's lap and chattered for belly rubs. Her hand absentmindedly running over the soft feathers soothed her.

She was fast becoming attached to Irul. She refused to think about leaving her behind when they left. She knew it was best, but she didn't want to think about that moment until it happened.

The one thing she couldn't ignore was the warrior behind her. His presence filled the small ship and seemed to grow larger with each passing moment. The memory of that kiss flooded her with heat. But there was more than physical attraction. She was falling in love with him.

She saw how his fists clenched every so often, how he inhaled deep and exhaled slow before shaking out his hands. She knew he was struggling with rhun , but he didn't complain and he didn't push.

She stretched her neck and reached her arms high above her head. Irul grouched about being displaced, but she needed to move. She was getting stiff from sitting in one position too long.

She paced the length of the fighter. On her third lap, Calyx turned and raised a brow at her.

"I'm going stir crazy." She leaned over the console to look at yet another view of dense forest, filled with the same trees and bushes she'd already tested.

She turned and rested her hands behind her, well aware of how it pushed her chest toward a now gawking Calyx.

“These scans don’t need to be monitored, but I need to be distracted. ”

His eyes flicked to hers before they scanned her from head to toe. “What sort of distraction do you have in mind?”

She steeled her spine and gathered her courage. “Sex. Calyx, I want to have sex with you.”

He jumped against the far wall of the ship like she brandished a flame thrower. “Have you,” he swallowed, “are you—”

She cut him off. “Developing feelings for you? Yes, I believe I am. I can’t say I love you, yet, but I can say I care for you, and right now that has to be enough because if you don’t give in, neither one of us will be able to focus.”

She watched his lips twitch as he contained a smile. Then it was her turn to back away as he prowled toward her with predatory grace.

“Are you losing focus, Razili?”

“Yes. Watching you struggle has been maddening.”

“And you want me, to distract you, with my body?”

“Y... yes.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m sure.”

“You know,” he mused, as they engaged in a snail speed chase around the ship, “the

other humans said you were shy. I wonder why?"

"No idea," she breathed as she felt the hard bulkhead stop her progress.

His arms raised, hands landing on either side of her head, caging her in. Heat pooled low in her belly. He leaned until their lips were a hair's breadth apart and stared into her eyes. "I'm glad you aren't shy with me, Razili."

Then his lips met hers, and all rational thought fled. The feel of his tongue sliding against hers wrung a moan from her throat.

One of his hands speared into the hair at her nape, the other pressing against her lower back, bringing her flush against his body.

The proof of his arousal pushed hard into her belly.

In the back of her mind it registered how big he was, but that thought was obliterated when he grabbed her thigh and wrapped her leg around his waist, that long length pressing into her exactly where she needed it.

She gasped for air, letting her head fall back as he rocked into her. She'd been a teenager the last time she'd been dry humped and it had felt nowhere near this good. "Oh stars, Calyx, that feels so good."

His hips surged against her, and an orgasm shattered her. She was dazed, wondering how it happened even as he lay her on the bunk and stripped her out of her pants.

He spread her legs and shoved between them. She heard him inhale with a groan.

"Holy shit, give me a minute."

He raised his head and waited until she looked at him. Then he growled, “No,” before he ripped her underwear off and descended into her pussy like a champion diver.

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She was exquisite. The thought repeated itself as he explored her folds with his fingers and tongue. He never would have guessed that under the buttoned-up scientist was a woman who enthusiastically responded to every touch, every lick.

He studied her pants, her moans, her movements, wanting to be an expert in giving her pleasure. He took his time, his control in full force now that he had her beneath him. His hands roamed her body, exploring her soft skin and luscious curves.

She was perfect.

After she came a third time he gave her a brief respite as he kissed his way up her body, shucking his pants along the way. He paused, the head of his cock poised at her entrance, everything in him wanting to surge forward into heaven.

“You’re sure?” His nanites cursed his hesitation, but he held fast.

In response, she grabbed both his ass cheeks and yanked as her hips came up.

His eyes crossed and he swore to the stars that his brain and his nanites stopped working for several moments.

She giggled beneath him; the movement causing her pussy walls to flutter.

“Did I break you?”

He managed a strangled, “Yes,” before his body instinctively took over and he began to move. He tried to hold back, to linger over their first time together, but the need

pent up over the last weeks had other ideas.

“Touch your clit, Razili. I’m not going to last.”

He felt her hand snake between them and lifted more of his weight on his arms to give her access. In moments, her head went back, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Her walls gripped tight as she came, and his orgasm thundered through him, blanking his brain in its intensity.

He had the presence of mind to roll them so he didn’t crush her when he collapsed. He surrendered willingly as the release, coupled with the exhaustion of fighting rhun, took him under.

He woke to the sounds of Razili speaking softly and Irul cooing in response. He sat up and watched as she rubbed her nose along its cheek. Whatever gene evolved in human women that allowed them to see all manner of creatures as friends was beyond him.

She smiled at him. “Good morning.”

He startled. Surely he hadn’t slept a full day?

She laughed. “In a manner of speaking. It’s actually late evening, this planet’s time.”

“You should have woken me.”

“Why? You needed the rest. Besides,”—she waved at the monitors—“nothing new to report. Just the same few plant species over and over again.”

He studied the screens for a moment. “Maybe we’re looking in the wrong place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe instead of looking at the surface, we should focus above... or below it.” He stood and sent the scan in reverse over the previous area. “There,” he pointed to a dark, misshapen oval.

“A cave of some sort?”

“It would make sense. This is near where we first saw Irul, and one animal I believe to be a genetic ancestor, the rhurzi, make their nests underground.”

She nodded. “Let’s hope there is different plant life underground.” She stood and grabbed her pack but he stopped her.

“We’ll go at first light.”

The heavy backpack landed with a thunk . “Right. Okay.”

She looked so crestfallen he couldn’t help but laugh. Before she expressed her outrage, he picked her up and tossed her onto the bunk.

She squealed. “What are you doing?”

“Tiring you enough to sleep.” He gave her a wicked grin and watched as color bloomed in her cheeks.

Then he made her squeal and moan until she was too tired to move.

The brief rest he’d had earlier energized him, so while she slept he studied the presumed cave and readied their supplies. They would dress warmly and pack light. He couldn’t be sure how quickly the cave would narrow.

Once he was satisfied, he sent the sensors north, to the Scozid outpost. Activity suggested it was still a skeleton crew, and they weren't aware of his and Razili's presence.

He wouldn't linger on the surface longer than necessary.

He felt sure they would patrol this sector eventually.

They needed to find what she was looking for before the Scozid caught wind of them—or Kiran sent a search party after them.

Razili woke as purple tinted light filtered through the trees that shielded the fighter from view. They donned their packs and struck out for the cave with little fanfare. He felt a new urgency, and from her demeanor he surmised she did as well.

Irul silently flew beside or above them until they neared the cave entrance. Then he grew more excited, chattering and swooping and randomly disappearing in shadow before emerging on silent wings.

The temperature dropped several degrees as they stepped into the dark interior. Calyx reached in his pack for a light, but stopped when Irul let out a high, clicking whistle. The walls, ceiling and floor of the cave exploded in a myriad of colored lights.

Razili stared in wonder as she spun to take it all in. "It's bioluminescent." She darted from one color to the next, taking small samples of each. "This is more fungi or moss-like than plant, but it seems to have a silicate... skeleton, for lack of a better word. Like a giant diatom."

He nodded like he understood, and his nanites were valiantly trying to keep up with the science but he quieted them. It was enough that she was excited.

Irul disappeared into the depths of the cave before reappearing and flying off again. He repeated the maneuver several times before Razili said, “I think she wants us to follow her.”

Calyx was unsure. If the cave had a sudden drop or chasm, it would be unwise to continue on.

Razili had no such qualms and barreled past him.

“Razili, wait! We need to be cautious.”

She slowed, but didn’t stop. Every time the lights dimmed, Irul would whistle-click and brighten the way ahead. Until, after several minutes of walking deeper into the cave, she let them extinguish completely.

Calyx rooted in his pack for a light, but before he switched it on, Razili laid her hand on his forearm.

She leaned into him and said, “listen,” in barely a whisper.

Then he heard it. The distinct murmur of Scozid conversation.

Her eyes adjusted and Razili could see the faint outline of a curve in the cave that blocked them from view. Together, she and Calyx crept forward. She could see Irul’s shadow pacing them from the corner of her eye.

Calyx pushed her low as they neared the edge and both held their breath as they leaned for a view.

A dozen Scozid were scattered in a large, open cavern, chipping at the walls with lasers and metal tools.

She hadn't seen one since the attack on the Shangris .

Their large bulbous heads and lanky arms atop tentacles truly did give them the appearance of squid.

The cave walls turned bright purple where they struck, the bioluminescent fungi lending them the appearance of bleeding.

Razili covered her mouth to hold in her gasp of shock. Irul's shadow fluttered nearby and anger surged in her chest. She'd never felt a depth of hate so strong. This species took without regard for anything but themselves.

One of the Scozid let out a shout and the others stopped, rushing to its location. A small cavity had been discovered. After what seemed like a debate, one of the Scozid reluctantly sent a tentacle inside. It screamed and pulled back a nub.

The others backed away and another argument ensued. One threw up several tentacles and then left down a passage Razili hadn't noticed. There must be another entrance to the cave.

Calyx tugged on her shoulder, but she shook her head. She wasn't leaving until she saw what they were after.

The Scozid returned with a long metal pole. It shoved the pole into the hole, twisting it until the opening widened enough to fit. A high-pitched squeal caused the Scozid to back away again.

Irul's shadows flickered, and Razili heard a tiny whimper.

Whatever was in that hole was alive .

She turned to Calyx, who shook his head with an expression of sadness.

Her muscles locked. She could not—would not—sit by and watch them torture the creature.

Red haze blanketed her vision and a fury she'd never felt coursed through her veins.

Watching them torture whatever was in that cavity was too much.

It called up all the feelings she'd carefully repressed when hearing tales of the suffering Brak, her friend Anela's rhun, endured at their hands.

Of hearing Torvid, Cora's preuvret whimper and whine in her sleep as she dreamed of what they'd done to her.

Of the countless other horrors she'd learned had been committed by the Scozid.

She yanked Calyx's grajz from its holster before he could stop her.

She stomped into the main cavern and yelled, "Hey!"

All twelve Scozid turned in shock and she opened fire. She heard Calyx cussing behind her, but she never let off the trigger. She swept the rail gun from one side of the cavern to the other. A sick satisfaction bloomed every time one of the Scozid exploded in a rush of goo.

She was dimly aware of Calyx going after a runner, while she focused on the other side of the area. When the gun finally spun down, she thought she must have gotten most of them. Her hands shook and her breath sawed in and out of her lungs.

Calyx reappeared, clearly furious. "That was incredibly stupid, Razili! You could

have been injured, or,” his eyes closed, “or killed.”

“I couldn’t let them.” Her voice cracked on a sob. “They were killing it.”

Tears ran down her face. Her fingers went numb and sent the grajz to the ground with a clang that echoed. Then she was wrapped in Calyx’s arms. She clung to him; her face buried in his chest as the bravery of the moment turned into full body shakes.

His hands moved up and down her back, and he whispered soothing words in her ear. He stopped and pushed her back, but he wasn’t looking at her. He was staring at the cave wall.

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She turned slowly. Irul hovered in front of the opening, cooing softly, her nose half buried in the wall. The cooing became chittering, which became whistling. She turned and flew to perch on her shoulder and she watched, wide-eyed, as several small shadows emerged.

They clung to the cave wall and shook before they crawled in different directions. Five, no, six shadows separated from the mass and one by one, the shadows fell. Baby versions of Irul stared at them with eyes in heads too big for their tiny bodies.

Razili looked on in horror as a seventh stumbled from the opening and fell to the cave floor.

She gently cradled it in her hands, but she knew there was nothing she could do.

A puncture wound marred its small chest, and its head lolled on its neck.

She smoothed a finger over its head and told it nonsense in whispers broken by her sobs.

She knew it died when the rest wailed in unison.

Razili turned to Calyx. "Why? Why would they do this?"

"I don't know. We have to go, Razili. The one I chased seemed to communicate before I dispatched it. They will know we're here."

She nodded and laid the small body gently on the floor.

The other babies returned to their den when what she assumed was a parent swooped into the cave.

She turned to leave, but Irul's screech stopped her.

She was once again hovering near the opening, one leg buried in the cavity.

At first, she thought she might be stuck.

Then she drew her foot out. It was covered in a bright purple substance.

The same color the walls had turned when struck.

She flew to Razili and stuck her foot in her face. She dug out a collection jar and scraped as much of the substance from her talons as she could. He went to the trouble to get it, get her attention, and then shove it in her face. It had to be important.

As soon as she'd stowed the vial in her pack, Calyx grabbed Razili's arm and towed her from the cave. Their exit was much faster than their entrance, but Irul kept up, whistle-clicking as they went to keep the bioluminescence lighting their way.

With each step, his nanites helpfully recalculated their odds of reaching the ship without Scozid intervention. When they reached the cave entrance, he picked her up and sprinted.

He slowed when they reached the edge of the small clearing concealing his fighter. "Stay here."

She nodded and he began a perimeter sweep. He found nothing disturbed. It looked like they'd manage to get off planet with no more trouble.

He was walking up the ship's rear ramp when he heard Razili gasp. He turned around to find his worst nightmare—Razili, being held by a Scozid who had a knife to her throat.

The same knife he'd plunged into the Scozid's body a few moments earlier. How it survived was anyone's guess. Usually, a pierced outer layer made them pop like a balloon. This one was still intact—mostly. There was fluid leaking from the stab wound.

If he kept it busy, maybe it would collapse from loss of fluid. He didn't intend to wait and see. He held both hands up, palms toward the squid as he trudged back down the ramp.

His nanites translated a series of hard knocks . “Under Scozid law, you are both to die. It is forbidden to kill an individual.”

Interesting. He chose not to point out that if it's forbidden to kill, a death sentence shouldn't be allowed. He suspected that applied only to non-Scozid.

“You will come with me now.”

His eyes flicked to Razili's. She was looking from him, down and to her right, and back to him. He glanced at where she was looking and saw her hand nearing the stab wound. He gave her an imperceptible nod.

She grabbed the edge of the wound and yanked with all her strength. A shadow swooped from behind and Irul's sharp talons sank into its flesh.

The Scozid popped, sending a gush of fluid over both Razili and Irul. She gagged. Irul chattered happily.

Calyx grabbed her arm. “Time to go. Now.”

Irul tried to follow them, but Calyx shooed him away. “You need to stay here, where you belong.”

Irul clicked his talons together in Calyx’s face and hissed at him. Calyx shrugged. He didn’t have time to deal with a reluctant pet. “Suit yourself.”

As soon as he and Razili were strapped in, he hit the thrusters. The fighter climbed through the atmosphere, pinning them to their seats. They broke into space and found themselves in the center of a group of Scozid fighters.

“Hold on.”

In the corner of his eye, he saw Razili brace against the back of the co-pilot’s chair and close her eyes.

Irul locked her talons to the back of her chair.

His fighter was smaller and faster than theirs.

He maneuvered it through the crowd, using their targeting systems against them.

As they lined up to take a shot, he would swerve and send their bolts into another of their own ships.

He managed to move them closer to one of Dunia Prime’s moons. After taking out two more Scozid ships, he ducked behind the moon, engaged the cloaking mechanism, pointed the fighter toward Denchui space, and pushed the thrusters to their limit.

He didn't let up until they were well out of sensor range.

"Are we safe?"

He scanned the monitors. The lack of Scozid presence didn't ease his vigilance. "No, but we're out of range and moving fast toward Alliance space."

"Okay." Her voice was small and he could see the guilt she shouldered.

"None of this is your fault."

"If I hadn't attacked them in the cave—"

"Then those babies would all be dead."

"But we could have finished the mission. We wouldn't be running back with our tail between our legs."

"You have all the cave samples to test. Don't give up, yet." He sniffed and smirked at her. "But do go take a shower."

She laughed. "They really do reek, don't they?"

"Their insides do, for certain."

"That's à propos, isn't it? They're evil. It makes sense for their insides to be rotten."

She shuffled into the shower and he turned his attention to the avian perched on the back of her chair. "Go with her. She'll feel better with your presence."

Irul cooed and flew after her. Calyx shook his head. Irul was proving to be just as

protective as Cora's preuvret. She had even attacked the Scozid for her. The human's pets were almost as famous as they were, and now he understood why.

He felt it himself, this overriding need to shelter and protect his rhun .

Razili's tablet chirped, and Calyx swiped his finger over the screen. Cora's face appeared.

"I can't hold him off... oh, Calyx. Where's Razili?"

"In the shower."

"You need to come back. Kiran has called for a search party to go after you. They're preparing to launch."

"We are returning now."

Cora visibly relaxed. Then to someone offscreen, she said, "Go get him." In moments, Kiran's face replaced Cora's.

"What is your position?"

Calyx rattled off the coordinates and their ETA.

"Were you successful?"

"Unsure. Razili has several untested samples. We made a rather hasty retreat."

Cora shoved him out of the way. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine." He smiled. "It was actually her that caused our need to flee. She rather

impressively took out an entire cadre of Scozid.”

“Razili?”

Calyx nodded. “She is quite fierce.”

“But... Razili?”

Kiran eased her aside. “Did you gather any tactical intelligence?”

“A bit, but I’ll need to wait for Razili’s analysis before I can say what it means.

” He glanced toward the back of the fighter.

“I can tell you they’ve developed a substance that removes all organic material from existence.

We watched it literally turn fertile soil with thriving plants into barren earth. ”

“Stars. A substance like that...”

Calyx nodded. “And then I watched Razili’s compound bring it right back to life.”

Kiran closed his jaw and nodded. “I’ll make sure her lab is fully outfitted and waiting for her arrival.”

“She’s not to be disturbed.”

Kiran glanced to the side, where Calyx assumed Cora stood.

“Understood.”

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Razili giggled as Irul shoved into the shower with her, ruffling her feathers as the ions scrubbed them clean. She would give her right arm for a proper bath, in a massive tub filled with hot water, but this would do for now.

Her mood sobered. If one of the samples she'd collected didn't prove fruitful, the Scozid would win the war. The threat of decimating all life on a planet was too great. The Alliance would have to bow.

She stepped out of the small enclosure and into a wall of warm skin. Warm, naked skin. She looked into Calyx's heated eyes with a soft, "Oh."

"This time, it's me who needs distraction."

She smiled and ran a finger down the center of his chest, following one of the silver lines that ran across his skin. "Am I just a distraction?"

"No." He growled and scooped her into his arms. His lips met hers in a fiery kiss that made her instantly wet.

She looped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

He set her on the bunk and then broke away long enough to rumble, "You are my rhun. " Then his mouth returned to her skin, licking and sucking down her neck and across her chest. He pulled one nipple into his mouth while his fingers plucked the other and she moaned at the pleasure spiking through her veins.

He nipped at the side of her breast as his fingers coasted over her stomach and slid

into her folds. He groaned against her skin. “You are so wet for me, Razili. You set fire to my blood.”

He surged up and grabbed her hand, wrapping it around his cock. “Feel how hard you make me? I can barely think. All my focus is on you, and making you feel the same amount of pleasure you give me.”

She squeezed and he moaned, his eyes closed and his teeth gritted. “Make me feel it. Show me.”

Her breath stuck in her throat as he turned her onto her stomach, a hand under her belly lifting her hips. He leaned over her, surrounding her, dominating her, but she didn’t feel caged. She felt protected. Desired.

She felt the blunt head of his cock at her entrance and stiffened.

“Breathe, Razili.”

She did as she was told and willed her lungs to fill slow and smooth.

As she exhaled, he pushed inside in the same slow, smooth manner.

She reveled in the feeling of fullness, her pussy stretching to accommodate him.

The first zings of an orgasm shot across her belly.

She let her forehead fall to the mattress and he shoved impossibly deeper.

“Open your eyes. Look how well you take me.”

She looked and saw his hard length pull from her and slowly return.

It was coated in her juices and with every thrust, more ran down the inside of her thighs.

She watched as his finger trailed up her leg, not to clean her or stop it from hitting the sheet, but to arrive unerringly at her clit and press hard.

She screamed and shattered. Her vision dimmed at the edges, her muscles locked, her pussy spasmed through her release. She sagged as she returned to earth. Then startled as he moved again.

While his cock speared into her, pounding her into the bunk with each thrust, his fingers worked wicked magic on her sensitive bundle of nerves. She lost count of how many times she came. Every time he slowed, it was only to let her recover before he started again.

When he finally came, her muscles were spent.

Her clit throbbed from overuse and she knew she'd be sore.

But there was a grin on her face she couldn't shake.

He had certainly made her feel. She knew, without a doubt, that he loved her.

He would stand beside her, support her, and protect her for the rest of his life.

Was that what love was? Support and protection and sex? She was out of her depth. She'd never had a serious relationship.

She cared for him, but was that the extent of the feeling she wanted for herself? Was she just a cold and calculating scientist who couldn't feel a fairytale depth of love?

She shook her head and mentally chided herself. There were bigger problems than her love life. And she could do far worse than Calyx.

Alarms blared throughout the cabin and they both leaped from the bunk, pulling on whatever clothes they found nearby. Calyx made it to the controls first.

“What is it?”

“Scozid.” He glanced at her over his shoulder. “Strap in. They’ve found us.”

“How?”

“I suspect our pursuers called for those ahead of us to intercept.”

“So they’re between us and Alliance space?”

“Yes.”

“Are we going to be okay?”

He spared her a glance. “We’ll be fine, but you need to strap in and hold on to Irul.” He reassured her, even as his eyes told her they were in trouble.

She strapped in and grabbed Irul.

Calyx set all his nanites on the problem of getting them to Denchui space safely—or barring that, in as much of one piece as possible. The only viable plan wasn’t ideal by any means, but the Scozid wouldn’t expect it and that gave them an advantage.

His fighter was smaller and more nimble than even the smallest craft in the Scozid fleet.

He also had the cloaking technology, but that would need to be saved as a last resort.

If they engaged the cloak while in eyesight of the Scozid, they would blanket the area with fire in the hope they would hit them.

They were still too far from the border for any help to arrive in time, but he sent a distress message anyway. If they didn't make it back...

No. He shut down that line of thinking. They would make it back. They had to.

He directed every bit of energy he could spare to the shields. They weren't much, but they would help. His ship's design prioritized offense and lacked robust defensive capabilities. But they would need all the advantages they could muster.

The enemy ships came into view on the forward screen and he quickly assessed what they were up against. Half a dozen light fighters and a mid-size destroyer. The destroyer was the largest problem. The six fighters were easily within his capabilities, but his fighter couldn't disable a destroyer.

He would need to keep it distracted.

He fired two long-range missiles targeting the outermost fighters. As soon as they hit, he dove beneath the others.

The destroyer couldn't follow, but it rolled to train its guns on them. The remaining fighters engaged.

Calyx piloted their ship between and around the fighters to bring them closer. The destroyer wouldn't fire while its own were vulnerable. Their arrogance that they could overpower any combatant would work in his and Razili's favor.

The ship shuddered as one of their bolts hit its mark.

He gritted his teeth. He needed them closer, but another hit like that one would take out the shields.

The tighter they were in a radius surrounding his fighter, the better.

His return fire was sloppy. He didn't want to actually incapacitate any more of the vessels—he needed them as cover.

Another hit shuddered the fighter and Calyx knew they were out of time. He could see the Scozid pilots, and had to hope it was close enough.

He engaged the cloak, then pointed the craft upward and threaded his ship through the others and toward the destroyer. Tucked on top of the larger ship, he watched the Scozid fire in all directions in confusion. Even the destroyer let loose a few bolts.

With seconds left before their cloak ran out, he pushed his ship as hard as he dared in a straight line away toward the border.

If his calculations were correct, he'd managed to maneuver them closer during the fight, and the Scozid themselves would have taken them closer still while searching for them.

If the stars were with them, they were close enough to the border beacons.

He didn't dare look at Razili. All his focus needed to be on getting them to, and across, those beacons.

The beacons flashed red as they scanned for authorization and signaled their arrival in Denchui space. Calyx eased his grip on the controls.

He expected the Scozid to break off now that their prey made it to safety. Instead, they followed them across.

The beacon guns fired behind them, taking out all four of the smaller fighters. Calyx didn't ease the engines. He couldn't outrun the destroyer's large guns, but he could get far enough away to make them a hard target.

"Are you in need of assistance?"

The modulated tones of a Trader vessel rang through the cabin. Calyx grinned. "Yes. Assistance will be rewarded."

He held his breath but a specific credit amount didn't come. He'd expected it to be an outrageous sum, given they were in a vulnerable position. Instead, the lumbering vessel appeared on their port side in the telltale flashes of blue lightning that hallmarked the end of a jump.

Several streaks of red curved to the Scozid ship, setting off a powerful explosion when they met.

Calyx opened a video channel to Trade. "I am in your debt."

The forward screen crackled and an Inruil sporting a gentle smile stared back at him. "We are trade in service to Vaphrir. There is no debt." The thin teal alien bowed its head. "Fair skies, Trelxak."

"Distant stars, Trade."

Only then did he look at Razili. Razili pressed her head into the back of the seat, her eyes closed. She wrapped her arms around Irul in a grip he imagined wasn't very comfortable for the creature.

He released his restraints and kneeled before her. She jumped when he placed a hand on her knee. “Are you okay?”

Her shoulders raised and fell with a deep breath. “Yes. I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be fine? We just went straight into a flock of Scozid ships, with weapons trained on us, got hit twice, were close enough to a massive Scozid warship to see the rivets on the outside—”

He thought it wise not to point out Scozid ships didn’t have rivets on the outside.

“—raced across the border into Alliance space and right when I relaxed I realized they followed us across , and then another ship appeared from nowhere and blew them out of the sky.”

She sucked a breath through her teeth. “Why wouldn’t I be fine?”

Adrenaline threatened to send her into a full-blown panic. She tried to slow her breathing, but couldn’t manage it. Calyx pulled at her hands tightly clenched around Irul’s breastbone until he successfully separated them enough for the beast to escape.

He filled the now empty space with his torso, which she clung to just as tightly.

“I’m a scientist! Not a warrior!”

She shook as he chuckled.

“Says the woman who took out a dozen Scozid single-handedly.”

She could feel the post adrenaline crash coming. She sniffed. “You killed one of them.”

“Eleven or twelve. It was still impressive.”

She felt anger returning. “I was angry.”

“Hold on to that feeling. Use it. Expand your anger until fear has no room.”

Razili pulled back and looked into Calyx’s eyes. “Is that what you do? How you stay so calm?”

He shook his head. “No. Trelxak have a cheat code. Our nanites redirect our adrenaline so we can use it.” His finger brushed down her cheek.

“Make no mistake, Razili, I was afraid. Not for myself, but for you. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe, and when circumstances have the outcome beyond my control, I am afraid every second.”

She cradled his face in her hands and kissed his lips lightly. “Let’s not have another circumstance like that, okay?”

He turned his head and kissed her palm. “I wasn’t the one who got us into that situation. I should be asking you not to steal my ship again.”

She shoved his chest and he fell back on his ass, laughing. She wanted to stalk away in a fine huff, but the ship just wasn’t big enough. He caught her and spun her in his arms, kissing her with all the emotion she felt after their close call.

His tongue demanded entry and she opened for him, greedy for the feel of him. She wanted to wallow in his touch. Was it rhun or something deeper driving this all-consuming need? She didn’t care. She just wanted to give in.

“We have twenty minutes before we reach Corix 23’s atmosphere.”

She nipped at his bottom lip. “Plenty of time.”

“There is no amount of time with you I’d classify as ‘plenty’.” He chuckled. “But I’ll make do.”

He didn’t waste time on soft preamble. They were naked in seconds, and he had her splayed in front of him on the bunk.

“Gorgeous. Do you know how perfect you are?”

She wasn’t, but she squelched the inner voice that cataloged her flaws as he stared down at her in awe. When he looked at her like that, she believed him.

He dropped to his knees and her head fell back when his nose dragged through her folds, opening the way for his tongue that followed. He circled her clit, and she whimpered, wanting more, needing more.

She felt his teeth scrape across her nerves before his lips closed around her, and he sucked.

She nearly came off the bunk. The orgasm was swift and powerful. Her vision blacked behind her eyelids and all her muscles locked in place. It seemed to go on forever before she drifted back to earth. Calyx smiled at her from between her legs.

“My turn.”

She sat up. “What an excellent idea.”

She grabbed his hips and jerked him around, pushing until he lay on his back. His cock jutted from his stomach, long and thick. She licked her lips.

His expression was one of confusion until she leaned in and licked him from root to tip.

“Fuck, Razili.”

She smiled. “I intend to, but first...” she wrapped her lips around him, sinking down as far as she could.

She wrapped her fist around the rest of him and her fingers and mouth worked in tandem.

She slid up, swirling her tongue as she went, and then sucked him back in.

She was rewarded with more cussing and moans before he sat up, growling at her pout.

“Maybe one day I’ll be content spilling into your pretty mouth, but today is not that day.” He pulled her into his lap, lifted her and speared her on his dick in one smooth motion that left her breathless.

She’d never been on top before, but always wanted to try.

She didn’t waste the opportunity. She bounced on his lap until she found a rhythm.

Leaned forward and back until she found the angle where he hit all the right places.

And just when she thought it couldn’t feel better, he reached between them and pressed on her clit.

She threw her head back in ecstasy. The tip of her braid tickled her ass as she rode wave after wave of pleasure. Her walls gripped him tight, and she was rewarded

when his cock grew thicker and his orgasm rocked through her.

She sank against his chest, her arms wrapped around his neck and their breathing slowed.

He laid them down on the bunk. “Rest now. I’ll pilot us in.”

He drew the blanket up to her shoulders and whispered in her ear, “I love you, Razili.”

She pretended to be asleep, like the coward she was.

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He took his own do not disturb edict to heart, staying outside Razili's lab and turning away anyone who dared bother her.

He didn't need to go inside to know when another substance had failed her tests. As she grew more frustrated, she took it out on the slides. He winced as the sound of shattering glass hitting metal rang out again.

The leather of Irul's wings shuffled together as he shifted. Razili had kicked her out an hour before, saying she was distracting her.

Calyx thought the truth was that she didn't want anyone to witness what she must feel is failure.

He still held out hope. One of the last samples would be the key she needed. It had to be.

Despite Premiere Det'ae herself urging her to reconsider, Razili refused to reveal the source of the initial compound. She didn't trust the alliance not to go to great lengths to collect the amount they needed for the war—no matter the consequences.

He was proud of her for holding her ground.

She told the Premiere, "It is not worth winning the war if it takes us becoming the very thing we fight against."

So they waited. It took several hours for the tests to run on each sample. Calyx tried to get her to leave the lab while the equipment worked, but she refused. He arranged

instead for meals to be delivered, and even a cot and blankets when the cycle grew long.

Each time, the wait seemed longer. The pressure mounted and he grew more and more worried as her anxiety visibly increased.

The door to the lab opened behind him, the hiss of air so uncommon it startled him.

“You should go rest.”

He shook his head at her. “Not until you do.”

Her chest rose and fell. “What of your portion of this project? Do you have a way to distribute the compound if I’m able to synthesize it?”

“ When you can synthesize it, we have specialized torpedoes capable of atomizing your compound in the atmosphere of any targeted planet. The planet itself will do the rest, distributing the compound on the flow of air currents.”

She nodded, exhaustion in every line of her face and body.

“You need to rest, Razili.”

He thought she might be about to nod, but a chime from the lab stopped her. She slowly turned and made her way back inside. The doors closed with a soft shush, and he braced for the sound of shattering glass.

When it didn’t come, he peeked into the lab and found her standing over the trash bin, where she let a slide slip from her fingertips.

She looked up and caught him watching her. She glanced around to see if anyone else

was watching, before she moved to a worktable and picked up the vial of bright purple. The substance she had scraped from Irul's talons after their fight in the cave.

She mouthed at him, "Last one."

He nodded.

She went to work and he put his back to the wall. He slid down and bent his knees, resting his head on his forearms. He must have fallen asleep, but came awake when Irul's talons sank into the flesh of his shoulder.

He spun to the lab, fearing something happened to Razili, only to watch her jump and dance her way across the floor. She ran and smacked the button to open the doors and let him in, then threw herself into his arms.

He caught her and she squealed. "I've done it! The compound successfully synthesized! I engineered a sample twice the size of the original and it's stable. Now we just need to test it on Scozid tech and make sure it works as well as the primary."

He grinned. "I knew you would find the answer."

"Actually, it was Irul who knew what we needed. It was the sample she insisted we take from the cave that had the chemical bond I needed."

The beast remained attached to his shoulder, and she reached up and ruffled its fur.

"Extra fruit for you today."

She chittered at her.

Calyx grinned. "Do you have enough to test right away?"

“How much do you need? It doesn’t take long to manufacture, now that I’ve worked out the synthetic version of the compound.”

“A kilogram should do for an initial test.”

She nodded. “I can do that. Give me an hour.”

“I’ll get the cylinder that will hold it in the torpedo for deployment and ready a fighter.”

Her grin fell. “Wait, you’re going to be the one to test it?”

“Yes. I created the atomizer. If tweaks need to be made, then I need to be present to make them.”

She nodded, her voice small when she responded, “I understand.”

She released him and went back to her work, creating more of the goo that would win them the war. He called after her, “You should name it.”

“What?”

“You should name the compound so we can stop calling it goo.”

She tilted her head. “Who calls it goo?”

He laughed. “Everyone but you.”

She gave him a weak smile. “Fair enough.”

Razili thought for a moment. She wanted to name it after the gruthji who put his

entire species at risk by telling them what their saliva could do, but she wouldn't endanger Wrenross.

"We'll call it tuppu."

"Tuppu?" Calyx repeated.

She nodded. His pronunciation was off, but it would do.

The phrase for spit in her language was the closest she would come to Wren's saliva without putting the gruthji in danger.

She knew the universal translators used by the Denchui Alliance weren't calibrated for all the distinct Earth languages, since everyone aboard the Shangris used the far more common universal tongue.

Calyx grinned at her, then carefully pried Irul's talons from his shoulder and disappeared with long strides.

Irul flew on silent wings into the lab and reclaimed the top of a large microscope as her perch. She preened and strutted until Razili laughed.

"Yes, you did good."

She was still cooing over her when a throat clearing got her attention. She turned to find Rahel standing in the doorway.

She expected him to berate her for disobeying him. Her smile fell but she straightened her spine.

"I owe you an apology."

Shock dropped her jaw, but she composed herself quickly. “But I disobeyed you.”

“Yes, you put yourself and Calyx in great danger.” His scowled turned darker. “I am not happy with you for that decision. However, I must admit that you did what any Ka’atari would do. You did what you felt necessary for the good of the whole, and it was successful.”

She didn't blink at him knowing she'd synthesized the compound. News traveled fast on Corix 23. “What if I hadn’t succeeded? What if my impulsive decision got us both killed?”

“Then I would mourn you as a fallen warrior.”

She hugged the elder she’d come to respect during her time on Corix 23. Her mission was only successful because Calyx caught her sneaking onto his ship. If she had attempted to go alone, she would have died.

“Thank you, Rahel. That means a lot.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. If you think about running off by yourself on a fool’s errand again, I will lock you up and forget the key code.”

She laughed. “I think my adventuring days are over. That was enough excitement to last me a lifetime.”

She had the tuppu ready when Calyx returned with a good-sized cylinder. She smiled at being able to fill it to the top, but it faded quickly. “How will you test it?”

“Droscal knows where Scozid abandoned a cache of tech. We’ll test it there.”

“Abandoned? What if it’s no longer functioning?”

“Then we’ll find some that works.”

Fear choked her throat closed. A full team of warriors stood ready behind Calyx, but he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I can’t say, but I will be as fast as possible.”

She nodded. With another quick peck on her lips, he and the team turned as a unit and disappeared. She followed behind, unwilling to let him out of her sight just yet. He never paused. He never looked back.

They held a steady pace to the hangar and she lost sight of him as he climbed the ramp into a ship a good deal larger than his. She continued to stand there, staring at the smooth bulkhead that wrapped the ship’s frame, until its thrusters fired and the noise and heat drove her back.

She recited a quick Hindu prayer and resigned herself to many cycles of worry.

The other Shangris women present on Corix 23 were determined not to let her wallow. They descended on her before she made it back to her quarters.

“You are not going back to the lab,” Cora announced.

Razili didn’t hide her smile. “You’re right. I’m not.”

Cora deflated a bit. “Oh. I thought you’d be eager to make vats of goo.”

“No, we’ll wait until the tuppu is tested before we make more. No sense in using materials if it fails.”

Gabriella caught her eye. “Tuppu?”

She knew what the other woman was asking. “A name I gave it from my language.”

“What does it mean?”

Razili turned to Stephanie. “Spit.” She glanced at Gabriella. “It seemed fitting, since we’ll be spitting on their technology.”

Anela nodded. “It is. It’s hard to believe something so innocuous as goop would bring down an entire civilization.”

“Wait, we’re wiping out a civilization?” Willow pushed her way past several of the other women.

“Just their technology. We’re sending them back to the stone age, essentially.”

“Won’t that gut their ability to survive?”

“Who cares?” Anela sneered. “They haven’t cared about any other species’ ability to survive.”

Willow fell quiet. Razili wondered if the indigenous culture scientist worried they would be rendered too vulnerable to invasion. “The premiere plans to negotiate a treaty.”

Willow nodded.

Cora reached up to touch Irul where he perched on Razili's shoulder, but he hissed at her.

Cora laughed. "I see you've brought back your own pet.

" Her hand dropped as if to rub her preuvret's head, but the large feline was missing.

Cora caught herself and at Razili's questioning look, she said, "Torvid's watching the kids. "

Razili stroked the iridescent feathers coating her friend's chest. "This is Irul. Without her help, I wouldn't have found what I needed."

"It's good she found you, then."

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She started to correct Anela, but realized she was right. Irul had found her. From her perspective, she was probably the pet.

For the rest of the night, her friends kept her busy and engaged. Gabriella whispered to her at one point that if she needed a break, to let her know. She was grateful, but since Miranda hopped the first flight to Earth, along with Emily and Zoranna, there were only six of them left.

She'd neglected them while she worked in her lab, but now she had an opportunity to catch up, and she would make the most of it.

Besides, it was better than sitting alone, worried sick for Calyx.

Calyx coughed and spat out the thick wad of congealing blood dislodged from his lung. His nanites, helpful as ever, informed him that one of his cracked ribs had splintered further with that cough.

Droscal's "abandoned" trove of Scozid tech turned out to be a manned outpost well past the Denchui border.

He'd decided to go ahead with the test. They didn't need to enter the atmosphere, just deliver the torpedoes. The weapon itself did the rest.

He and his team watched from a safe distance as the tuppu worked as intended. The missile broke apart after entering the small moon's atmosphere; the cylinder activating and atomizing the compound; the mist coating the surface and rendering Scozid tech inoperable.

The team rejoiced and turned for home. In sight of the border, a Scozid ship appeared and hit them with an unknown weapon. A bright green substance coated the exterior of their ship and Calyx recognized it immediately.

He scanned for the nearest barren rock big enough to land the ship. They barely made it in time.

Even though their own technology was not integrated with a biological component, he knew the substance would make its way to the interior and attack the warriors directly.

If any of it touched their skin, it would turn them to dust as easily as the plant back on Dunia Prime.

They were ill-equipped for an emergency landing on a surface with no atmosphere. There were six in his team, including him, and only three extravehicular suits.

Three suits that would only sustain them for half a cycle.

Once on the surface, his team worked to do what they could to shore the ship's interior against the compound. It wasn't much, and it wouldn't be enough. Their emergency message to headquarters was acknowledged, the elders assuring them they would mobilize immediately.

They thought the wait would be the worst of their problems. Then the Scozid ship landed a shuttle on the same moon.

The battle raged until both ship's weaponry was disabled.

Then the fight continued on the surface.

Three Ka'atari against a full complement of Scozid.

It wasn't a fair fight. To preserve the lives of the three still aboard the ship, and give time for the rescue ship to arrive, Calyx and the two teammates fighting alongside him surrendered.

They were drugged, beaten, and put into a cage while their Scozid captors decided how best to get off the barren moon. The shuttle was disabled, and any ship landing on the surface was vulnerable to both their own biology killing weapon and the tuppū.

Calyx was in relatively good shape. The Azar chosen for his team had fought until the Scozid injected him with something that sent him to the ground. He remained knocked out, but was otherwise unharmed. Renjik, a Rucieth Calyx had served with for years, was most injured.

Calyx held his hands around the other warrior's bicep as tightly as he could manage. The Scozid had taken a particular interest in the warrior's natural armor, using various implements to test it until they landed on one that sliced through it, nearly severing the arm.

Several smaller cuts adorned the warrior's chest and face.

They would scar, but they were not life-threatening the way the arm was.

He needed to find something to act as a tourniquet, but they'd been stripped naked.

The only thing left to them that might work was a length of the Azar's long hair, but he was reluctant to take it without consent.

He'd be forced to, if the warrior didn't wake up soon.

Calyx kneeled on the cold metal floor, ignoring the pain in his side and sending more nanites to his fingers to maintain his grip on Renjik's bicep.

The Rucieth was barely conscious, flickers of awareness in his dark eyes as Calyx tried to stanch the worst of the bleeding.

Something about the Scozid's last slash had corroded the edge of his natural armor. It gave Calyx a sick, hollow feeling.

"I'm not letting you die," Calyx said softly. Near the front of the cage, the unconscious Azar still lay on his side, unmoving except for the faintest rise of breath. "We just need a..." He exhaled sharply. "Anything."

Renjik's lip twitched. "I'd kill... for one... of your nanite-laced... wrappings," he managed, voice raspy.

Calyx's nanites flared. Renjik was bleeding out. He couldn't wait any longer. Stretching one arm as far as possible, he reached for the Azar. A quick, hard yank separated a single lock from the warrior's thick head of hair.

The Azar didn't stir. Calyx ruthlessly pushed guilt aside.

Renjik's life was draining away. He twisted the thick, black strands around Renjik's upper arm.

With a grunt, he pulled it tight and secured it.

Renjik swore under his breath, but slumped in relief as the flow of blood slowed. "Thanks," he rasped.

Calyx exhaled. "Not done yet."

Renjik's eyes slipped shut again. Calyx slumped in relief. It was best he stay unconscious. For a moment, Calyx let guilt, shame, and anger wash over him. He'd led this mission to test the distribution system for the tuppū. And it had worked—until the Scozid showed up and fired back.

Razili's compound neutralized theirs. As soon as they returned, he'd work on a portable system that each warrior could carry.

If they'd had enough on board, they could have rendered what covered the ship inert, and none of this would have happened.

He almost jumped at a soft groan behind him. The Azar warrior stirred, fingers twitching. "Stars," he mumbled. Then, more vehemently, "What the hell is that smell?"

Calyx stifled a laugh of relief. "Good to see you awake." He shifted closer to the Azar. "Renjik's lost a lot of blood."

The Azar blinked and winced as he sat up. Calyx saw scorching cuts across his shoulder. "I remember... we got jumped by half a dozen Scozid." He exhaled. "I see we lost."

"Temporarily," Calyx said, injecting more confidence than he felt. He nodded at the hair tourniquet. "I owe you a rebraiding. Sorry for—"

"War is war and hair will regrow."

"Thank you for understanding." Calyx looked through the bars, but the Scozid were still absent. "I'm sorry, my nanites were damaged, and I don't remember your name."

The Azar nodded. He grunted as he stood and stretched his muscles. "Traik."

Calyx nodded. "Let's work on getting out of here, Traik."

"Do you have a plan?"

Calyx shook his head. "No good ones. We're naked and weaponless on a moon with no atmosphere.

The Scozid have been absent since they threw us in here, but I've heard them communicating.

Presumably, they won't risk landing another vessel on the moon until they are sure they have neutralized the tuppu. "

The Azar frowned. "And your nanites?"

"Functional, but only seventy-five percent." Calyx gestured to the cuts crossing the Trelxak lines near his shoulder. "They can't patch the code. I risk a meltdown if I push them into override."

A thoughtful grunt. "We can't wait for rescue, can we?"

"No. They're on their way, but might not make it in time." Calyx's gaze lingered on Renjik. "He can't survive much longer."

The Azar grinned and stretched his neck. "Then we find a way out or die trying."

Calyx managed a half-smile. "Agreed."

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Razili laughed with her friends until Rahel ran past the common room, followed by several other elders.

Something was wrong.

She followed them to the command center, where the elder chief was barking orders. Like a deadly ballet, warriors streamed in and out, carrying out those orders.

“Map the most efficient route to their location.”

“Done.”

“Upload it to the Nondia .” The elder turned. “Is she ready to fly?” He continued after a nod from his second. “I want a full complement of warriors. What team leaders do we have in residence?”

“Kiran, Eveth, and Nislu.”

“Good. I want them and any of their team members on board. Round out the numbers with anyone not nailed down or otherwise occupied.”

“They’re already aboard.”

Cora and Torvid slid to a stop next to Razili. “What’s going on?”

“I think...” Razili took a deep breath. “I think there’s been an attack on Calyx and his team.”

The chief spotted them in the corner and frowned. “Is there a med pod on the Nondia?”

Razili gasped and covered her mouth with her hand as tears flooded her eyes.

“It might be just a precaution, Razili.”

Cora wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in tight. Then she looked down at her preuvret.

“Go with Kiran. There will be Scozid to eat. Keep him out of trouble.”

The big feline took off at a run, punching her claws into the floor to round the corner without losing speed. Cora winced.

Razili was barely aware of the activity. The rush of blood in her ears muffled everything after she heard ‘med pod,’ as if she were underwater. Calyx was hurt.

Rahel stepped in front of her, but addressed Cora. “You should take her back to the common room.”

Razili steeled her spine. “No.” She focused on the elder. “I assume information will be relayed here?”

Rahel nodded.

“Then I’m staying.”

He sighed. “I’ll get you a chair.”

Razili listened as they made the final preparations and the large fighter took off on its

rescue mission. Calyx and his team had been successful testing the tuppu but were attacked just after delivery. Their ship crashed on a barren moon, and they were attacked again.

When she heard about a weapon using a green substance, she perked up.

She rushed to the elder chief and grabbed his arm to get his attention.

He frowned down at her, but she rushed ahead.

“The green grains... it destroys all organic life. We didn’t know they’d weaponized it, but if it’s the same substance Calyx and I encountered, they mustn’t touch it.”

He nodded. “Is there a way to neutralize it?”

“The tuppu restores life where this substance has destroyed it, but I’m not sure it would render it inert.” She thought quickly through the samples she’d brought back from Dunia Prime. “I might have enough to test.”

The chief nodded. “Go. I will send a runner if there are updates of significance.”

She nodded and ran from the room.

An hour later, she paced the lab. She’d analyzed the green compound and synthesized more tuppu. Now she was waiting on test results from the experiment she’d conducted. A beep alerted her as the screen filled with a readout of the results.

Not only did it render the Scozid substance inert, it protected against any further contamination. As long as a layer of tuppu was present, the green substance had zero effect.

Her mind raced with the possibilities. If they could engineer a surface infused with tuppu to wrap their ships, and fashion armor for the warriors, they would be protected.

She grabbed a container and ran from the lab.

Calyx and Traik scoured every inch of the cell.

They had amassed a small pile of wire and a chunk of an EV suit no bigger than their palm.

Propped against the back wall, Renjik picked through what they had found with one hand.

Between his knowledge of wiring and Calyx's engineering skills, they felt sure they could come up with... something.

Renjik's hand dropped to the floor, and his head hit the wall behind him. "We need a power source."

His voice was weak, his skin pale between his armored plates. Calyx kneeled in front of him. "I am a power source."

Traik gave him a harsh look. "Don't do something stupid, Trelxak."

"Stupid is all we have at the moment." Calyx looked back to Renjik. "What do I need to do?"

Renjik's lips twitched. "Remember Demetera?"

Calyx scrubbed a hand down his face. "My nanites would have to be a hell of a lot

more damaged to forget Demetera.”

Traik looked back and forth between them. “What happened on Demetera?”

Calyx waved at Renjik. “This idiot got between a Klaaxin and its mate.”

“Ouch.” Traik grimaced. “How’d you survive that?”

Calyx pointed to himself. “This idiot acted as a conduit and grounded the electricity before it fried his tiny brain.”

“Hey! My brain isn’t tiny.”

“It was that day.”

Renjik’s head fell back with a weak chuckle. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“So what’s the plan?”

Calyx looked at Renjik. “Fry some Scozid?”

Renjik nodded. “Fry some Scozid.”

Thirty minutes later, they had a working device that would convert whatever energy hit Calyx into a weapon of sorts. The aim would be shit, but hopefully he could take a few of them down while Traik cleaned up the rest—without completely frying his nanites.

Renjik was twisting the final two wires together when their guards appeared. Calyx scanned them quickly, relieved when he saw one of them carried a shock stick.

“Far left,” Calyx mumbled to the Azar.

“I see it,” Renjik replied.

They stood shoulder to shoulder to block Renjik from view. The three Scozid stopped in front of the cell, the clicks and clacks of their language grating on Calyx’s last nerve. Eventually, they turned to their prisoners.

“We will take the Azar.” The middle one announced in the common tongue.

Calyx stepped forward. “I don’t think so.”

It chuckled. “Do not worry, Trelxak, you will get a turn.” A tentacle waved in the air, flinging slime as it gestured. “Back up.”

Calyx and Traik took one step back. While Calyx relaxed his muscles, he could sense the Azar tensing next to him, ready to fight.

As soon as the cage door opened, they rushed it.

As hoped, the Scozid on the far left brandished his shock stick.

Calyx grabbed the end and saw the squid smile as it activated the button.

Energy hit him like an angry kilfot but the device Renjik rigged kicked in and the pain ebbed.

Calyx pressed his palm against the Scozid’s exposed body and watched the smile turn into a scream of horror just before it popped.

He turned to the next, grabbing its nearest tentacle. Electric burns raced up the

appendage, turning it black. The Scozid struggled to get away but only grabbed more of Calyx and sped its demise.

His muscles heated to an impossible degree and Calyx felt like he was burning alive, but he steeled himself and turned for the last enemy. Traik was on the floor, bleeding from a fresh wound in his stomach. The Scozid turned his gun on Calyx.

He stored as much of the energy flowing through him as possible before he opened his fist. Arcs of blue streamed from his fingers and hit the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

The bars of the cage lit up red as they heated where they were struck.

Calyx concentrated. The Scozid had dropped its weapon, locked in a cage of electricity. If Calyx could just bring it closer...

His muscles locked in place, his teeth clenched and his eyes closed against the pain that screamed through every fiber of his being. With the last of his strength, he moved his arm and watched as a bolt struck the Scozid and it dissolved into a pool of blackened sludge.

One by one, Calyx peeled his fingers from the shock stick until it clattered to the floor.

He followed it down.

Razili sat in the chair Rahel brought for her, pressed against the back wall of the command center, and listened as the Nondia crew relayed what little information they had.

“Targets spotted. Beginning approach. It appears the Scozid ship has abandoned its shuttle.”

“Be advised, the green substance is extremely dangerous and should not be touched.”

“Copy that.”

Several minutes passed where the only sound was that of the thrusters as the ship landed on the surface of the moon. The ramp opened, boots pounded on metal, and again, silence reigned.

“Switching comms to mobile units.”

Sound flooded the room as each warrior’s comm system engaged. The sound leveled out after the warriors took up their positions, and only the team leaders’ voices remained audible. Razili recognized Kiran’s voice, but she didn’t know the other two.

“First sweeping left.

“Second right.”

Seconds stretched like hours. Razili’s leg bounced uncontrollably until Irul hopped from her shoulder to her knee.

She stroked her head and back, her eyes glued to the screens that showed the view outside the fighter.

Their landing was far enough away from Calyx’s ship to avoid the green substance, but she could see part of it off-screen to the right.

On the other side, also partially off screen, was a Scozid shuttle.

The warriors advanced, one team moving toward the Denchui ship, another toward the Scozid, and a third straight up the middle.

The right-hand team paused. “Toven, this is Ka’atari captain Eveth. Respond if you are able.”

“Captain Eveth, stars, are we glad to hear you.”

A cheer went up in the command center before the chief snuffed it out.

“...engaged in a surface fight. There are no remaining EV suits.”

“Copy that. Do you have any tuppu left? It neutralizes the Scozid compound.”

“A small amount.”

“Apply it to the airlock seams. We’ll have you out of there in no time.”

Razili watched as the team got to work, then switched her focus to the other two. Kiran’s team was preparing to breach the Scozid ship, with Nislu’s team providing backup. A hiss signaled a door opening and all twelve team members raised their guns.

She watched in horror as they exchanged fire, unable to see the combatants due to the ship’s angle and the limited field of view of the camera. The fight didn’t last long. Kiran’s team moved, guns still up, before disappearing from view.

Irul chittered and nuzzled her cheek with hers. She wanted to look away, wanted to close her eyes, afraid of what they’d find. She knew better than to think Calyx was among the three left on board the Toven. He was the mission leader. He would not stay safe while others fought.

She couldn’t look away. Her heart pounded in her chest. If he had died... if she had lost him before she could tell him she loved him, she might never recover.

It seemed silly now that she'd ever doubted her feelings for him. Every interaction, from the first time he'd stepped into her lab wearing only pants and she'd drooled over his incredible body to the lingering kiss he gave her before he left, marked the path of her falling in love.

She'd thought it a crush, at first. Then on their way to Dunia Prime, she thought it was the effects of rhun . Now she knew. She'd loved him the entire time.

He'd promised to come back to her.

"I hope we packed extra med pods."

"No! No, no, no." Razili shook her head as tears streamed down her face.

"Get her out of here!" The chief yelled.

Two Ka'atari helped her stand and led her from the command center. She was numb. Her mind refused to believe that he was gone.

Cora stayed by her side as they led her into a quiet room nearby. "They said med pods. Even the finest med pod can't help a dead person." She grabbed Razili's cheeks and forced her to look at her. "He's not dead, Razili. Do you hear me? He's alive."

Razili nodded. There was still hope. And too many unknowns for her scientific brain to handle. "I need to go back. I need to hear what's happening."

Cora nodded and they resumed their places on the back wall of the command center. The chief gave them a stern look but didn't kick them out.

She watched as they carried three warriors out of the Scozid ship, one by one.

They were each placed on a levi-cart with an atmospheric tent for the transfer, so she couldn't tell which one was Calyx.

The process moved slowly, but by the time they extracted the third warrior from the Scozid ship, the Nondia crew had rigged a system to safely allow the remaining Toven crew to board.

“Base, Nondia is six heavy and headed home.”

The chief gave up trying to quiet the cheer that erupted.

It would take hours for the Nondia to make it back to Corix 23. That didn't deter Razili from running to the hangar to wait for her arrival.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:19 pm

Calyx recognized the soft hum of a med pod before he opened his eyes. He startled and pushed against the enclosure until a cream-colored Molzaed appeared.

“Calm yourself, please.”

“Renjik? Traik? The rest of my team?” His voice came out in a harsh croak.

The Molzaed nodded. “All are well. The Azar is just there,” a cream arm waved behind Calyx, “and the Rucieth in a med pod on a passing Trade vessel.”

Calyx scrunched his brows. “Trade vessel?”

“Yes, one in employ of Vaphrir, the Trade captain who supports the Alliance. They are following us to Corix 23, where he will be transferred for further treatment.”

“He’ll live?”

The Molzaed dipped its head. “The loss of his arm was unfortunately necessary, but he will live.”

Calyx relaxed back into the soft surface of the pod. His nanites were quiet. No doubt running diagnostics on all his systems. “How much longer will I be in here?”

The healer hummed. “Until the pod decides you are well enough, of course. I will sedate you so the wait is easier.”

He didn’t object.

A scream bubbled up his chest and out of his throat. Alarms blared. The pod cover sprang open with a hiss, and long, slender fingers gripped his wrists.

“What’s... happening?” His teeth clenched and his back bowed as his veins seared like lava through his body.

He felt a pinprick on his bicep and then blessed, cool relief spread from that point up his arm and cascaded like a wave until it reached his toes. He slumped, barely aware of the Molzaed standing over him.

“We believe your nanites are malfunctioning. We have suppressed their function for now and are searching for a solution.”

“Malfunctioning?” His mouth felt like it was full of sludge, his tongue struggling to form the word through the mire.

“We understand you acted as a conduit for a large amount of energy. The nanites seem unable to recalibrate after the damage done.”

If he could have rolled his eyes, he would have, but his eyelids were too heavy to lift.

His parents always said the nanites were both a blessing and a curse.

He just now understood. He tried to call them up, but they were eerily silent.

It was strange. His whole life, he could control every function, pull up any known data, calculate at dizzying speeds and now... Nothing.

Another prick in the opposite arm, and darkness swallowed him.

He regained consciousness slowly, awareness returned in minute degrees.

He felt the warm med pod beneath him. His fingertips prickled and the sensation moved up his arms. The shush shush of machinery almost blocked out the sound of an argument.

He thought first it might be far away, but realized whoever argued was doing so in heated whispers.

“No, I will not.”

“It could be days...”

“It has been weeks!”

“We need you in the lab.”

“Uv’ex is perfectly capable of handling the synthesizing process.”

Razili? Calyx fought the depths that seemed to pull him under even as he struggled to surface.

“Give up, doc. She’s not going anywhere.”

Renjik? The last he remembered, the Rucieth was still in recovery.

“You need to tend to your health. The baby...”

Calyx’s eyes shot open and he sat up gasping like he’d plunged into the waters on Kocylite.

“Calyx!” Razili’s cry was strangled.

He turned his head, his neck protesting like his muscles forgot how to work. “Razili?”

He croaked, his throat dry and raw.

She was by his side in an instant. She reached for him, but pulled back in hesitation. He wanted nothing more than to grab her, pull her into his arms, and never let her go. A wave of dizziness hit him and she was there, helping him lie back down.

Tears streamed down her face and though his hand felt like lead, he managed to lift it and caress her cheek. She grabbed his wrist and leaned into the touch.

She smiled at him, and it was the most beautiful sight in the known galaxies.

“I’m here.”

A pale green Molzaed looking at a tablet grumbled, “She’s been here.”

Calyx couldn’t tear his eyes from Razili. She looked exhausted. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, her hair limp where it escaped her braid. He swept his gaze from her head to her toes, lingering on her abdomen. She seemed unhurt, just tired.

“I want to sit up.” Calyx struggled to get his free hand beneath him, but he was too weak and too unwilling to let go of Razili to free both hands.

“I got you.”

His head tilted back as he was slowly lifted. His view filled with Traik’s smirking face.

The Molzaed fussed over him for several more minutes, telling him to move slowly. It had taken two weeks for his nanites to repair themselves. He was told he’d woken several times in intense pain, though thankfully, he didn’t remember.

The unusually bossy Molzaed shoved a straw into his mouth and ordered him to

drink.

He did as told, and almost instantly felt better.

The healer droned on about follow up therapies to strengthen his muscles.

The healer tested his nanites by asking him a litany of questions, and they performed perfectly.

It seemed hours before he was released; the Molzaed keeping a close eye on him as he walked the perimeter of the med bay to prove he was stable on his feet. Satisfied he wouldn't fall on his face the instant he stepped through the doors, the doctor sighed and shook his head, waving them out.

He was grateful for Traik's presence on his right shoulder. No one said anything, but Calyx knew he flanked him just in case. Razili walked on his left, and Renjik trailed behind. It was a slow procession to his quarters. The door slid open and he stepped inside, feeling disconnected from reality.

Even without noting the passage of time, it seemed like something should have changed while he was gone. He felt monumentally altered. He turned in the doorway and his eyes fell on Renjik. A swell of guilt filled his chest. "I'm sorry."

His friend glanced at his arm where it ended halfway between his shoulder and where his elbow had been.

"It sucks, but it's not your fault." Renjik met his eyes. "I'm glad I was with you. You saved me, Calyx. The Molzaed say I had minutes before the med pod couldn't save my life. I'm alive because of you."

He shook his head. "I should have accounted for the possibility of active Scozid presence."

Renjik clasped his shoulder with his remaining hand. “Don’t carry guilt over me, Calyx.”

He released him and stepped back. Before he turned to leave, Renjik gave him a lopsided smile. “Besides, now you owe me.”

Traik grunted a laugh. “Didn’t you just get through telling him not to carry guilt?”

Renjik laughed as he disappeared around a corner.

Traik turned to Calyx, then Razili. “Will you be okay getting settled? I can help if you need.”

She shook her head. “No, thank you, Traik. I think we can manage from here.”

The Azar nodded, squeezed Calyx’s bicep in farewell, and disappeared the same direction as Renjik.

Calyx made it to his couch before collapsing. He stared at Razili as she leaned against the door to his quarters.

After a dozen long heartbeats, he gathered the courage to speak one word.

“Baby?”

Razili grinned, unable to contain her joy. Calyx was awake. He seemed whole, if weak, which was understandable given how long he’d been in the med pod.

Every time he’d woken up screaming, her heart twisted. They weren’t sure his nanites could repair the damage, and even if they were, the healers couldn’t tell her if they would be fundamentally altered. She didn’t know if she would get him back—even if he woke, he may not be the person she knew.

She kneeled at his feet, grinning up at him. “Surprise!”

He shook his head, his eyes wide with wonder. He reached for her and she straddled his lap and settled in his arms.

“I thought I’d lost you.” She told his neck, holding on tight, afraid he might disappear if she let go.

“Never. I told you I would always come back to you.”

She pulled away to look into his eyes. “I love you.”

He brushed his lips to hers in a featherlight caress. “It was worth almost dying to hear those words.”

She laughed. “I knew the moment they told me you’d been captured. I think I’ve loved you from the first day you stepped foot in my lab bare chested and demanding I hurry.”

He grinned. “You noticed my chest?”

“Is that really what you want to ask?”

“Are you truly pregnant?”

She nodded as an impossibly wide grin split her face. “We fulfilled rhun .”

A look of sheer panic overtook his features. She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him. “I hope you still love me, too. I never intend to give you up.”

He relaxed beneath her. “I loved you from the moment I stood outside your lab for the first time, my skin on fire as rhun flared. It took me three days to work up the

courage to enter.”

“You stalked me for three days?”

A lecture was gathering steam in her head when Cora’s voice rang from the door.
“Incoming!”

A shadow flew around the room before settling on the end of the couch to reveal Irul. She chittered and squeaked, eyes slanted, obviously giving her own lecture. Razili decided hers could wait.

Calyx chuckled beneath her. “I missed you, too.”

Irul hopped across the cushions and leaned into their sides. Cora bounced onto their other side.

“Group hug!”

A steady stream of visitors flowed in and out for the next few hours. Razili noticed Calyx’s eyes droop, his movements slow. She declared visiting hours over and locked the door.

Calyx moved up behind her as she turned. He brushed his thumbs under her eyes.
“You look tired.”

She smiled. “Just what a girl wants to hear.”

He shook his head as his thumbs morphed into his fingers and trailed down her neck and shoulders. “I’m sure I look ten times worse. I feel like I could sleep for a year. Will you stay with me?”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Thank you for reading! I hope you loved Razili and Calyx's story. The next (and final!) book in the Ka'atari Warriors series is coming soon!