



Deserted (The Legion: Savage Lands Sector #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Stranded in the sand. Marked by fate. Claimed by fire.

Jas

One second, I was hunting down ghost stories in the Sahara. The next, I'm waking up on a blistering alien desert with two suns, one survival bunker, and a grumpy catman who keeps calling me kassari.

Fated. Mate. His.

Commander Rhaekar is seven feet of pure “don’t touch that” energy—except when he’s touching me. And when we share a dream? I see what he’s holding back.

Possession. Heat. A slow, burning hunger that says I’m his from now until the stars burn out.

I should want to get home. But the longer I’m in his arms, the more I start to think...maybe fate knew exactly what it was doing.

Rhaekar

She fell through a rift and landed in my wasteland.

She is loud. Human. Reckless. Everything I do not need.

And yet—she’s mine.

My mate. The one fate has chosen for me.

But this desert hides more than heat. Buried beneath the sands is something I was sent to guard—ancient tech with a mind of its own.

Now it targets her.

But I was forged in fire. And I will bury every threat beneath these dunes before I let the universe take my mate.

Deserted is a high-heat, standalone sci-fi romance featuring fated mates, desert survival, one mat-shared sleeping arrangement, and a

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I should've turned around when my camel guide refused to go any farther.

In hindsight, that was the first red flag.

Not the cracked tablet with radiation warnings scratched in three languages.

Not the flickering lights dancing on the sand like a mirage was trying to seduce me with its best nightclub impression.

Nope. Just me, Jas Navarro, genius cryptid podcaster-slash-freelance journalist, trudging into a restricted zone in the Sahara like I was auditioning for a Darwin Award.

But curiosity is a hell of a drug. So is ambition. And I was chasing both like a girl on fire.

The desert stretched before me in endless waves of gold, each dune carved by wind into ripples that resembled an ocean frozen in time.

My boots sank with each step, leaving behind imprints that were already being erased by the restless sand.

Three hours since I'd left the last village.

Two since my guide had abandoned me with wild gestures and fervent prayers to Allah.

“Demon lights,” he’d said in broken English, pointing at the horizon where something pulsed beneath the sand. “Bad place. Very bad.”

I’d doubled his payment and promised to return by sunset. He’d laughed in my face.

“No return,” he’d said, patting his camel’s neck before climbing atop it. “Only ghosts return.”

Now, squinting through the afternoon haze, I understood his fear.

The air had changed. Thickened. Electric currents raced across my skin like phantom fingers, raising goosebumps despite the blistering heat.

My satellite phone had died an hour ago, and my compass spun in lazy circles, the needle twitching like it was having a seizure.

Classic signs of electromagnetic interference. The kind UFO hunters had wet dreams about.

I wiped a sweaty hand across my forehead, squinting through the heat haze toward the barely-there structure I’d spotted two dunes back.

It looked like a hunk of ancient metal half-buried in sand, sun-bleached and humming beneath my boots.

Definitely not Bedouin. Definitely not in any archaeology database I’d checked.

Which meant jackpot.

My podcast listeners would lose their minds. After three years of chasing legends—Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest, ghost ships in the Bermuda Triangle, the

Montauk monster—I'd finally found something that couldn't be explained away by weather patterns or drunk eyewitnesses. Something otherworldly.

If the anonymous tip that had led me here was right, this wasn't just a UFO landing site. It was a doorway. A gateway to somewhere else, activated every hundred years by the alignment of stars or electromagnetic fields or whatever cosmic bullshit my source had rambled about.

"The gateway will open soon," the email had read. "Three days after the winter solstice, when the Pleiades align with the Great Pyramid. Be there or wait another century."

I'd traced the IP address to a cybercafé in Cairo that had mysteriously burned down the next day.

Classic. The locals called this place Bab al-Jinn—the Door of Spirits.

Western explorers who'd ventured too close had disappeared, only to return months later with impossible stories and radiation burns.

All of which made for killer podcast material.

My recorder was already strapped to my backpack, and my GoCam was blinking green.

I crouched low, brushing sand off a slab of metal that curved up from the ground like a rib cage.

There were symbols etched into it—circles, slashes, alien geometry that didn't belong on Earth.

And the closer I got, the warmer it felt beneath my fingers.

“This is Jasmine Cruz Navarro,” I spoke into my recorder, keeping my voice steady despite the adrenaline pumping through my veins. “December twenty-fourth, approximately fourteen hundred hours. I’m at the coordinates sent by our anonymous source, and I’ve discovered what appears to be?—”

I paused, running my fingers along the grooves of the symbols. They were warm to the touch, almost hot, pulsing with what felt like a heartbeat.

“—what appears to be non-terrestrial technology of unknown origin and purpose. The metal has properties I’ve never encountered before. It’s warm, almost like it’s alive.”

I reached into my pack for my sample kit. A scraping here, a soil sample there—standard procedure for when I found something worth analyzing. But as I leaned closer, my long braid slipped over my shoulder, the tip brushing against the center symbol.

It flashed—a split-second of brilliant green light—and I jerked backward, heart hammering against my ribs.

“Shit,” I hissed, fumbling for my water bottle. My throat suddenly felt like I’d swallowed the Sahara. “Did you see that? Tell me the camera caught that.”

The symbols were glowing now, faint pulses of emerald and gold that reminded me of the Northern Lights I’d photographed in Alaska two years ago. They moved like liquid, flowing from one etching to another in geometric patterns that hurt my eyes to follow.

This was big. Bigger than anything I’d covered before. Governments would kill for this kind of discovery. Hell, if half the conspiracy theories about Area 51 were true,

they already had.

This was either a UFO or a very elaborate prank. Either way, I'm getting a bonus.

I took a breath. Reached forward. Touched the center of the glyph.

The world blinked.

No sound. No wind. Just a vacuum suck that yanked the air out of my lungs and the sand out from under me. I screamed—maybe. Or maybe it was just in my head. The light flared around me in gold and green, and then the ground disappeared.

I fell.

Not down. Not up. There was no direction, no orientation, just the sensation of being stretched and compressed simultaneously, my body pulled apart at the atomic level and then slammed back together.

Colors that had no name streaked past me, smearing across my vision like wet paint.

The universe turned inside out, revealing its machinery—gears and cogs and impossible geometry that my human brain couldn't process.

Time collapsed. Expanded. Folded in on itself.

I tasted copper. Smelled ozone. Felt my cells vibrate at frequencies that threatened to shake me apart.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped.

Tumbling, weightless, through a tunnel of burning light. I hit something—soft and

sharp at the same time—and then heat slammed into me like a fist. Not Earth heat. Not even Sahara heat. This was wrong. Oppressive. Alive.

The sand here burned like fire. The air scraped my throat with every breath.

Two suns blazed overhead. No clouds. No shadows. No landmarks. Just dunes and a shimmering horizon and a sudden, deep, nauseating certainty.

I wasn't on Earth anymore.

The realization hit me like a physical blow, driving me to my knees. My stomach heaved, but nothing came up—just dry, painful retches that left me gasping. My ears popped, adjusting to the pressure change. My skin prickled with sweat that evaporated instantly in the brutal heat.

This couldn't be happening. Time travel, maybe. Hallucination, probably. But another planet? That was the stuff of bad sci-fi movies, not real life. Not my life.

And yet.

Two suns. Two fucking suns hanging in an alien sky that wasn't quite the right shade of blue—more teal than azure, deeper and more intense than Earth's atmosphere. No moon. No familiar constellations. Just vast, unforgiving space stretching above me like a cosmic joke at my expense.

“This isn't real,” I wheezed, my voice sounding strange in the thinner air. “This is a heat stroke dream. Or someone drugged me. Or?—”

My pack was still on my back, heavier now in what felt like slightly stronger gravity. I fumbled for my satellite phone, though I already knew it was useless. No satellites here to connect to. No cell towers. No internet. No nothing.

I was alone in a way humans had never been alone before.

I staggered forward. My boots sank in the sand. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. My skin was boiling inside my clothes. I tried to think. Tried to record something, say something, but my vision blurred and the buzzing in my ears turned to a roar.

The heat was overwhelming, crushing down on me like a vise.

Each breath felt like inhaling fire. I'd survived a war zone in Syria, an earthquake in Nepal, and a hurricane in Puerto Rico.

I'd stared down gun barrels and corrupt officials and competed with media sharks for the best shots.

But this—this was different. This was beyond human endurance.

My GoCam was still recording, its little green light a steady pulse against the overwhelming orange-gold of this alien desert. Would anyone ever see the footage? Would anyone even look for me when I didn't return?

I had no family waiting for my call. No boyfriend expecting me home. Just an editor who'd want to know why I'd missed my deadline, and podcast listeners who would assume I'd finally given up the ghost-hunting gig.

I collapsed to my knees. Then to my side.

The sand burned through my clothes, scorching my skin, but I couldn't find the strength to move. My heart pounded too fast, then too slow. The world tilted and spun around me, my vision narrowing to a pinprick of consciousness.

And just before darkness swallowed me whole, I saw them.

A pair of eyes—gold, slitted, glowing with something wild and hungry—appearing like twin stars through the haze.

They floated above me, disembodied in my fading vision, before resolving into a face that wasn't human.

Couldn't be human. The angles were wrong, the proportions alien, the skin a burnished copper that reflected the twin suns like metal.

The creature—the person—whatever it was—tilted its head, studying me with predatory intensity. Its mouth moved, forming words I couldn't hear over the rushing in my ears.

I tried to speak. To move. To do anything but lie there dying on alien sand under alien suns.

But my body had reached its limit.

And then everything went black.

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The desert didn't whisper. It screamed. Fine sand hissed against my armor as I crested the dune, scanning the scorched expanse for irregularities.

Nothing but fire and memory. Nothing but heat and echoes.

This wasteland had killed better Reapers than me—and buried technology that should have never been built.

I shouldn't have been here. This was punishment.

Banishment in a tactical uniform. Still, I did what Reapers do. I patrolled.

Twin suns beat down on my shoulders, their combined heat enough to scorch even Rodinian hide.

My fur bristled beneath my cooling suit, seeking release from the confines of technology meant to keep me alive in this inferno.

House Acinonyx warriors were desert-born, but even we had limits.

Two years on this forsaken outpost had taught me mine.

I flexed my claws inside my gauntlets, feeling the sensors adjust to accommodate the movement. High-sensory warriors were too valuable to waste—even grumpy, insubordinate ones who'd questioned orders. So they'd sent me here, to patrol and report and slowly lose my mind to the emptiness.

The sensor in my gauntlet pulsed once. Faint. Organic.

I went still, every sense instantly heightened. Not an echo. Not a glitch. Something alive where nothing should be alive.

My vision shifted, pupils narrowing to slits as I scanned the rippling heat waves. The desert played tricks—mirages, reflections, hallucinations for the desperate. But my sensors didn't lie, and neither did my instincts.

Then I saw her.

Collapsed in a shallow hollow between dunes, face-down in the sand, her limbs twisted in the awkward sprawl of heatstroke and desperation. Her skin was flushed, her lips cracked. A human female. Alone. No equipment. No tether. No atmospheric suit.

Impossible.

I approached cautiously, combat reflexes overriding curiosity. No human should have been able to breach the perimeter. No human should have survived the transit. No human should be here, period.

I knelt beside her, running my scanner over her form. Temperature: dangerously elevated. Heartbeat: erratic but present. Dehydration: severe. She'd be dead within the hour without intervention.

Legion protocol was clear. Unauthorized personnel were to be detained, interrogated, then processed according to threat level. But detention required a living subject, and this one was barely clinging to life.

I reached out, turning her gently onto her back.

Dark hair, matted with sweat and sand, framed a face that, despite its current distress, showed strength in its lines.

Her clothes were reminiscent of the primitive gear and style found on Terra Prime—sturdy materials designed for desert exploration, but woefully inadequate for the dual-sun heat of The Burn.

Her eyelids fluttered—a brief, desperate battle against unconsciousness that she was rapidly losing. Her lips parted, cracked and bleeding, forming a word I couldn't hear.

I cursed the Swarm for creating this scorched wasteland. I cursed myself for not having the necessary resources for a rescue. But I would not leave her, protocol be damned.

Decision made, I scooped her up, cradling her against my chest. She was too light. Overexposed. Her sweat had dried to salt on her skin. How long had she wandered before collapsing? How had she even gotten here?

Her head lolled against my shoulder, her cheek pressing against my chest plate. She moaned something—a name, maybe. Or a plea. It didn't matter. She wouldn't survive the coming storm, and neither would her answers if I left her to die.

I strode back toward my outpost, trying to ignore how right she felt in my arms. How her scent seemed to intensify with each step, wrapping around me like a physical presence.

These were inappropriate reactions. Unproductive thoughts.

I was a Legion Reaper, not some untrained cub experiencing his first rut.

The desert winds were picking up, carrying the electric charge that preceded the

worst of the storms. Sand particles swirled in vicious eddies around my boots, visibility dropping with each passing minute. I increased my pace, unwilling to be caught in the open when the real fury hit.

I reached the protective shelter just as the first lightning bolt split the sky, striking a dune barely half a kilometer away. The static charge made my fur stand on end beneath my armor, but the reinforced walls of the outpost would hold. They always did.

Inside, I carried her directly to the medical bay—a sparse room with basic equipment meant for field triage. I placed her in the medical pod that was reserved for me to use in the most dire of situations.

I hadn't had to use it in the two years of my assignment here.

The pod hummed to life as I initiated the diagnostic sequence. Its sophisticated sensors would stabilize her, hydrate her, and repair the worst of the heat damage. Whether it could reverse the trauma of whatever had brought her here was another question entirely.

I secured the nutrient lines, adjusted the atmospheric settings to compensate for her human physiology, and activated the dermal regenerators for the sun-scorched patches of her skin. Only then did I step back, allowing myself to process what I'd done.

I'd broken protocol. Risked contamination. Prioritized an unknown subject over immediate containment procedures.

The reasons why were beyond anything conscious. It was an instinct, a prime directive I could not ignore, despite what had been trained into me.

It had been the first time in my years of service that I had ever disregarded my training.

As if thinking about them too much called them to me, the communication console chimed. My check-ins. I activated the link to Legion Command, composing my face into its usual stoic mask.

“Reaper Onca reporting. Sector clear. No Swarm activity.” The detail made it the truth—and the omission easier to swallow. “Storm interference expected for the next two rotations. Will resume standard patrols once conditions permit.”

The transmission officer barely looked up from his console. “Acknowledged, Reaper. Maintain position.”

The connection terminated before I could respond. They never expected trouble from my outpost. No one did. That was the point of patrolling dead sites. They were supposed to be inactive and contained.

I returned to the medical bay, watching the pod’s steady lights as it worked to save the human female. Who was she? How had she breached our defenses? And why did her mere presence set my protective instincts on fire?

The storm howled outside, rattling the outpost’s reinforced walls. No answers would come tonight. I decided it would be best to get some rest as well.

My private quarters were in the next room over, close enough to the med bay that I could monitor her condition.

As exhaustion claimed me, my last conscious thought was of her scent—citrus and spice and something I couldn’t name—following me down into darkness.

I saw her like a desert mirage at first, bounding along the ridge of a dune.

Her lithe form cut a silhouette against the dream sky, wild and free in a way no human could move in this world's crushing gravity.

This wasn't reality. This was something else—something ancient, instinctual.

The shared space where fate unveiled its design.

She glanced back at me, challenge in her eyes, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

She thought she could outrun me. My mate was about to learn otherwise.

She raced ahead, black hair streaming behind her like a banner of conquest. Each movement was an invitation—the sway of her hips, the flash of skin where her shirt rode up, the laughter that carried back to me on the dream-wind. My blood surged hot, a growl of anticipation rumbling in my chest.

If it was a race she wanted, she would be sorely disappointed. I am Rodinian—born to the chase, bred for pursuit. I let her gain distance, allowed her the fleeting thrill of believing she might escape, then unleashed my true speed.

I overtook her in moments, enjoying how her hair whipped behind her like a black silk ribbon. The shock on her face when I appeared beside her turned quickly to delight. I swept her up in my arms and over my shoulder, drinking in her squeal of surprise that melted into breathless laughter.

“Put me down, you giant cat!” she demanded, but her hands were already exploring the fur along my shoulders, fingers digging in appreciatively.

“Not until I’ve claimed my prize,” I growled, carrying her toward an oasis that appeared on the horizon.

She felt perfect in my arms, her soft curves molding against my harder planes as I carried her toward the shimmering oasis that appeared ahead.

The water glistened like liquid sapphires beneath twin suns that somehow didn’t burn but caressed our skin with gentle warmth.

This dream-logic didn’t bother me—nothing mattered except the female in my arms, the one whose scent had called to something primal within me the moment I found her collapsed in the desert.

“You can’t catch me forever,” she teased, her breath warm against my neck. “I’m pretty fast for a human.”

“And I am Rodinian,” I rumbled, enjoying the way her body trembled against mine at the deeper register of my voice. “We do not lose our prey.”

The oasis welcomed us with lush vegetation that shouldn’t have existed in this harsh landscape.

Broad-leafed trees provided dappled shade over beds of soft moss and vibrant flowers whose fragrance couldn’t compete with her scent—that intoxicating blend of citrus and spice that had rooted itself in my consciousness.

I laid her down beneath the shade, watching as she stretched like a pleasure-seeking feline, all lithe limbs and inviting curves. Her skin glowed golden in the filtered sunlight, and her eyes—dark as the space between stars—watched me with hunger that matched my own.

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“You’re beautiful,” I said, the words inadequate for what stirred within me. “The mate that the universe provided for me.”

Her lips curved into a smile. “Do you know my name, desert cat? Or am I just prey to you?”

I leaned closer, inhaling deeply at the pulse point beneath her jaw where her scent was strongest. “Jasmine,” I breathed, tasting the name on my tongue. It felt right. Familiar. As though I’d been waiting to speak it my entire life.

Surprise flickered across her features. “Not fair. You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

I lowered my body over hers, careful to keep my weight on my forearms as I brought my mouth to the delicate shell of her ear. My tongue traced its curve, enjoying how she shivered despite the heat.

“You already know it,” I whispered, letting my fangs graze her earlobe. “And I’ll make you say it in pleasure.”

Her breath caught, pupils dilating as arousal flooded her scent. “Tell me,” she demanded, hands coming up to tangle in the fur at the back of my neck.

I growled, allowing her to pull me down for a kiss that started gentle but quickly turned hungry. “You will say it.”

“Rhaekar,” she said on a sigh.

Her mouth was sweet, eager, opening to me as I claimed her with lips and tongue and the careful edge of teeth. I tasted her desire, felt it echo in my own body as my cock hardened against the confines of my sleep pants.

I trailed my mouth down the column of her throat, nipping at the sensitive juncture where her shoulder began.

Each bite drew a gasp from her lips, each lick soothed the sting.

I moved lower, tugging at her clothing that melted away as dreams allow, revealing her breasts—full and perfect, nipples pebbled with anticipation.

I took one into my mouth, suckling with deliberate pressure, watching her face contort with pleasure. Her back arched, pressing more of herself against me as my tongue swirled around the tight bud. My hand found her other breast, kneading the soft flesh before rolling her nipple between my fingers.

“Yes,” she hissed, her hips rising to seek friction against mine. “More.”

I obeyed, alternating between her breasts, learning what made her squirm, what made her moan, what made her grab fistfuls of moss beneath her. When I scraped my fangs lightly across one nipple, she cried out, her entire body shuddering.

“So responsive,” I murmured against her skin, working my way down the flat plane of her stomach. “So perfect for me.”

Her thighs parted willingly as I settled between them, my broad shoulders keeping them spread wide. I pressed my face to the junction of her thighs, inhaling deeply, my growl of approval vibrating against her most intimate flesh.

“Please,” she whispered, one hand coming down to tangle in my hair.

I nipped at the tender skin of her inner thigh, marking her with gentle bites that made her whimper. “Please what, Jasmine? Tell me what you want.”

“Your mouth,” she gasped. “Your tongue. Taste me. Please, Rhaekar.”

My name on her lips sent fire racing through my veins. I rewarded her by parting her folds with my thumbs, exposing the glistening pink of her sex to my hungry gaze. She was already wet for me, slick and swollen, her clit peeking from its hood, begging for attention.

I gave it gladly, a broad lick from her entrance to her clit that had her bucking against my face. I held her hips firmly, keeping her in place as I devoured her, alternating between teasing flicks and firm pressure, learning what made her thrash and what made her beg.

When I slipped a finger inside her tight heat, she clenched around it immediately, her inner walls gripping the digit like a vise. I added a second, stretching her gently as I continued to work her clit with my tongue. Her taste was addictive—sweet and tangy and uniquely hers.

“Rhaekar,” she moaned, her hips moving in rhythm with my thrusting fingers. “I need you. Inside me. Now.”

I rose above her, my sleep pants vanishing as dream-logic asserted itself once more. My cock jutted proudly from the nest of coarse fur at my groin, thick and heavy with desire. Her eyes widened, a mixture of awe and trepidation crossing her features.

“I will fit,” I assured her, positioning myself at her entrance. “We are made for each other.”

I pressed forward slowly, watching her face for any sign of discomfort as I stretched

her inch by inch. Her wetness eased my way, her body gradually accepting my girth with little gasps and moans that drove me to the edge of my control.

“More,” she demanded, wrapping her legs around my waist to pull me deeper. “Faster.”

But I maintained my pace, refusing to rush this first joining. “Patience, little mate. I want this to last.”

Her frustration manifested in nails digging into my shoulders, in teeth nipping at my collarbone, in increasingly urgent rolls of her hips. “Please, Rhaekar. I need it hard. Fast.”

I chuckled, enjoying her desperation even as it stoked my own. When I was fully seated within her, I stilled, savoring the perfect clutch of her body around mine. “Is this what you want?” I asked, grinding my hips in a slow circle that pressed against her sensitive spots.

“No,” she growled, surprising me with her ferocity. “I want you to fuck me like you mean it.”

Something snapped in me then—the last tether of restraint giving way to primal need.

With a growl that rumbled from deep in my chest, I withdrew almost completely before slamming back into her.

Her cry of pleasure spurred me on, and I set a punishing rhythm that had the moss beneath us compressing with each thrust.

Her climax built quickly under this new assault, her inner walls fluttering around my cock as I drove into her again and again. When she came, her back bowed off the

ground, my name tearing from her lips in a hoarse cry that echoed through the oasis.

But I wasn't finished. Before her spasms had fully subsided, I flipped her onto her stomach, pulling her hips up and back to meet my renewed thrusts. This position allowed me even deeper penetration, and I growled my approval as I slid back into her welcoming heat.

My hand fisted in the tangle of her hair, pulling just enough to arch her back at the perfect angle. She moaned, pushing back against me, meeting each thrust with eager movements of her own.

"Again," I commanded, reaching around to circle her clit with firm, quick strokes. "Come for me again, Jasmine."

Her second orgasm hit harder than the first, her entire body convulsing as she cried out wordlessly. The rhythmic clenching of her inner muscles around my cock triggered my own release, and I roared as pleasure crashed through me in waves.

I woke with a jolt, my body still pulsing with the aftershocks of intense pleasure. Jets of my seed pumped onto my abdomen, my fist tangled in the sheets I'd twisted in my sleep. My breath came in ragged pants, my heart hammering against my ribs like a caged animal.

A unity dream. And not just any unity dream—one so powerful, so real, that my body had responded as though she were truly in my arms.

I cleaned myself with quick, efficient movements, my mind racing with the implications. Unity dreams only happened when fate mates were in close proximity. The stronger the dream, the closer the mate.

And this dream had been stronger than any I'd ever heard described.

I strode back to the medical bay, my gaze immediately finding the woman in the pod.

Already the burns on her face had healed, revealing beautiful tanned skin almost as dark as my markings.

A spill of black hair framed features that were exactly as I'd seen in my dream—the full lips I could still feel against mine, the strong line of her jaw, the dark fan of lashes thick and curled.

My fate mate. After years of solitary patrols and empty skies, the universe had delivered her to me—though in a way that had nearly killed her.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, placing my palm against the transparent cover of the pod. “Fate has been unkind in its method of bringing you to me.” I studied the monitor displaying her vitals. They were improving, but slowly. She would need at least a full day to recover before regaining consciousness.

I checked her lines with even greater care now, ensuring the nutrient drips were properly calibrated for her human physiology. I took a deep inhale, committing her scent to memory—no longer just an instinctual attraction but a beacon I would recognize anywhere.

With a final caress along the pod’s surface, directly above her now-healed cheek, I stepped back. “I will meet you again in dreams, Jasmine,” I promised. “And when you wake, I will be here.”

I returned to my sleep cot, which I had pulled into the med bay to remain close to her. As I settled back onto the thin mattress, my body still humming with aftershocks of pleasure, I wondered what she would think when she woke. Would she remember our dream? Would she accept what fate had decreed?

It didn't matter. She was mine, and I was hers. The universe had spoken. Everything else was just details.

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I woke to the mechanical hiss of something opening above me, cold air rushing across my face like the breath of a machine.

My eyelids felt heavy, weighted with exhaustion and remnants of strange dreams that slipped away even as I tried to grasp them.

Dreams of golden sand and strong hands and pleasure so intense it bordered on pain.

The last thing I remembered was collapsing in an alien desert under twin suns.

Everything after that was darkness punctuated by flashes of gold—gold eyes, gold skin, gold heat.

Reality returned in unwelcome fragments. The hard surface beneath me, cool against my skin. The steady beep of unfamiliar equipment. The antiseptic smell that reminded me of hospitals and made my nose wrinkle in automatic distaste.

When I finally forced my eyes open, the world was too bright, too sharp.

I blinked furiously, tears forming at the corners of my eyes as they adjusted to the clinical light.

A metal ceiling swam into focus, followed by curved walls that reminded me of a submarine's interior—compact, utilitarian, designed for function over comfort.

And then I saw him.

He stood at the foot of whatever bed-like contraption I was lying on, arms crossed over a chest so broad it seemed to defy basic human proportions. Because he wasn't human. That much was immediately, jarringly clear.

His skin was a burnished copper, covered in distinctive markings that reminded me of a cheetah's spots, only more geometric, more deliberate.

They swirled down his bare arms and disappeared beneath the waistband of what looked like military-issue pants.

His face was...God, his face. Features too sharp to be human, too symmetrical to be anything but beautiful in an alien, predatory way.

High cheekbones. Strong jaw. A mouth that seemed permanently set in a grim line.

But it was his eyes that stopped my breath. Gold—pure, molten gold—with vertical pupils that contracted slightly as they fixed on mine. They glowed faintly, like a cat's caught in headlights, and held an intelligence that sent a chill down my spine.

I did what any rational person would do when waking up to find themselves being watched by a seven-foot-tall cat man on an alien planet.

I screamed.

The sound tore from my throat, raw and primal. I scrambled backward until my spine hit something solid, pulling my knees to my chest in a futile attempt at protection. My heart hammered against my ribs like it was trying to break free.

The alien didn't flinch. Didn't even blink. Just stared at me with those impossible eyes, his expression utterly unreadable.

“What the fuck?” I gasped when my scream finally died away. “What the actual fuck are you?”

No response. Not even a twitch. Just that steady, unnerving gaze.

I swallowed hard, trying to force my brain into some semblance of rational thought. I was alive. That was good. I wasn’t lying dead in the alien desert. Also good. I appeared to be in some kind of medical facility. Still in the plus column, considering the state I’d been in when I passed out.

But I was also trapped in a room with what looked like a reject from the Thundercats who’d somehow stepped out of my childhood TV screen and into three-dimensional, terrifyingly muscular reality.

“Where am I?” I demanded, my voice steadier than I felt. When he still didn’t respond, I tried again. “Who are you? Why do you look like a GQ cover model mated with a big cat?”

His nostrils flared slightly—the first reaction I’d gotten from him.

Then he turned away, moving with a predatory grace that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

He walked to a panel on the wall, all sleek muscle and contained power, and pressed a series of buttons.

The lights dimmed slightly, and I heard the distant rumble of machinery somewhere beyond the walls.

My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly, reminding me that I hadn’t eaten since...I couldn’t remember when. Before stepping through the portal, certainly.

Before waking up on an alien world with twin suns and lethal heat.

“I asked you a question,” I said, louder this time, trying to ignore the way my voice cracked. “Actually, I asked three.”

He turned back to me, and when he finally spoke, his voice was deeper than I expected—a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through the air between us, rough-edged and undeniably masculine.

“You are not to leave this shelter.”

I blinked, caught off guard by both the sound of his voice and the abrupt command. “Excuse me?”

“There is a storm,” he said, each word precise and clipped, as if human speech was uncomfortable for him. “You will not survive it.”

Oh, perfect. Trapped in a bunker with a hot alien warden who spoke in sentences shorter than a tweet. The absurdity of my situation hit me all at once, and I had to swallow a hysterical laugh.

I pushed myself to my feet, determined to at least face him standing. The room swayed alarmingly, and I grabbed the edge of the medical table to steady myself. My limbs felt simultaneously heavy and weightless, like I was moving through water.

“Great,” I said, aiming for sarcastic but landing somewhere closer to breathless. “So I just stay here? No phone, no signal, no clue how I got to... wherever this is?”

He stepped closer, his movements so fluid they almost seemed choreographed. I instinctively backed up, my spine hitting the wall behind me. In the confined space, he seemed even larger—a wall of muscle and alien otherness that made my heart race

for reasons I wasn't ready to examine.

"You stepped through something not meant for you," he said, his tone flat but his eyes intense. "Now you are here. And until the storm passes, you remain."

I hated how his voice affected me—low, gritty, and just this side of sinful.

I also hated how those ridiculous shoulders filled the doorway like a walking wall of temptation.

He was close enough now that I could see the texture of his skin, the subtle variations in the copper tones, the way his markings seemed to shift with his breathing.

"You could at least tell me your name, Fuzzy McGrowls," I said, falling back on sarcasm as my default defense mechanism.

That earned me a raised eyebrow—a strangely human expression on his alien features. The corner of his mouth twitched, just barely, and I felt an absurd sense of victory at having provoked even that tiny reaction.

But still no name. Still no real answers.

Fine. I could play the waiting game too. For now.

I moved away from the wall, trying to ignore the way my legs trembled, and sat on the edge of the low cot that occupied one corner of the room.

I crossed my arms over my chest, suddenly aware that I was wearing different clothes than I remembered—a simple gray jumpsuit-like garment that wasn't mine.

"You might've kidnapped me, but at least you have great lighting and sexy bone

structure,” I said, letting my gaze travel deliberately over his face, his chest, his arms.

Another blink. Still nothing.

I sighed dramatically. “Look, I get it. Strong, silent type. Very sexy. Very intimidating. But I’m going to need some answers eventually. Like, where exactly am I? What planet? What system? How did I get here? How do I get home? You know, the basics.”

He remained motionless for a long moment, then turned and walked to what appeared to be a storage unit built into the wall.

He opened it, removed something, and returned to stand before me.

He held out a container that looked vaguely like a water bottle, only made of some material I didn’t recognize.

“Drink,” he ordered.

I hesitated, eying the container suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Water. Electrolytes.” He pushed it closer to me. “You need hydration.”

I took it cautiously, unscrewing the cap and sniffing the contents.

It smelled like nothing, which was either a good sign or a very bad one.

My thirst won out over caution. I took a small sip, then a larger one when the cool liquid hit my parched throat.

It tasted vaguely sweet, almost like coconut water but cleaner, and instantly made me

feel more alert.

“Thanks,” I said grudgingly after I’d drained half the bottle.

He nodded once, then moved to a small console near the door. He tapped something on a screen, and suddenly one of the blank walls lit up with what looked like a weather map—swirling patterns of orange and red moving across a digital landscape.

“The storm,” he said, gesturing toward the display. “Sixteen hours remaining. Minimum.”

I stared at the screen, trying to make sense of the data. “Sixteen hours until... what? Until I can leave? Until someone comes to get me? Until you finally explain what the hell is going on?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Until communication is possible. Until extraction can be arranged.”

“Extraction?” That didn’t sound promising. “Am I a tooth now? A resource to be mined? Or just an inconvenient human who landed where she shouldn’t have?”

A low sound rumbled from his chest—not quite a growl, not quite a sigh. “You are an anomaly. Unauthorized presence in a quarantine zone. Protocol dictates?—”

“Oh my god, you actually do talk,” I interrupted, leaning forward. “Complete sentences and everything. Let’s try this again: Who are you? What’s your name? Where am I? And why do you look like you walked straight out of a sci-fi convention’s wet dream?”

He crossed his arms again, muscles flexing in a way that momentarily distracted me. “Rhaekar Onca. Legion Reaper. You are on D-7, colloquially known as The Burn.

Restricted access. Level One quarantine.”

Rhaekar. The name struck a chord somewhere deep in my subconscious, like I’d heard it before. Maybe in my dreams during unconsciousness? And “The Burn”—well, that seemed appropriately ominous for a planet with twin suns and lethal temperatures.

“Legion Reaper,” I repeated. “That sounds...friendly. Very warm and fuzzy. Definitely not terrifying at all.”

His expression didn’t change, but something flickered in those golden eyes. “It is not meant to be...friendly.”

“No kidding.” I finished the water and set the container aside.

“Look, Rhaekar—can I call you Rhae? No? Okay, Rhaekar it is. I didn’t exactly plan this little interplanetary vacation.

One minute I was in the Sahara, following a lead for my podcast. The next minute I’m touching some weird alien tech and falling through what I’m guessing was a portal or wormhole or whatever you want to call it.

And then I’m waking up here with you looming over me like some kind of sexy grim reaper. Cut me some slack.”

“Slack,” he repeated, as if testing the word. Then, to my surprise, his posture relaxed slightly. “You were dying when I found you. Heat exposure. Radiation. Dehydration.”

I blinked, processing this. “You...saved me?”

A short nod.

“Well. Thank you for that.” I ran a hand through my hair, wincing when my fingers caught in tangles. “Though I’m still not clear on why you were there to find me in the first place. Or why this place is quarantined. Or how I’m supposed to get home.”

Rhaekar moved to a small table on the other side of the room and returned with something that looked like a protein bar, only it was blue and faintly luminescent. He held it out to me.

“Eat. Then rest. Questions later.”

I took the bar reluctantly. “Is this going to turn me into a Smurf? Because I have to say, blue isn’t really my color.”

The corner of his mouth twitched again—almost a smile, but not quite. Progress.

I unwrapped the bar and took a tentative bite. It tasted better than it looked—something between almonds and vanilla, with a hint of cinnamon. My stomach growled again, reminding me how hungry I was, and I devoured the rest in three bites.

“So,” I said after swallowing the last mouthful. “Sixteen hours trapped in here with you. Whatever shall we do to pass the time? Twenty questions? Truth or dare? Naked Twister?”

That got me a full-on blink of surprise, his pupils contracting to thin slits before expanding again. I grinned, oddly pleased to have finally rattled him.

“You will rest,” he said, his voice even deeper than before. “Your body requires recovery.”

“Fine, fine. All business, no pleasure. I get it.” I stretched, wincing at the stiffness in my muscles. “But just so you know, I’m not great at following orders. Never have been. It’s kind of my thing.”

For the first time, something like amusement crossed his features—a slight softening around his eyes, a barely perceptible quirk of his lips. “I gathered that.”

I laughed, surprised by the dry humor in his tone. “Oh, so the cat alien does have a personality buried under all that brooding intensity. Good to know.”

He didn’t respond, but he didn’t move away either.

He just watched me with those impossible eyes, studying me like I was a puzzle he couldn’t quite solve.

The intensity of his gaze should have made me uncomfortable, but instead it sent a different kind of heat through me—one that had nothing to do with desert suns or radiation exposure.

“Can I at least get a tour of my stylish new prison?” I asked, gesturing around the small medical bay. “Or am I confined to this room?”

Rhaekar considered this for a moment, then nodded once. “Follow. Do not touch anything.”

He turned and walked toward the door, his movements still unnervingly graceful for someone his size. I stood and followed, curiosity temporarily overriding my fear and confusion.

Whatever had happened, however I’d ended up here, I was stuck for the next sixteen hours minimum. With an alien who looked like he’d walked straight out of my most

secret fantasies, who spoke like each word cost him credits, and who had apparently saved my life.

There were worse situations to be in. Probably.

“Lead on, Thundercat,” I muttered under my breath as I followed him through the doorway. “Let’s see what kind of mess I’ve landed myself in this time.”

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The human female followed me out of the medical bay, her footsteps quick and light compared to my measured stride.

I could hear her heartbeat, still slightly elevated, smell the lingering traces of desert sand and medical antiseptic on her skin.

The scent beneath it all—citrus and spice—called to something primal in me that I refused to acknowledge.

Not now. Not when she was looking at me with those wide, dark eyes, waiting for explanations I wasn't authorized to give and answers I wasn't prepared to offer.

"This is the main corridor," I said, gesturing to the narrow hallway with its reinforced walls. The words felt inadequate even as they left my mouth. What I wanted to say was: This is where I've spent countless solitary rotations, never knowing I was waiting for you.

Instead, I pointed toward the various sealed doorways. "Communications. Storage. Sustenance preparation. Sleeping quarters."

"Wow, so spacious," she quipped, the sarcasm evident in her tone. "Do you also have a ballroom and an Olympic-sized swimming pool tucked away somewhere?"

I blinked at her, momentarily confused. Humor. She was using humor to mask her fear. A surprisingly effective coping mechanism, though it made interaction more challenging. I'd been trained to interrogate, intimidate, and when necessary, eliminate. Not to...banter.

“The outpost is designed for efficiency, not comfort,” I replied, leading her toward the monitoring station. “One Legion operative. Maximum fourteen-day deployment.”

She followed close behind me, close enough that her scent enveloped me with each step. Close enough that if I turned suddenly, she would collide with my chest. The thought sent an inappropriate surge of heat through my veins.

Focus, Reaper.

The monitoring station hummed with activity—screens displaying atmospheric conditions, radiation levels, and the storm’s progress. I gestured toward the main display where swirling patterns of orange and red showed the storm’s intensity.

“As I said, sixteen hours minimum before communications can be restored.” I kept my voice neutral, professional. “Legion protocol will then dictate extraction procedures.”

She leaned forward to study the screen, her long braid sliding over her shoulder. “And what exactly does ‘extraction’ mean for me? Are we talking comfy spaceship ride back to Earth, or something more...invasive?”

The word ‘invasive’ conjured images from our shared dream that I immediately suppressed. I cleared my throat.

“Standard quarantine and decontamination. Debriefing.” I hesitated, then added reluctantly, “Memory protocols may be implemented.”

Her head snapped up, eyes narrowing. “Memory protocols? As in, making me forget? Oh hell no. That’s not happening.”

I should have explained that it was non-negotiable, that Legion security was

paramount. Instead, I found myself saying, “That decision is beyond my authority.”

It wasn’t a promise, but it wasn’t a denial either. The lie of omission sat uncomfortably between us.

She studied my face for a long moment, as if trying to read truth in my alien features. “We’ll see about that,” she finally said, the determination in her voice making something in my chest tighten with admiration.

I moved us along to the food preparation area—little more than a narrow counter with built-in heating elements and a small conservation unit for rations.

Standard Legion fare: protein compounds, nutrient supplements, hydration capsules.

Nothing that would appeal to human tastes, but it would keep her alive.

“You require sustenance,” I said, reaching past her to access the storage compartment. Our arms brushed, the brief contact sending electricity through my skin. I froze for a fraction of a second, fighting the instinct to pull her closer, to wrap myself around her and never let go.

She didn’t seem to notice my momentary lapse, busy examining the strange packages I was arranging on the counter.

“Please tell me that’s not all freeze-dried space cardboard,” she said, poking at one of the ration packs.

“It contains all necessary nutrients for?—”

“For survival, yeah, I get it.” She sighed dramatically. “No pizza delivery out here in the space boonies, I guess.”

I unwrapped one of the nutrient bars and offered it to her. “This one contains proteins similar to your Earth nuts. Almonds, I believe.”

She took it with a raised eyebrow. “You know about almonds?”

Of course I did. I’d studied Earth extensively during my training. Known Terran weaknesses, strengths, cultural touchpoints. But I couldn’t tell her that. “Legion data files are...thorough.”

She bit into the bar and made a face, but continued eating. I watched her throat work as she swallowed, entranced by the simple movement. In our dream, I had tasted the salt of her skin there, felt her pulse against my tongue.

“Water?” I asked, my voice rougher than I intended.

She nodded, and I retrieved a hydration pack for her. Our fingers brushed during the exchange, and I withdrew mine perhaps too quickly. Her scent had changed subtly—still citrus and spice, but with a new note I recognized all too well. Arousal. Faint but undeniable.

Did she remember our dream? Feel the pull between us? Or was it simply a biological response to stress and proximity?

“So,” she said after draining half the pack, “where do I sleep? Or do you expect me to stand at attention all night like a good little prisoner?”

I led her to the final doorway. Inside was a compact sleeping chamber—one narrow bunk built into the wall, storage beneath it, environmental controls nearby.

“You will rest here,” I said, adjusting the temperature settings to better suit human comfort levels. “I will remain in the monitoring station.”

She looked at the bunk, then back at me, her expression skeptical. “That’s barely big enough for me. Where do you usually sleep?”

“Here.” The word escaped before I could consider its implications.

She smirked. “Well, this just got awkward.”

I stiffened, desperately searching for the right response. “I require less rest than humans,” I finally said. “And there are emergency provisions I can utilize.”

In truth, I had no intention of sleeping while she was here. Not if it meant risking another Unity dream. Not when the reality of her was mere steps away, testing my control with every breath, every movement, every flash of those dark eyes.

“If you say so, big guy.” She yawned suddenly, her body finally succumbing to the exhaustion she’d been fighting. “God, I’m tired. Being portaled to an alien death planet really takes it out of a girl.”

I watched as she sat on the edge of the bunk, her shoulders slumping with fatigue. The medical pod had healed the worst of her injuries, but her body still needed natural recovery time. She needed rest. Food. Protection.

The urge to provide these things was overwhelming—not just as a duty, but as a need buried deep in my bones.

“Rest,” I said, the word emerging gentler than I intended. “I will bring additional sustenance when you wake.”

She looked up at me, fatigue softening her features. For a moment, her guard dropped, and I glimpsed the vulnerability beneath her bravado. It hit me like a physical blow, that trust, however temporary.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “For saving me out there. I would have died if you hadn’t found me.”

I inclined my head, unable to trust my voice. What could I say? That finding her was the most significant event of my existence? That the thought of her death hollowed me out in ways I couldn’t articulate?

She stretched out on the bunk, not bothering to remove the gray jumpsuit we’d dressed her in after the medical treatment. Her eyes were already closing, her breathing slowing. The combined effects of the healing, the food, and her ordeal were pulling her rapidly toward sleep.

I should have left immediately. Instead, I found myself lingering, watching the rise and fall of her chest, the way her hair spilled across the pillow. My fate mate. Here. Real.

When I was certain she was deeply asleep, I reached out, allowing myself the smallest indulgence—one finger lightly tracing the curve of her jaw, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine without the barrier of the medical pod between us.

“Kassari,” I whispered, the Rodinian word for fate-chosen falling from my lips like a prayer.

Then I withdrew, locking down every instinct that screamed at me to stay, to curl around her, to guard her sleep with fang and claw. Instead, I stepped back, securing the door in its open position so I could hear if she called out in distress.

I would not sleep. Not tonight. I would maintain my vigil from the monitoring station, keep the necessary distance, retain control of the primal urges that threatened to overwhelm me.

For now, she was safe. Fed. Resting.

It would have to be enough.

She was soft, warm, and utterly unaware that I was five seconds away from flinging myself headfirst into madness.

Not that I would show it. On the outside?

Controlled. Stoic. Reaper-trained. On the inside?

Ferality. Pure, uncut. I stood near the water recycler, arms crossed, pretending to inspect the condensation levels when really, I was trying not to watch the sway of her hips as she bent over to check her boots—now half-melted by the heat but somehow still clinging to her tiny human feet like stubborn parasites.

My tail, traitorous bastard that it was, had attempted three separate times last night to wrap itself around her waist whenever she was near, and when she'd fallen asleep, I'd had to physically restrain it with my hand.

I'd snarled at my own appendage like a deranged predator. Which, to be fair, I was. Sort of.

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She'd woken an hour ago, seeming refreshed despite the circumstances.

Now she moved through the small space of the outpost like she owned it, examining everything with those curious fingers and asking questions I answered in clipped sentences while my inner voice composed elaborate sonnets about the curve of her neck.

"These are toast," she muttered, tossing her ruined boots aside. "Any chance you've got human footwear in that magic storage unit of yours?"

"Negative." What I didn't say: I could carry you everywhere. You wouldn't need to touch the ground again. Just wrap your legs around my waist and?—

"Guess I'm going barefoot then." She wiggled her toes, oblivious to the effect her simple movements had on me. "These floors are cold."

I adjusted a control panel without looking at it. "Temperature increase initiated."

She glanced up, surprise flitting across her features. "Thanks."

I inclined my head, not trusting myself to speak. Did she remember our shared Unity dream? Where I'd tasted every inch of her skin, heard her cry my name in pleasure? Did her subconscious remember me?

Perhaps no. Fate mates were so rare; rarer still to have humans familiar with Rodinian culture to even know what was considered normal. Yet, for me, every molecule in my body strained toward her like she was gravity itself.

She stirred from her inspection of the room and blinked up at me with those wide, dark eyes that were currently ruining my ability to remain sane.

“Why are you standing like a gargoyle over there?” she asked, yawning.

“I am meditating,” I said, voice calm, unbothered.

Lie.

I was imagining biting her neck and claiming her in seven different positions.

“Oh. Okay. You do that. I’m going to find a snack. Again.”

She wandered off toward the ration packs like she hadn’t just detonated a nuclear-level mating urge in me by saying the word “snack.” My mind immediately supplied the image of her sprawled across the monitoring console, her legs spread, my head between her thighs, feasting?—

I turned to face the far wall, inhaling sharply.

Meditation. Breathe. Focus.

I was a Reaper. I had been trained to resist pain, deprivation, and psychological manipulation. Surely I could resist one tiny, sassy human woman who smelled like warm sunlight and tasted like salted sweat and promise in dreams that felt more real than any mission I’d ever undertaken.

I lowered myself to the cold floor, crossing my legs in the traditional Rodinian meditation pose. The coolness against my heated skin helped ground me slightly. I closed my eyes, seeking the mental discipline that had carried me through countless battles and hostile environments.

My claws retracted slowly, though my cock remained inconveniently firm beneath my armor. I shifted, trying to find a position that didn't remind me of my body's betrayal.

Unity dreams don't lie.

She was kassari. Mine. Fate-mate. She didn't know it yet, and I refused to pressure her into anything she didn't choose for herself. That wasn't the bond. That wasn't us.

Still...

The soft sound of her rummaging through the storage compartments penetrated my attempted meditation. I heard the crinkle of packaging, the tiny sound of satisfaction she made when she found something appealing. Such mundane activities shouldn't hold my attention so completely.

And yet.

Her laugh carried across the bunker as she discovered a particularly colorful nutrient pack. My heart did something deeply embarrassing in my chest—a flutter that belonged to adolescent cubs, not battle-hardened Reapers.

Stars help me.

I was going to die.

Either from mating fever or sheer humiliation when she eventually realized that the big bad Rodinian Reaper was having nightly wet dreams about her and mentally writing her name into the sand like a lovesick cub.

“Is this supposed to be fruit?” Her voice broke through my spiraling thoughts. “It

tastes like someone described strawberries to a computer that's never seen one."

I opened my eyes to find her standing a few feet away, holding a red nutrient packet. The sight of her lips, slightly stained from whatever she'd been eating, nearly undid my carefully constructed calm.

"Synthetic compounds," I managed. "Designed to approximate familiar flavors."

"They missed the mark." She shrugged, then added, "But I'm not complaining. Better than dying of starvation on alien death world."

"The Burn," I corrected automatically.

"Yeah, that's what I said. Alien death world." Her smile flashed, quick and bright. "Though I guess it's less deadly with you around."

Something warm and dangerous unfurled in my chest at her words. Pride. Pleasure at the acknowledgment of protection provided. Ancient Rodinian instincts responding to the subtle praise from a potential mate.

She dropped onto the mat again, sighing contentedly, seemingly at ease despite her circumstances.

Her adaptability was remarkable. I'd heard stories of the softer races.

How most would be panicking, demanding answers, attempting escape.

She had done all that initially, yes, but now she seemed to be taking the situation in stride, assessing, observing.

"Still meditating?" she teased.

“Yes.”

Also: imagining your thighs wrapped around my waist, your body arched beneath mine, your voice breaking as you scream my name the way you did in our shared dream.

“Cool. Have fun with that.”

I didn’t respond. If I opened my mouth now, the words “Let me claim you, little flame, let me ruin you gently” might escape—and then I’d really be in trouble. For wanting her.

So I stayed quiet. Still. Breathing in the scent of my fate.

She stretched out on the mat, her limbs extending gracefully. “How much longer until this storm passes, anyway? Not that I’m not enjoying our stimulating conversations.”

“Eight hours, seventeen minutes.” I could tell her the seconds as well, but that might reveal too much about how acutely aware I was of every moment spent in her presence.

“Guess we’re stuck with each other a while longer then.” She yawned again, the release of tension suggesting she felt safe enough to relax. Safe with me. The thought sent another surge of pride through my system.

I watched her through slightly narrowed eyes as she adjusted her position, getting comfortable.

Her scent had changed again—still that intoxicating blend of citrus and spice, but mellowed now with contentment and drowsiness.

She was drifting back toward sleep, her body still recovering from its ordeal.

Good. Sleep would give me time to regain control. To plan. To figure out how to explain to Legion Command that I could not—would not—allow them to erase her memories. That she was kassari, and therefore under my protection by laws older than the Legion itself.

That I would tear apart anyone who tried to harm her.

The violence of that thought should have alarmed me. Instead, it settled into my bones with comfortable certainty. This was what it meant to find one's fate-mate. This fierce, uncompromising need to protect, to claim, to cherish.

She mumbled something unintelligible as she curled onto her side, her breathing deepening into sleep.

I remained in my meditation pose, watching over her, gathering my strength.

And hoping the stars would give me strength. Or a cold shower.

Preferably both.

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It started with a hiss. Not from the alien, who had apparently taken a vow of dramatic brooding, but from the water purifier.

The sound cut through the stale recycled air of our little bunker, startling me from my third attempt to inventory what was left of my personal belongings after my unexpected interplanetary vacation.

I'd been awake for a few hours, restless and unable to fall back asleep with my skin still buzzing from dreams too vivid to dismiss.

Dreams that left me flushed and frustrated, with phantom sensations of strong hands and golden eyes.

Dreams that felt strangely familiar, like memories I couldn't quite place.

The purifier hissed again, more aggressively this time, followed by an alarming pop and the distinct smell of something electrical giving up the ghost.

"Hey, uh... Mr. Tall, Grim, and Growly?" I called out, abandoning my pathetic pile of half-melted possessions and crouching beside the sparking device. "Your apocalypse Keurig is throwing a tantrum."

No answer. Of course.

I glanced over my shoulder and, yep—there he was, standing like a granite sculpture with arms crossed and eyes glowing faintly in the low light. Watching. Always watching. His massive frame somehow managed to make the already cramped shelter

feel both smaller and safer at the same time.

“Do you even speak?” I asked, voice rising with mock incredulity.

“Or do you just... brood people into submission? Because if it’s the latter, I should warn you that I’m particularly resistant to tall, dark, and silent types.

” That was a lie. I was extremely susceptible to his particular brand of brooding intensity, a fact I was desperately trying to ignore.

Still no response, though his jaw ticked. Aha! Progress.

The purifier gave one last pathetic wheeze before spitting out a stream of what looked suspiciously like steam instead of water. I leapt back with a yelp that I would later deny vehemently.

“Okay, seriously, I think it’s dying. And since I’m guessing water is kind of important in this hellscape desert of yours, maybe we should do something?”

He walked over finally, every heavy step somehow quieter than my heartbeat, and knelt beside me.

Without a word, he popped open the panel, large clawed hands far more gentle than I expected as he fiddled with internal components.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop a comment about how even his fingers were annoyingly attractive—long, strong, with those predatory claws that retracted partially as he worked with delicate parts.

The proximity was torture. Heat radiated from his body like a furnace, carrying that scent I couldn’t place—something wild and masculine and definitely not human.

Something that made my mouth water embarrassingly.

“Do you glower at all broken appliances,” I said lightly, desperate to break the silence, “or am I just lucky?”

He looked up at me then, eyes narrowing, his voice gravel and thunder. “You talk too much.”

“Right,” I muttered. “Definitely not a conversationalist.”

Still, I didn’t move as he worked. I liked the heat of him, the scent—something earthy and dry, like sunbaked stone and wild herbs. I was dangerously close to leaning into him when he handed me a replacement tube with a single grunted word: “Hold.”

I held. Probably held my breath too. Our fingers brushed during the exchange, and the contact sent an electric jolt up my arm that had absolutely nothing to do with the malfunctioning purifier.

His skin was hot and slightly rough, textured in a way human skin wasn’t. The brief touch lingered like a brand.

I watched his face as he worked, fascinated by the subtle expressions that crossed his alien features.

Concentration furrowed his brow. Irritation tightened his jaw.

Satisfaction softened his eyes when a connection clicked into place.

He was more expressive than he knew, or at least more than he intended to be.

When the purifier finally purred instead of hissed, I grinned. “Look at that.

Teamwork.”

He stood, his massive frame unfolding with that fluid grace that never failed to mesmerize me. “Stay out of the systems next time.”

“Aw, he cares.” I placed a hand over my heart in mock surprise.

His look was flat. “I care about not dying of dehydration.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled anyway. This whole thing was weird.

Alien tech. Alien desert. Alien man. And now, alien flirtation, apparently.

Because no matter how grumpy he tried to act, I wasn’t imagining the way his eyes dropped to my mouth.

Or the way his tail twitched every time I touched my hair.

I made a strategic retreat to the other side of the small common area, busying myself with reorganizing my meager possessions while my face burned. Smooth, Jas. Real smooth. Accidentally propositioning the alien warrior who’s keeping you alive. A+ survival strategy.

But when I dared to glance up again, I caught him watching me, something almost like amusement softening his stern features. His tail swayed gently behind him, a rhythmic movement that seemed unconscious. It was... strangely captivating.

“Four hours,” he said suddenly.

I blinked. “What?”

“Until the storm clears. Four hours.”

Four more hours trapped in this shelter with him. Four more hours of this strange, electric tension. Four more hours of pretending I wasn't increasingly drawn to someone who wasn't even human.

“Great,” I said, aiming for nonchalance and landing somewhere near desperate. “Can't wait.”

His tail twitched again, and I wondered if it gave away his thoughts the way a human's face might. If so, I desperately needed a translation guide. Because something told me surviving the next four hours would be a hell of a lot harder than surviving the alien desert.

The temperature dropped first, which made no sense on a planet hot enough to fry an egg on my forehead.

Then, with a sound like a dying whale, the environmental controls went haywire.

Red warning lights flashed across the console as the shelter's system fought a losing battle against whatever was happening outside.

“What the hell?” I pressed my palm against the wall, feeling it vibrate beneath my touch. “Is this normal?”

Rhaekar stalked to the control panel, his movements tense and controlled. “Radiation surge from the storm. Overwhelming the cooling systems.”

As if to punctuate his explanation, the lights flickered once, twice, then dimmed to an eerie emergency glow.

And with that dimming came the heat—not gradually, but all at once, like someone had opened the door to a blast furnace.

Within seconds, sweat beaded along my hairline and trickled down my spine.

“Fuck,” I gasped, already feeling my clothes sticking to my skin. “What happened to ‘advanced alien technology’?”

His golden eyes gleamed in the low light as his fingers flew over the controls. “Legion tech. Not designed for anomalies of this magnitude.”

“Great. So we’re going to bake alive in here?”

He didn’t answer immediately, focused on whatever emergency protocols he was engaging. The shelter’s systems responded with a series of angry beeps that didn’t sound promising.

I peeled my shirt away from my skin, already soaked through. “Jesus, it’s like a sauna in here.”

“Remove excess clothing,” he ordered without looking at me, still working frantically at the console. “Conserve your body’s cooling mechanisms.”

“Excuse me?”

“Human physiology is inefficient at temperature regulation. You will overheat faster than I will.”

Well. Hard to argue with that kind of cold biological assessment. I stripped down to my tank top and shorts, fanning myself like some sort of stranded pin-up girl. The relative lack of clothing helped, but not much. The heat was relentless, pressing

against my skin like a physical force.

Rhaekar finally abandoned the console with a growl of frustration. “System is locked. Self-protection protocol.” He turned to a storage compartment and yanked out what looked like a thin silver mat. “Emergency thermal regulation.”

“A space blanket?” I asked incredulously. “It’s already hot enough to cook meat in here!”

“Heat shield. Reflects ambient temperature.” He unfurled the mat on the floor, the material gleaming strangely in the emergency lighting. “It will protect from radiation and extreme heat.”

And then came the kicker: only one heat-shielded mat. Just one.

I looked at the mat, then at him, then back at the mat. It was barely big enough for one of us, let alone both—especially considering his massive frame took up about twice the space of an average human.

“I’m not cuddling you,” I warned, already knowing where this was headed.

“I wouldn’t allow it,” he said, deadpan. But something in his eyes flickered—a heat that had nothing to do with the malfunctioning environmental systems.

Ten minutes later, I was definitely cuddling him.

It wasn’t like I had a choice. The heat pressed down like a weighted blanket soaked in lava.

And he...well, he radiated cool calm like an enormous space AC unit, his body somehow maintaining a comfortable temperature despite the inferno around us.

I justified every inch I scooted closer with science.

Body heat regulation. Shared survival tactics. Shut up.

We lay side by side on the mat, his massive body dwarfing mine, careful inches of space between us that grew smaller with each passing minute. His breathing was measured, controlled, while mine came in shallow pants as I fought the dual discomfort of the heat and the proximity to him.

“Try to rest,” he rumbled, his voice vibrating through the small space between us. “Conserve energy.”

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered. “You’re not the one whose brain is being slow-cooked.”

His response was to shift slightly, one arm extending beneath my head like an offering. “Elevated position will improve circulation. It will help.”

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I hesitated, pride warring with practicality. But the heat won out. I allowed myself to rest against his arm, my head pillowed on his bicep, which was approximately the size of a small tree trunk. The effect was immediate—blessed coolness radiating from his skin to mine.

“Oh,” I breathed, unable to stop myself from pressing closer. “That’s... better.”

A sound rumbled in his chest—not quite a growl, not quite a purr. His tail curled loosely around my ankle, the touch so light I might have imagined it.

“Sleep,” he commanded softly. “I will monitor the systems.”

But that night, sleep didn’t come easy.

Instead, vivid dreams wrapped around me like a net of silk and fire. Hands I recognized but shouldn’t. A mouth on my skin. My name in that gravel voice, turned reverent and hungry.

I was in a different place—still a desert, but beautiful rather than deadly.

Golden dunes stretched to the horizon under a sky painted in impossible colors.

And he was there, Rhaekar, but different—his full alien nature on display, magnificent and primal.

The markings on his skin gleamed like burnished gold, his eyes fierce and hungry as they locked on mine.

“Kassari,” he called, the word unfamiliar yet instantly meaningful. “My fate mate.”

He stalked toward me with predatory grace, and instead of running, I moved to meet him. His hands found my waist, hot and possessive, lifting me effortlessly. My legs wrapped around him as if they’d always belonged there.

“This is a dream,” I murmured against his mouth.

“This is unity,” he corrected, his voice deeper, rougher. “The sharing of mates.”

His kiss devastated me—hot and demanding and perfect. I opened for him instantly, his tongue sliding against mine in a dance that felt like coming home. His taste was exotic and familiar all at once, sending sparks of pleasure cascading through my body.

We were suddenly on the ground, the sand beneath us impossibly soft. His weight pressed me down, delicious and commanding, as his mouth traveled from my lips to my jaw, my neck, my collarbone. Every touch ignited new fires beneath my skin.

“I need—” I gasped, arching as his sharp teeth grazed my pulse point.

“Tell me,” he growled, his hands sliding beneath my clothes, which seemed to melt away at his touch. “Tell me what you need, little flame.”

“You,” I breathed, shameless with desire. “Inside me. Now.”

He growled again, the sound vibrating through my bones. His claws extended, carefully shredding what remained of my clothing without scratching my skin. Then his mouth was on my breast, hot and wet, tongue circling my nipple before sucking hard enough to make me cry out.

“Fuck,” I moaned, threading my fingers through his hair, surprised to find it soft despite its wild appearance. “More, please?—”

He obliged, his mouth working magic on my sensitive flesh while his hand slid lower, across my stomach, between my thighs. When his fingers found my center, already slick with need, we both groaned.

“So wet for me,” he purred, his golden eyes meeting mine as he stroked through my folds. “So ready.”

“Yes,” I hissed, bucking against his hand. “Don’t tease me, Rhaekar.”

The sound of his name on my lips seemed to break something in him. With a fluid motion, he positioned himself between my thighs, the blunt head of his cock pressing against my entrance. He was huge, intimidatingly so, but my body welcomed him as if made for this—for him.

“Mine,” he growled as he pushed inside, stretching me exquisitely with each careful inch. “My kassari. My mate.”

I cried out as he filled me completely, the sensation so perfect it bordered on pain. He stilled, giving me time to adjust, his body trembling with the effort of his restraint.

“Yours,” I agreed, not understanding the full meaning but feeling the truth of it in my bones. “And you’re mine.”

That admission unleashed him. He began to move, long powerful strokes that hit something deep inside me with each thrust. I clung to his shoulders, nails digging into his skin as pleasure built with shocking speed.

“Harder,” I demanded, wrapping my legs tighter around his waist. “I won’t break.”

He snarled, baring teeth that were sharper than human, more predatory. The sight sent a thrill through me that I couldn't explain—shouldn't want—but did.

“Bite me,” I begged, the words spilling from me without conscious thought. “Mark me. Claim me.”

His rhythm faltered for just a moment, his eyes widening with surprise before darkening with primal hunger. “Do you know what you ask for, little flame?”

“I don't care,” I gasped as he hit a spot inside me that made stars explode behind my eyelids. “I need it. Need you.”

His pace increased, driving me higher, building a pleasure so intense it bordered on unbearable. His mouth descended to my neck, breath hot against my pulse point.

“It will bind us,” he warned, even as his hips maintained their relentless rhythm. “Forever.”

“Yes,” I moaned, tangling my fingers in his hair and pulling his mouth closer to my neck. “Please, Rhaekar. Make me yours.”

With a growl that vibrated through my entire body, he sank his teeth into the junction of my neck and shoulder—not breaking skin but applying exquisite pressure.

The slight pain combined with the pleasure of his cock driving into me pushed me over the edge.

I came with a scream, my inner walls clamping down on him as waves of ecstasy crashed through me.

He followed immediately, his release triggering another wave of pleasure that left me

sobbing his name.

I felt something strange, a physical change as he swelled inside me, locking us together as his seed pumped deep.

The sensation was foreign but perfect, prolonging my orgasm until I could barely breathe through the pleasure.

We stayed joined, panting, as aftershocks rippled through us both. His teeth released my neck, his tongue gently soothing the mark he'd left.

“My kassari,” he murmured against my skin. “Mine at last.”

I woke with a gasp, heart pounding and legs tangled in the protective blanket. My skin buzzed like it remembered every touch from the dream, my center throbbing with phantom pleasure so real I had to press my thighs together to ease the ache.

When I dared glance over at the space beside me, I saw that I was alone, the emergency lights cast a strange glow around me. And, I wasn't sure whether I was disappointed in myself or him?

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I woke with my claws dug deep into the heat shield, my body rigid and aching in ways that would make a Legion medical officer prescribe immediate isolation.

The scent of her—citrus, spice, and the unmistakable musk of arousal—filled my lungs with every desperate breath.

My fate mate had dreamed with me. Had begged me to claim her.

And stars help me, every cell in my body demanded I comply.

“Make me yours,” she’d said in our Unity dream. The echo of her voice still vibrated through my bones, a siren call that threatened to shatter decades of discipline in seconds.

I didn’t dare move. Not with my cock painfully engorged beneath my regulation pants, not with my tail twitching like a live wire seeking a ground.

My fingers flexed, claws retracting with effort.

I needed to get up. To move away. To put distance between us before I did something irreversible.

Like pin her beneath me. Like taste her again, this time in reality instead of dreams. Like sink my teeth into that perfect junction of neck and shoulder where I’d marked her in our shared vision.

Kassari. My fate mate. The most revered bond in Rodinian culture—and I’d found

mine in the least convenient location in the galaxy, at the most inconvenient time possible, in the form of a fragile Terran female who had no idea what was happening.

Brilliant work, Reaper. Exemplary mission parameters.

I forced myself to breathe normally, to regain control of my heart rate. The Legion had trained me to withstand torture, to ignore pain, to function despite catastrophic injury. Surely I could manage one small human female and her intoxicating scent.

A merciful interruption came in the form of a loud mechanical clunk from somewhere deep in the shelter's systems. It was followed by a high-pitched whine that any engineer would recognize as bad news.

I seized the opportunity like a drowning man grabbing a lifeline.

"Environmental controls," I said, my voice embarrassingly rough. "Stabilizers failing."

Her brow furrowed, confusion replacing the heat in her eyes. "Is that... dangerous?"

"Yes." Probably not as dangerous as staying here with her, but she didn't need to know that. "System needs manual override. I must attend to it."

I sat up in one fluid motion, keeping my back to her as I fought to calm my rebellious body. My tail, the traitorous appendage, swished behind me with obvious interest. If tails could talk, mine would be shouting obscenities at me for moving away from her.

I'm sorry, but I don't take orders from my extremities. Not even when they're technically right.

"Will you be okay here?" I asked, still not turning. "I need to check the auxiliary

systems. It may take...time.”

Hours, preferably. Long enough for both our scents to clear from the enclosed space. Long enough for me to remember why seducing a human female during a high-priority Legion mission was a terrible idea.

“I’m fine,” she said, her voice smaller than usual. “Do what you need to do.”

I risked a glance back at her. Mistake. Her hair was tousled from sleep, her cheeks flushed, her lips still parted. She looked exactly like she had in our dream, right after I’d—

Nope. Not going there.

I stood abruptly, nearly hitting my head on the low ceiling. “Rest,” I ordered, more gruffly than I intended. “The storm has weakened. You need strength for extraction.”

She nodded, pulling the heat shield closer around her slender form. The motion released another wave of her scent, and I nearly stumbled as it hit me. Sweet stars, she smelled like paradise and sin wrapped into one delectable package.

I needed to get out of here before I embarrassed myself.

Or worse, before I gave in to the urge to explain exactly what had happened between us.

To tell her that on my world, what we’d shared was the equivalent of a soul-binding.

That Unity dreams didn’t lie. That we were meant for each other in ways that transcended species and cultures.

That would go over well. “Excuse me, human female I found dying in a desert, but we’re cosmically destined to mate for life.

Please ignore the fact that I look like your planet’s apex predator stuffed into humanoid form.

Also, did I mention the part where we’re locked together during sex?

No? Let me explain while you back away slowly. ”

The mechanical whine increased in pitch, giving me the perfect excuse to flee. “I must go,” I said, already moving toward the door. “Stay. Here.”

I didn’t wait for her response. I couldn’t.

Not when every step away from her felt like tearing something vital from my chest. The Rodinian mating instinct was powerful, overwhelming for those unprepared.

And despite my years of training, despite my reputation as the Legion’s most controlled operative, I was definitely unprepared for Jasmine Navarro.

I palmed the door panel with more force than necessary, slipping into the corridor beyond. The cooler air hit my overheated skin like a blessing, though it did little to calm the fire in my veins. I leaned against the wall, eyes closed, focusing on my breathing.

Get it together, Reaper. You’ve faced down Swarm hives without flinching. You’ve survived planetary bombardment. You’ve infiltrated hostile territories with nothing but your claws and your wits. You can handle one small human female.

Even if she is your fate mate.

Even if she did beg you to claim her in the most explicit terms possible.

Even if your body is currently staging a full-scale rebellion against your orders.

My tail lashed behind me, expressing its profound disagreement with my chosen course of action. My cock remained stubbornly, painfully erect despite my best efforts to think of Legion disciplinary procedures and cold vacuum exposure.

“Not helping,” I muttered to my rebellious appendages.

I pushed away from the wall, straightening my spine. I was Rhaekar Onca, Legion Reaper, scion of House Acinonyx. I had a duty to perform, protocols to follow, a mission to complete.

And if that mission now included protecting my unexpected fate mate from both external threats and my own overwhelming desire to claim her... well, that was just another challenge to overcome.

I headed toward the auxiliary control room, every step an exercise in willpower.

The mechanical problem was real—I could hear the struggling air recyclers from here—but it wasn’t urgent.

Still, it gave me purpose, direction, something to focus on besides the woman I’d left behind on that heat shield.

The woman who, if fate had its way, would eventually be mine in every sense that mattered.

If we both survived long enough for that to happen.

My tail gave one final, disgusted twitch before settling into its usual rhythm behind me. Even it knew when to admit temporary defeat.

But temporary was the operative word. Because one thing was certain—this conversation wasn't over. It was merely postponed.

And when it resumed, I had no idea what I would say. Or if words

The heat flare had passed during the night, leaving the air thick and the sands eerily quiet.

I stepped outside at first light, my senses immediately cataloging the changed environment—radiation levels down, temperature stabilized, storm debris scattered like forgotten toys across the dunes.

Perfect calm after perfect chaos. Exactly like my internal state after sharing that dream with Jas.

On the outside? Professional. Composed. Ready for duty.

On the inside? A complete disaster of primal urges and inappropriate fantasies about a human woman who had no idea she'd accidentally stumbled into being my cosmic soulmate.

I'd left her sleeping, curled into the warmth I'd vacated. She'd murmured something unintelligible when I'd extricated myself from our shared heat mat, her small hand reaching briefly before finding my pillow instead. The sight had nearly broken my resolve to check the perimeter. Nearly.

The silence of The Burn pressed against my ears, making me listen harder for threats that might be lurking beneath the deceptive calm.

My tail flicked once—an unconscious tell that I’d long ago given up trying to control.

It had a mind of its own, especially around Jas.

Three separate attempts to coil around her waist last night.

Embarrassing. I was a trained Reaper, not some hormone-addled cub with his first crush.

Yet here I was, thinking about her scent rather than focusing on the half-buried perimeter sensors blinking lazily under a thin film of red dust. I knelt to check the western unit, my fingers brushing over the sand-etched alloy. No power. No signal. No surprise.

“Fantastic,” I muttered to the empty desert. My superior hearing confirmed that Jas was still asleep inside—her heartbeat steady and slow, her breathing deep. Good. I needed time to compose myself after what we’d shared. After feeling her body against mine, her dream-self begging me to claim her.

Not helpful, brain. Focus on the dead tech.

The flare had likely fried every exposed component across Base D-7’s sprawl. The good news: no signs of immediate danger. The bad news? The communications relay was toast. I’d have to dig out the secondary panel, reroute the charge coils, and pray to the stars nothing had surged past the breakers.

And all this while pretending I hadn’t just experienced the most intense Unity dream of my life with a woman who probably thought I was a hallucination brought on by heat stroke. Perfect.

I stood and turned toward the distant dunes, watching the horizon ripple like a

mirage. But this was no illusion. Beneath the surface, something pulsed—deep, steady, and ancient. Swarm tech.

I could feel it again, that low thrum beneath my boots, the way it had hummed to life in pockets ever since Jas arrived. As if her presence had stirred something slumbering. Maybe it was coincidence. Maybe it was the buried hive-mind recognizing someone it didn't catalog as Legion.

Or maybe the universe had a sick sense of humor, sending my fate mate to the one place in the galaxy guaranteed to complicate our bonding with deadly alien tech and Legion protocols that would have her memory wiped if I didn't figure something out fast.

I growled low in my throat, the sound rumbling up from my chest without conscious thought.

A group of small reptilian scavengers that had been cautiously approaching scattered at the noise, skittering back beneath the shelter of a nearby rock formation.

I hadn't even noticed them. My situational awareness was shot to hell, and all because a small human female with a smart mouth and eyes like the depths of space had stumbled through a portal and straight into my fate.

What was I supposed to tell Command? "Sorry sir, can't let you erase her memories because we shared an ancient Rodinian mating dream and I'm pretty sure I'll go insane if you take her away from me now"? That would go over brilliantly.

I paced along the perimeter, checking each sensor and making mental notes of the repairs needed. Work. Focus on work. Not on how her skin had felt against mine, or how she'd moaned my name in her sleep, or how the scent of her arousal had nearly driven me feral.

The sand shifted beneath my boots, revealing more damaged tech—a communications array half-melted by the heat flare. I crouched to examine it, running a diagnostic with my wrist scanner. Complete failure. Parts might be salvageable, but I'd need to extract the core processor from beneath the?—

The ground beneath me trembled, just slightly. Barely perceptible to human senses, but my enhanced perception caught it instantly. I froze, extending my claws instinctively as I pressed my palm flat against the sand.

There it was again. A pulse. Like a heartbeat, but wrong—mechanical, precise. Swarm tech awakening.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the sensation. The vibration was stronger than yesterday. Closer to the surface. Almost as if it were...growing toward us.

Well, that wasn't ominous at all.

The Swarm had been dormant for years, the remaining tech sealed away in underground bunkers after the war. Nothing should be active, especially not responding to surface stimuli. Yet here it was, pulsing beneath my hand like a technological tumor that had sensed new prey.

New prey named Jasmine.

I straightened, scanning the horizon with narrowed eyes.

The twin suns were climbing higher, their combined heat already making the air shimmer.

In a few hours, the surface temperature would be lethal to humans again.

I needed to fix the communications relay, report the Swarm activity, and keep Jas safe until extraction.

All while pretending I wasn't completely, utterly compromised by feelings that had no place in a Reaper's mission parameters.

My tail lashed behind me, betraying my agitation. The sensation of the tech beneath the surface made my fur stand on end, my instincts screaming danger in a way they hadn't since the war. Whatever was happening, it was escalating. And it seemed to be focused on our shelter—on Jas.

I growled again, this time embracing the primal sound. Let the tech hear it. Let it know that between it and my fate mate stood a very pissed off Rodinian with absolutely no patience left for universe-ending threats.

"Try it," I muttered to the sand, to the buried tech, to whatever intelligence might be stirring below. "Just try to get to her."

The desert offered no reply, just that steady, ominous pulse beneath the surface. I turned back toward the shelter, my decision made. I had two missions now: fix the communications to get us off this hellscape, and protect the human female inside that bunker with every fiber of my being.

Legion protocol could go to hell.

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I was going stir-crazy. Rhaekar had gone to check the perimeter hours ago, leaving me alone in the bunker with nothing but filtered water, stale rations, and my own increasingly explicit memories of our shared dream to keep me company.

Not ideal for maintaining my already tenuous grip on sanity.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw golden skin and felt phantom hands, heard that gravelly voice whispering “kassari” against my neck.

I’d already tried pacing, but the bunker was too small—five steps this way, six steps that way, bump into a wall, repeat until crazy.

“This is ridiculous,” I announced to the empty room. My voice echoed off the metal walls, bouncing back at me like the universe’s most pathetic conversation partner. “Get it together, Jas.”

I’d already re-inventoried my salvaged gear twice.

My camera was toast—melted beyond repair when I’d first stumbled through the portal.

My satellite phone was equally useless, though I’d managed to save the memory card.

My recorder had survived, surprisingly, though what good audio files would do me on an alien planet was anyone’s guess.

Maybe I could leave my last will and testament.

“Here lies Jasmine Navarro, who died of sexual frustration after dream-banging a cat alien.”

God, I was losing it.

I’d even made a list of possible symptoms of heatstroke, just in case this entire “alien warrior fate-mate” thing was a sunbaked hallucination.

The list included “vivid hallucinations,” “inappropriate sexual attraction to non-humans,” and “believing you’re on another planet.

” Then I deleted the list because it wasn’t helping, especially when the weight of Rhaekar’s body against mine had felt far too real to be a figment of my imagination.

I dragged my hands down my face, groaning. “Focus on something else. Literally anything else.”

So I tried cleaning my boots—what was left of them—and organizing the ration packs by color rather than nutritional value.

I attempted to decipher the alien writing on the equipment panels, which was about as productive as trying to read cat memes in Sanskrit.

I even tried meditating, but every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was Rhaekar’s golden gaze, intense and hungry as he moved above me in that dream.

“Nope!” I shot to my feet, pacing again. “Not going there.”

But my mind went there anyway, replaying the dream in high-definition detail.

The way his claws had lightly scraped my skin without drawing blood.

The raw power in his muscles as he'd held himself above me.

The taste of him—wild and exotic and somehow perfect.

The word he'd called me—kassari. Whatever it meant, he'd said it like a prayer, like something sacred.

And then there was the way we'd fit together, his body filling mine completely, the strange sensation of him swelling inside me, locking us together as we?—

“Okay, that's it!” I clapped my hands together, trying to shock myself out of the memory. “Inventory. For the third time. Because that's totally normal and not at all the behavior of someone losing her damn mind.”

By the time the bunker door finally hissed open, I'd graduated from stir-crazy to possibly unhinged. I spun toward the sound, relief warring with irritation as Rhaekar ducked through the entrance.

He looked...incredible. Sweat glistened on his copper skin, making the cheetah-like markings seem to move with each breath.

His hair—longer than a human's would be, almost mane-like—was windblown and wild, framing his sharp features in a way that shouldn't have been attractive but absolutely was.

Sand clung to his boots and the lower part of his Legion-issue pants, which did nothing to hide the powerful muscles of his thighs.

I mentally slapped myself. Focus, Jas.

“Well, look who finally decided to return to the land of the living,” I said, crossing

my arms over my chest. “Did you get lost, or were you just avoiding me?”

His golden eyes narrowed slightly. “The perimeter needed checking.”

“For six hours?”

He stepped further into the bunker, the door sliding shut behind him with a soft hiss. He smelled like sun-warmed stone and something spicy I couldn’t identify—distinctly him, distinctly alien, and distinctly driving me insane.

“There was damage to assess. Equipment to salvage.” His gaze swept over me, quick but thorough, as if making sure I was still in one piece. “You are well?”

“Well?” I echoed, incredulous. “No. I’m confused. And I’m pissed. And also a little aroused, which is very inconvenient, thank you.”

His tail twitched sharply behind him, the only betrayal of his otherwise calm exterior.

That tail had featured prominently in several of my more creative daydreams during his absence, and seeing it move sent a jolt of heat through my core that was entirely inappropriate for the serious conversation we needed to have.

“The storm has passed,” he said, moving toward the monitoring station without meeting my eyes. “I needed to ensure the perimeter was intact.”

“Oh, sure.” I followed him, refusing to be ignored. “But no time for the ‘why am I dreaming about you wrapping that tail around me like a weighted blanket from a sex dungeon’ conversation, huh?”

That got his attention. He froze, one clawed hand hovering over the control panel. I saw his back muscles tense beneath his thin shirt, his shoulders going rigid. When he

finally turned to face me, his expression was carefully neutral.

“Dreams are not always literal,” he said, each word measured and controlled.

“I think these are,” I countered, stepping closer. I jabbed a finger at his broad chest, feeling the solid heat of him even through that small point of contact. “You’ve been avoiding me. And don’t think I didn’t notice how you won’t even sleep near me anymore.”

Rhaekar remained silent, his jaw clenched tight, those alien eyes giving away nothing. But I could see the thoughts wrestling behind them, calculations and considerations that he wasn’t sharing. It was infuriating.

“The comms are down,” he finally said, turning back to the control panel. “I’ll need to repair the long-range uplink to contact Command.”

“Oh, that’s what we’re doing? Swapping topics now?” I narrowed my eyes, planting myself between him and the console. “Because I’m not a threat, Rhaekar. I’m a grown-ass woman who just wants the truth. What was that dream? Why did it feel so real? Why did you call me... what was it... kassari?”

The word hung between us, charged with significance I didn’t fully understand. His eyes widened fractionally, pupils contracting to slits before expanding again.

“I am protecting you,” he growled, the words rumbling up from his chest.

“From what? Your feelings?”

That earned me a deep, gravelly sigh and a glower aimed at the sand-crusting floor. For a moment, I thought he might actually answer me. His tail swished behind him, betraying his agitation even as his face remained impassive.

But then he stepped around me, careful not to touch me, and began checking the diagnostics on the monitoring station.

“The extraction team will come when communications are restored,” he said, as if we’d been discussing the weather. “They will take you back to Earth.”

“And that’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “What about the dream? What about the fact that we both experienced it? What about?—”

“Enough.” The word cracked like a whip in the confined space. His shoulders heaved with a deep breath before he continued more quietly. “I need to check the auxiliary systems in the equipment shed. There may be parts I can salvage for the communications array.”

With that, he strode toward the door, his long legs carrying him away before I could formulate a suitably scathing response. The door hissed shut behind him, leaving me alone again with my frustration and confusion.

“Fine,” I muttered to the empty bunker. “Be that way. See if I care.”

But I did care. And if he wasn’t going to give me answers, I’d find them myself.

I waited fifteen minutes, making sure he was well and truly occupied with whatever he was doing in the equipment shed.

Then I moved to the monitoring station he’d been so eager to access.

After three days in this bunker, I’d picked up on the basic operational patterns of Legion tech.

It wasn't so different from the systems I'd hacked for investigative pieces back on Earth—just more advanced.

My fingers hovered over the control panel. What I was about to do definitely crossed a line. But Rhaekar had already vaulted over that line, leaving me in the dark about something that clearly involved me.

“Screw it,” I whispered, pulling my salvaged tablet from my pack.

It had taken a beating in the desert, but the core systems still worked.

More importantly, I'd managed to retrofit it with a universal adapter that would connect to almost any system—a necessary tool for a journalist who often found herself extracting data from less-than-cooperative sources.

I plugged it into a port beneath the main console and waited for the connection.

The tablet screen flickered, then stabilized as it interfaced with the alien tech.

Lines of unfamiliar code scrolled past, but I'd anticipated that.

I activated the translation program I'd been developing for the past two days—a crude thing, but it had already helped me decipher some of the bunker's basic functions.

“Come on, come on,” I murmured, watching as the program began converting the alien symbols into something I could understand. Not perfect translations, but enough to navigate.

I started with the most recent logs, figuring that's where I'd find whatever had Rhaekar so on edge. Personnel reports, environmental scans, radiation readings—all

routine. But then I found a subfolder labeled with a symbol my program translated roughly as “anomaly” or “threat.”

Bingo.

I tapped the folder, and it opened to reveal a series of sensor readings and video captures. Most were corrupted or incomplete, but one file was intact—a short video clip from what appeared to be a perimeter sensor.

Heart pounding, I opened it.

The footage was grainy, distorted by heat waves and radiation interference.

At first, it showed nothing but the endless dunes of The Burn, rippling under the twin suns.

Then, movement. A shimmer beneath the sand, like something burrowing just under the surface.

The image zoomed in automatically, enhancing.

My breath caught in my throat.

It wasn't a natural formation. The shape was too deliberate, too structured—like liquid metal flowing in precise patterns. Spidery appendages extended and retracted as it moved, sensing, searching. And it was headed directly toward the bunker.

Toward me.

A data file was attached to the video. I opened it, scanning through the information as my translation program struggled to keep up.

Species D-7-alpha. Recovered designation: The Swarm.

There was more—technical specifications, threat assessments, historical data—but one passage caught my eye:

Known trigger: Unclassified biosignatures. Responds aggressively to non-Legion organic patterns. Appears drawn to new genetic material. Countermeasures required.

My fingers trembled as I continued searching, pulling up older files. The history of The Burn. The war that had scorched this planet. The technology that had nearly consumed an entire civilization before the Legion had contained it.

And then I saw it—a reference to “naturally occurring transdimensional gateways.” Portals. Just like the one I’d fallen through in the Sahara.

The pieces locked together with sickening clarity. The shimmer I’d seen just before touching the strange metal in the desert. The way the sand had moved beneath my feet when I’d first arrived here. The reason Rhaekar had been patrolling this specific area.

The Swarm wasn’t just a relic. It was still alive. Still dangerous.

And somehow, I’d gotten its attention.

I leaned back, my heart hammering against my ribs. Rhaekar hadn’t been avoiding me just because of our shared dream. He’d been trying to protect me from something far worse—something he knew was coming for me specifically.

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered, staring at the screen.

The video played again, showing that sinister shimmer moving inexorably closer to

the bunker. According to the timestamp, this footage was from less than an hour ago.

I unplugged my tablet, my mind racing. No more lies. No more deflection. No more hiding behind Legion protocol or whatever passed for professional ethics among alien cat warriors.

He wanted to protect me? Then he better start with the truth.

I marched toward the door, tablet clutched in my hand like a weapon. It was time for Rhaekar Onca to explain exactly what was hunting me—and why he thought keeping me in the dark was any kind of protection at all.

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I found the tech shard buried beneath three meters of sand, its obsidian surface pulsing with malevolent life.

My claws scraped against it, and the sound that resonated up my arm wasn't physical—it was mental.

A whisper. A hunger. A recognition. The Swarm knew I was here, and worse, it knew she was here too.

The tech fragment wasn't just active; it was hunting.

I did not panic. Rodinians did not panic.

I simply quickened my pace to a tactical jog and mentally revised our threat level from minor nuisance to imminent, dumbass-level catastrophe.

Because the sensor array had just pinged something alive.

It wasn't just an echo of old tech. No, this was active.

Searching. The readings spiked with intent that even our most advanced Legion scanners struggled to categorize.

No biological traces. No footsteps. No scent trail.

Just a shimmer of energy pulsing from below the dunes like a heartbeat.

A cold, mechanical, hostile heartbeat. Swarm-adjacent.

Which meant trouble.

I knelt at the coordinates, brushing away the top layer of scorched sand with one clawed hand until something gleamed beneath—slender, obsidian-black, ridged with etching. It pulsed faintly as I touched it.

And I absolutely did not curse out loud like a startled youth.

“Shit.”

Okay, maybe I did.

It was a shard of alien tech. One of theirs. Swarm residue, still alive with energy after all this time. Even buried, even damaged, it hummed with awareness. Hungry. Intelligent. Not ideal.

I extracted the fragment carefully, using a specialized containment tool from my field kit.

The tech responded instantly—coiling tendrils of liquid metal reaching toward my hand before the containment field activated, freezing it in mid-motion.

The sight sent a cold shiver down my spine, memories of the Burn campaign flashing through my mind.

Legionnaires disappearing into the sand.

Whole battalions lost to tech that seemed to melt into their bodies, rewriting flesh and bone into something neither machine nor organic.

The shard I held—barely the length of my forearm—was a fractional piece of a larger system.

An appendage, perhaps. Or a scout probe.

Hard to tell with Swarm tech; it changed function based on need.

Adapted. Evolved. Which was why the Legion had opted to bomb this planet back to the stone age rather than risk further contamination.

Yet here it was. Active. Aware. And drawn straight to our shelter.

Drawn to Jas.

My tail lashed behind me, expressing agitation my face would never betray.

I scanned the surroundings, extending my senses to their limits.

The desert seemed calm, but the tremors beneath the surface told a different story.

The tech wasn't isolated. There was more—much more—moving beneath the dunes, awakening from dormancy.

The Legion had briefed us extensively on The Swarm before deployment to The Burn.

I'd memorized the threat assessment, the containment protocols, the recommended countermeasures.

But the briefings couldn't capture the visceral wrongness of the tech—how it seemed to observe you even as you observed it.

How it learned your patterns, anticipated your strategies. How it hungered.

“It doesn’t just consume,” Commander Vex had explained during our pre-mission briefing, his scarred face grim in the holographic light. “It assimilates. Adapts. Uses what it takes to become stronger. The first wave targeted our tech. The second, our bodies. The third...our minds.”

I recalled asking why Legion forces hadn’t simply purged all remnants from the planet’s surface after containment. Why maintain outposts on a world too dangerous to inhabit?

“Because it’s still valuable,” he’d answered, his eyes cold and calculating. “The tech is unlike anything we’ve encountered. If we can harness it—control it—the tactical advantages would be immeasurable.”

So we’d maintained our watch. Patrolled the perimeters. Monitored for signs of activity. And for years, nothing had happened. The Swarm had remained dormant, buried beneath meters of radiation-soaked sand.

Until now. Until Jas.

I secured the containment unit to my belt and rose, brushing sand from my armor.

My scanner indicated the largest concentration of activity was still several kilometers out—converging on our position but not yet an immediate threat.

I had time. Not much, but enough to formulate a plan that didn’t end with Jas dissected by alien tech with a taste for new genetic material.

I made it back to the bunker with only minimal muttering.

She wasn't in the main chamber. Probably trying to avoid me as much as I did her after my speech earlier.

The thought brought a twist of something uncomfortable to my chest—regret, perhaps.

Or guilt. Neither emotion had a place in Reaper training, yet here they were, making themselves comfortable in my conscience.

I upgraded the security protocols, rerouted the shielding nodes, and triple-checked the perimeter defense mesh.

To the casual observer, I appeared focused, efficient, controlled.

Inside, I was calculating fourteen different scenarios for evacuation, twelve of which ended with me carrying Jas through a Swarm-infested desert while she complained about my communication skills.

I looked like a male seconds from murder—or mating. Or both.

Perfectly calm.

Absolutely not imagining her soft little human body draped over my bunk again, whispering in her husky voice that she trusted me. That she wanted me.

I grunted and scrubbed a hand down my face.

This was ridiculous. I was a Legion Reaper, one of the most elite soldiers in the known galaxy.

I'd faced down hive queens and come back with nothing but a scratch.

I'd infiltrated hostile territories with nothing but my claws and my wits.

I should not be this affected by one small human female with a penchant for asking questions I couldn't answer.

And yet.

She would not get marked by the Swarm. Not on my watch. I would burn the desert to glass before I let that happen.

I input the final security override, then moved to the communications array.

The damage from the storm was extensive, but not irreparable.

I could bypass the main circuits, reroute through the secondary relay, and establish a narrow- band transmission.

Enough to alert Command to our situation. Enough to request immediate extraction.

My fingers moved swiftly over the controls, bypassing damaged sectors and implementing field repairs that weren't exactly regulation but would serve our immediate needs.

All the while, my senses remained attuned to Jas—her heartbeat, her breathing, the subtle shifts in her scent that telegraphed her emotional state more clearly than any words.

She was angry. Frustrated. But beneath that, there was fear. Not of me—never of me, which was both gratifying and infuriating given the circumstances—but of the unknown. Of the situation she found herself in. A situation I had failed to adequately explain.

Because how could I? How could I tell her that she'd stumbled through a portal onto a quarantine world, awakened dormant tech that now seemed fixated on her unique biosignature, and, oh yes, also happened to be my cosmic soulmate according to ancient Rodinian tradition?

That we were bound by fate through dreams that would only grow more intense, more real, until we either completed the bond or rejected it entirely?

She might not understand yet what she was to me. Might not be ready to hear words like kassari or lifebond or please stop doing sexy things with your voice when you're mad at me, but that didn't matter.

She was mine.

And I protected what was mine.

Even if that meant shielding her from the truth... and from herself.

The communication array sparked, then hummed to life.

A small victory. I programmed a distress signal, embedding our coordinates and a priority-one extraction request. The message would transmit on a secure Legion frequency, bouncing between relay stations until it reached Command.

Response time would depend on available resources and proximity of extraction teams.

Hours, at minimum. More likely a full rotation. Time we might not have, given the increasing activity beneath the dunes.

I turned back to the monitoring station, checking the perimeter sensors again.

The activity had intensified—multiple signals now, converging from different directions.

The Swarm was coordinating, communicating through whatever network still existed beneath the surface.

Planning. My jaw tightened. We needed to move.

The bunker's defenses were formidable, but not designed to withstand a concentrated Swarm assault.

I gathered essential supplies—emergency rations, water purifiers, medical kit, weapons.

Only the necessities. Anything that would slow us down stayed behind.

My mind ran through escape routes, calculating risks and variables with cold efficiency.

The old mining tunnels to the east offered the best chance—their reinforced walls might shield us from the Swarm's sensors long enough to reach the secondary extraction point.

From there, if the communications array had successfully transmitted our distress signal, a Legion shuttle could retrieve us. If not... well, I had contingencies for that too. None particularly pleasant, but survival rarely was.

I checked my weapons—plasma rifle charged and ready, sidearm secured, combat blades sharpened to molecular precision. The weight of them was reassuring, grounding. Whatever came for us, I would be ready.

A sound at the door drew my attention—the soft pad of bare feet on metal. Jas. My body reacted instantly to her proximity, muscles tensing, senses sharpening. I inhaled deeply, taking in her scent—citrus and spice, underlaid with the sharp tang of adrenaline.

She'd been avoiding me, yes, but not idly. She'd been busy. I could smell the distinctive ozone trace of the monitoring station's interfaces on her skin. She'd been accessing the systems.

Clever, resourceful human. Of course she had.

Which meant she knew. Not everything, perhaps, but enough. Enough to be angry. Enough to demand answers I wasn't sure how to give.

I sighed, bracing myself for the confrontation that was about to happen.

For the accusations of deception, the demands for truth, the righteous anger that would flash in those dark eyes.

All justified. All deserved. And all spectacularly ill-timed given the mechanical death currently tunneling toward us through the sand.

But I would tell her. Everything. The Swarm.

The danger. Our bond. I'd lay it all bare—once I got her to safety.

Once I knew she could hear the truth without the immediate threat of death or assimilation looming over her head.

Once I could be sure she was choosing with clear eyes and a clear mind, not out of fear or necessity.

At least that's what I told myself as I heard her approach. That I was waiting for the right moment. The safe moment. That I wasn't simply a coward afraid of rejection from the one being in the universe fate had chosen for me.

She might not forgive me for the deception. She might laugh in my face at the very concept of fate mates and cosmic bonds. She might walk away once we returned to her world, never looking back, leaving me to an eternity of knowing what I'd found and lost.

But she would be alive to make that choice. And that was what mattered.

I squared my shoulders, turning to face the door as it slid open. My fate mate stood framed in the entrance, tablet clutched in one hand, eyes blazing with determination and betrayal. Beautiful. Fierce. Alive.

Stars help me.

She was going to be the death of me.

And I'd die grinning.

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Day Three of being trapped in the bunker with Rhaekar, and I'd progressed from "terrified of the alien predator" to "annoyed by his stoic silence" to my current state: dangerously curious about everything he wasn't telling me.

The confrontation about the Swarm data I'd found had yielded just enough information to keep me from completely losing it, but not nearly enough to satisfy my journalist's instincts.

Or my increasingly inconvenient fascination with the golden-eyed Rodinian who saved my life and then proceeded to drive me crazy with his selective communication skills.

After discovering the footage on his system, I'd stormed into the equipment bay, tablet in hand, ready for war.

What I got instead was a reluctant admission that yes, ancient tech called the Swarm was active beneath the surface.

Yes, it might be drawn to my "unique biosignature." And yes, we were in danger, which was why he'd sent a distress signal.

What he wouldn't explain was why he'd kept hiding it from me, or why he kept watching me with that intense golden stare when he thought I wasn't looking. Or why I kept dreaming about him calling me his "kassari."

I'd pieced together enough from the Legion files to know that Rodinians were a feline-adjacent species with complex social structures and some interesting biological

quirks.

The files mentioned something called “Unity dreams” shared between potential mates, but the details were frustratingly vague.

And every time I edged toward that topic, Rhaekar suddenly remembered urgent maintenance that needed his immediate attention.

But the worst thing about being stuck in a desert bunker with a grumpy alien warlord wasn’t the heat. Or the ration bars. Or even the sand that got into places sand should never go.

It was boredom.

The kind of boredom that made you do reckless things. Like poke a six-foot-plus predator with a stick. Or in my case, start asking too many questions about the swirling nightmare storm of alien tech buried outside.

“So... What’s the deal with the creepy alien signal you keep scowling about?” I asked, leaning against the monitoring station where Rhaekar had been standing motionless for at least twenty minutes.

He looked up from the console like I’d just asked if I could lick the sand. His ears—slightly pointed and adorned with those distinctive gold markings—flattened briefly against his head.

“It is not safe.”

“That’s not a deal. That’s a PSA.”

He gave me a look. The Rodinian equivalent of I’m warning you but also vaguely

impressed. I was learning the nuances.

“The Swarm is not a foe you take lightly,” he said, his deep voice rumbling through the small space between us. “This planet was once lush. Fertile. Until they came.”

Ah, the capital-S Swarm. That ominous proper noun he refused to elaborate on.

He’d said just enough to terrify me and then clammed up.

From what I’d gathered from my late-night data diving, the Swarm was some kind of semi-sentient tech that had decimated this planet before the Legion contained it.

What remained were fragments—dormant until recently.

“Well, someone should’ve left a Yelp review,” I muttered. “Zero stars. Swarm turned my jungle into a wasteland.”

“I am serious, Jas.”

The way he said my name, with that slight growl on the ‘J’, sent an entirely inappropriate shiver down my spine.

I crossed my arms. “Yeah? So am I. If I’m stuck here, I need to know what I’m dealing with. Not just cryptic threats and the ‘don’t touch the glowy thing’ warning.”

His jaw flexed. Probably weighing whether to knock me unconscious for my safety or just carry me to the sleeping mat like a misbehaving kitten.

Which, honestly? Not the worst idea I’d ever had.

“I need to be able to defend myself,” I added, trying to sound serious and not like I

was imagining him shirtless again.

Because I definitely wasn't thinking about the way his copper skin had gleamed with sweat after he'd returned from the perimeter check.

Or how the Legion-issue undershirt had clung to every ripple of muscle across his broad back.

Nope. Completely professional thoughts here.

His ears flicked. "You would spar?"

The question caught me off guard. "What?"

"Combat training. You wish to defend yourself. I can teach you." He tilted his head slightly, golden eyes narrowing. "Unless you are not physically capable."

Oh, he did not just go there.

"Unless you're afraid of losing," I shot back.

That got his attention. He straightened, tail flicking once behind him in challenge. "You are small."

"I'm scrappy."

"Prove it."

The two words hung in the air between us, charged with something that definitely wasn't just competitive spirit. His pupils had dilated slightly, those vertical slits expanding in a way that made him look more predatory. More dangerous.

More enticing.

“Outside,” he said, already moving toward the equipment locker. “The radiation levels are acceptable for short duration.”

I blinked, momentarily thrown by his sudden shift from Mr. Mysterious to Combat Instructor. “Wait, what about the Swarm? Won’t it, I don’t know, eat us or something?”

“The perimeter is secured. Temporarily.” He extracted what looked like two lightweight staffs from the locker. “Motion sensors will alert us to any approach.”

“Comforting.”

He tossed one of the staffs to me. I caught it reflexively, surprised by its balance and unusual weight. It wasn’t metal or wood, but some composite material that felt warm to the touch.

“What is this made of?”

“Hardened ceracane. Legion training material.”

“And what am I supposed to do with it? Besides, you know, not get my ass kicked.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not quite a smile, but close enough to make my heart do something stupid in my chest.

“You will attempt to strike me. I will show you how to defend yourself.”

“That’s it? No ‘wax on, wax off’? No deep philosophical lessons about the warrior’s spirit?”

He blinked slowly. “I do not understand that reference.”

“Of course you don’t.” I sighed, twirling the staff experimentally. “Lead the way, Sensei.”

The twin suns hit me like a physical blow as we stepped outside.

Even with the storm passed, the heat was oppressive, the air so dry it hurt to breathe.

Rhaekar moved ahead of me, his tall frame casting a long shadow across the scorched sand.

He’d changed into what looked like training gear—a sleeveless tunic that revealed more of those golden markings spiraling down his muscular arms, and loose pants that somehow still managed to emphasize the powerful lines of his thighs.

I was staring. I knew I was staring. But come on. The alien was built like a god with just enough cat DNA to make his movements liquid grace. Sue me.

He led me to a cleared area near the bunker—a rough circle about twenty feet in diameter where the sand had been packed down into a relatively firm surface. The perimeter was marked with small devices that pulsed with a faint blue light.

“Motion sensors,” he explained, noting my gaze. “They will warn us of approach.”

“From the Swarm?”

“From anything.”

Not exactly reassuring, but I’d take it. I stepped into the circle, testing the footing. Solid enough, though the sand would make quick movements challenging.

“How do we—” I began, turning back toward him.

But he was already moving.

One moment he was standing at the edge of the circle, the next he was beside me, staff sweeping toward my legs in a controlled arc. I reacted on instinct, jumping back and bringing my own staff up in a clumsy block.

The impact jarred my arms, but I managed to deflect his strike.

“Good,” he rumbled, already circling for another approach. “Your reflexes are acceptable.”

“Gee, thanks.”

What he didn’t know was that I hadn’t spent my twenties just chasing stories.

When you’re a five-foot-six woman who regularly puts herself in dangerous situations for the truth, you learn how to handle yourself.

Ten years of judo, krav maga, and whatever other self-defense classes I could fit between assignments had left me with decent skills and a healthy respect for bigger opponents.

Which Rhaekar definitely was.

He came at me again, faster this time. I sidestepped, using his momentum against him, and managed to tap his side lightly with my staff.

He froze, golden eyes widening in surprise.

“You did not mention you were trained.”

I couldn't help the smirk that spread across my face. “You didn't ask.”

Something shifted in his expression—a new assessment, a recalculation. The next attack was more serious, more focused. He moved like liquid, each strike flowing into the next with precision that spoke of years of disciplined training.

But I wasn't a complete novice. I blocked, dodged, and occasionally landed glancing blows that seemed to both irritate and impress him. Sweat poured down my face, my breath coming in harsh pants as we circled each other under the merciless suns.

“Your form is unusual,” he noted during a brief pause. “Not Legion-trained.”

“Earth martial arts,” I gasped, trying to catch my breath. “With some street fighting thrown in.”

“Effective. Unpredictable.”

“Was that a compliment? From the stoic Legion Reaper himself?”

His eyes narrowed. “Observation. Not compliment.”

“Right.” I twirled my staff, feeling more confident. “Ready for round two?”

The slight incline of his head was the only warning I got before he launched into a new series of attacks, each more challenging than the last. I held my own, barely, relying more on speed and unpredictability than strength.

And then I made a critical error.

After successfully ducking under a sweeping strike and landing a clean hit to his ribs, I allowed myself a moment of satisfaction. A small, self-congratulatory smirk.

The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back in the sand, the wind knocked out of me, with six-plus feet of muscular alien predator straddling my hips. His hands planted on either side of my head, not quite pinning me down—yet. But I wasn't exactly struggling to get away.

Our faces were too close. His scent engulfed me—sun-warmed spice and something darkly male that made my insides clench with want. His pupils dilated, those predatory slits expanding until his eyes were more black than gold.

My breath hitched. My heart hammered against my ribs, and not just from exertion.

And then his tail—that expressive, traitorous appendage—curled loosely around my thigh in what felt suspiciously like a possessive gesture.

“I win,” he rumbled, his voice deeper than usual, almost a purr.

“On a technicality,” I whispered back, hyper-aware of every point where our bodies connected.

His gaze dropped to my mouth, lingering there with an intensity that made heat pool low in my belly. I could feel his breath on my face, taste the spice of him on the air between us.

I could have kissed him. Could have fisted my hands in that strange, mane-like hair and pulled him down until his mouth met mine. Could have rolled my hips up into his until he made that growling sound I'd heard in our shared dream.

The thought of the dream—of his hands on my body, his teeth at my neck, his voice

calling me kassari—sent a jolt of both desire and uncertainty through me.

No. Too much. Too fast. Too confusing.

I turned my head, breaking the moment like a snapped tension wire.

He eased back immediately, his weight lifting from me without a word, but his breathing matched mine—rough and a little too eager. The loss of his heat felt like a physical ache.

We stood. Dusted off. Said nothing.

But the air between us? Crackling like a live wire dipped in gasoline.

“Your skills are... adequate,” he finally said, his voice still rough around the edges.

“High praise,” I managed, trying to sound normal and not like I was contemplating tackling him back into the sand. “Same time tomorrow?”

His eyes met mine, that golden gaze holding secrets I was increasingly desperate to unravel. “If you wish.”

“I do.”

The simple affirmation hung between us, weighted with meaning neither of us was ready to acknowledge.

We walked back to the bunker in silence, the heat of the twin suns nothing compared to the heat building between us. And I had a feeling the next round wouldn’t just be about combat training.

It would be about the truth we were both circling—about Unity dreams, about fate mates, about why I couldn't stop thinking about his hands on my body and his teeth at my throat.

About why, despite all logic and reason, despite the danger surrounding us, despite everything... I wanted him.

And I was increasingly certain he wanted me too.

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The recycler wheezed like it was on its last breath, which wasn't far from the truth.

Three days of operating beyond capacity had worn down its filtration system to dangerous levels.

I crouched beside the humming machine, tools spread at my feet in a half-circle of organized chaos, while Jas leaned over my shoulder with all the patience of a sand viper. Which was to say: none.

“Should it be sparking like that?” she asked, chewing on her bottom lip. Distracting.

“It always sparks,” I lied. It didn't. But she didn't need more reasons to doubt the integrity of this shelter.

I adjusted a cracked intake valve, then used a plasma solder to fuse the breach. The faint scent of ozone hissed into the air, followed by a blessed quiet.

It worked.

“That's not ominous at all,” she muttered, folding her arms. “You sure this thing won't melt us in our sleep?”

“Seventy percent.”

“Comforting.”

I stood, wiping grit off my hands as I turned to face her—and promptly forgot every

thought I'd just had.

The wind had picked up, lifting the edge of her tunic and carrying her scent directly to me. Soft, electric, unmistakably hers.

My kassari.

I'd been trying to ignore the bond pulling tight between us—tried to treat her like an unexpected assignment. A mission, not a mate.

But every moment with her made that lie harder to live in.

I'd slept maybe two hours in the past three days.

Deliberately. Sleeping meant dreaming, and dreaming meant Unity, and Unity meant sharing that charged mental space where my defenses crumbled and my nature—my true nature—emerged in all its feral glory.

The memory of her writhing beneath me, begging me to claim her, to mark her, to make her mine. .. it was torture.

Beautiful, exquisite torture.

So I fixed things instead. The recycler. The perimeter sensors. The communications array. Anything to keep my hands busy and my mind occupied. Anything to exhaust my body enough that when sleep finally claimed me, it would be too deep for dreams.

It hadn't worked yet.

"You look terrible," she said, reaching up to brush something from my face. Her fingers grazed my cheek, and I flinched like she'd burned me. "When's the last time

you slept?”

“Reapers require minimal rest.”

She gave me a look that said she wasn’t buying it. “Uh-huh. And I’m the Queen of England.”

I blinked, momentarily confused. “You are not royalty.”

That earned me a laugh—a quick, bright sound that sent warmth spiraling through my chest. I cataloged it instantly, adding it to my growing collection of her reactions. My tail flicked with pleasure before I could stop it.

“It’s an expression, Fuzzball.” She moved past me to check the now-silent recycler. “It means I don’t believe you.”

The nickname should have irritated me. No one in the Legion would dare address a Reaper with such familiarity. But from her lips, it sounded like an endearment. Like something intimate. Private.

Mine.

I shook my head, forcing my thoughts back to the task at hand. “The communications array still needs calibration,” I said, keeping my voice level. “I’ll need to check the exterior components.”

“Again? You were just out there three hours ago.”

“The sand shifts. Components become exposed. Buried.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. The sand did shift. But I needed distance. Space to breathe

air that wasn't saturated with her scent. Time to reinforce my crumbling resolve.

"I could help," she offered, and the genuine willingness in her voice nearly broke me. "I'm good with my hands."

Don't think about her hands. Don't think about her hands on you. Don't think about her hands on?—

"You should rest," I managed, my voice rougher than intended. "Conserve energy."

"For what? More sitting around while you pretend I don't exist?" Her frustration was palpable, her scent sharpening with it. "I'm going stir-crazy in here, Rhaekar."

The way she said my name—slightly accented, with a soft roll of the 'r'—sent heat straight to my core. It took every ounce of my training not to react visibly.

Instead, I moved to the equipment locker, retrieving my tools with mechanical precision. "There is the sand-pulse rifle," I said, nodding toward the weapon I'd shown her how to use yesterday. "You can practice disassembly and cleaning."

Her eyes lit up at the suggestion. Despite everything, I found myself smiling internally at her eagerness to learn, to adapt, to survive.

I'd shown her how to wield the sand-pulse rifle. She'd insisted. "If something comes after me, I'm not going down with just sass and sarcasm." Her words. I'd admired her grip, her stance, the way she absorbed information like a sponge. Terrans were fragile, yes. But Jas was not weak.

She'd been a natural with the weapon—quicker to adapt than some Legion recruits I'd trained.

Her smaller hands had struggled with the trigger mechanism, designed for larger Rodinian fingers, but she'd compensated with determination.

And when she'd hit the target dead center on her third attempt, the flash of triumph in her eyes had made my chest swell with pride.

Pride. In a human female I'd known for less than a week. Who happened to be my cosmic fate mate. Who had no idea what that meant.

This situation was beyond salvageable.

"Fine," she said, pulling me back to the present. "I'll clean the gun. You go play in the sand. But when you come back, we're having a real conversation."

I tilted my head, considering her. "About?"

"About why you keep avoiding me. About those dreams we shared. About whatever a 'kassari' is." She stepped closer, invading my space with a boldness that both impressed and alarmed me. "About why you look at me like you want to devour me, then act like I'm radioactive waste."

My pulse quickened, hammering against my ribs. She remembered the word—kassari. Of course she did. The Unity bond was strong between us, stronger than any I'd heard described. And now she wanted answers I wasn't sure I could give.

How did you explain to a human that fate had chosen her for a mate? That on my world, what we'd shared was sacred? That every instinct in my body screamed to claim her, mark her, protect her?

That I was terrified she would reject me once she understood what it meant?

“We will discuss it,” I conceded, stepping around her toward the door. “When I return.”

“Promise?”

The word hung between us, weighted with meaning beyond its simple syllables. A promise, to a Rodinian, was binding. Sacred. Especially between potential mates.

Did she know that? Could she possibly understand the significance of what she asked?

Probably not. But I answered anyway, my voice dropping to a rumble that betrayed more than I intended.

“I promise.”

She nodded, satisfied for now, and moved toward the weapons locker. I watched her for a moment longer than necessary, memorizing the lines of her body, the confident set of her shoulders, the way her dark hair caught the light.

Then I turned and escaped to the desert before I could do something foolish—like pull her against me and breathe in her scent until it was permanently etched in my memory. Or press my mouth to hers and taste the warmth I’d been dreaming of for days.

Or tell her the truth: that I was already hers, completely and irrevocably, whether she accepted it or not.

I had a duty to the Legion. A mission to complete. A human to protect—not just from the Swarm, but from myself and the overwhelming nature of a bond she hadn’t asked for and might not want.

So I would fix the communications array. I would secure our extraction. I would ignore the burning in my blood that demanded I claim what fate had given me.

And then, when we were safe, when she had choices beyond the desperate survival of two beings trapped in a hostile environment... then I would tell her everything.

And pray to the stars she didn't walk away.

That night, I was sitting on my usual mat, cross-legged, trying to meditate the edge off my instincts when she crossed the room.

No words. No preamble. She crawled into my lap like she belonged there.

My heart thundered once—then went still.

My body recognized what my mind was still fighting—the inevitability of us.

“Your fur is so soft,” she murmured, fingertips brushing the thick ruff on my chest where my tunic lay open.

“It's utilitarian,” I said, voice too low, too rough. A pathetic attempt at deflection.

She smiled. “Sure, big guy. Utilitarian. That's why I want to roll around in it like it's a five-star mattress.”

My claws bit into the mat beneath me.

Do not pounce.

But when her hand slid up to my neck, fingers threading into the sensitive fur just below my ears, I almost growled.

I let her touch, let her explore, as I gripped the mat beneath me and chanted battle mantras in my head to keep from flipping her over and worshipping every inch of her body with my mouth.

“Is this okay?” she asked, whisper-soft.

“Yes.” My voice broke around the word. “You lead, Jas.”

Her eyes glowed in the low light of the bunker, fierce and bright.

And when she kissed me—slow, sure, with heat behind it—I didn’t think.

I responded, my mouth opening under hers as a rumble of pleasure built in my chest. She tasted like the desert night—warm, mysterious, intoxicating.

My hands moved of their own accord, one sliding around her waist while the other cradled the back of her head, holding her to me as the kiss deepened.

Her tongue slid against mine, tentative at first, then bolder as I responded. She shifted in my lap, pressing herself closer, and the friction nearly undid me. I could feel her heartbeat, the heat of her through the thin fabric of her clothing, the trembling in her limbs that matched my own.

I broke the kiss before I could lose all control, pressing my forehead to hers as we both caught our breath.

“Wait,” I managed, though every cell in my body screamed against the word. “Jas, you don’t understand what this means.”

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She leaned back just enough to meet my eyes, her hands still tangled in my mane. “Then explain it to me.”

The request was so simple, so reasonable, and yet the answer was anything but.

“For my people, this is not... casual.” I struggled to find words that would make sense to a human. “The dreams we shared. The connection between us. It’s called Unity. It’s rare. Sacred.”

Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn’t pull away. “Go on.”

“Kassari means fate mate. Destined.” My voice dropped lower, rougher. “When a Rodinian finds their kassari, it’s for life. The bond, once completed, is unbreakable.”

I expected shock. Fear. Retreat. Instead, her fingers tightened in my mane, tugging gently.

“That’s why you’ve been avoiding me,” she said, understanding dawning in her expression. “You think I can’t handle it.”

“It’s not a matter of handling it. It’s a choice that should be made with full knowledge, not in the heat of the moment or under duress.”

Her hand moved to my cheek, her thumb tracing the markings that spread across my cheekbone. “And you think I’m just looking for a quick roll in the hay with the hot alien who rescued me?”

“I don’t know what you want.” The admission cost me, but I owed her truth. “And I can’t do casual, Jas. Not with you. It would break me.”

She was quiet for a long moment, studying my face with an intensity that made my pulse quicken. Then she smiled—a slow, sure curve of her lips that sent heat spiraling through me.

“Try me,” she whispered, and then she was kissing me again, deeper this time, more demanding.

I fought for control, for reason, even as my body responded to her with devastating eagerness. When we broke apart again, both breathing hard, I made one last attempt at sanity.

“Jas, the bond?—”

“I don’t care.” Her fingers worked at the closures of my tunic, pushing the fabric aside to expose more of my chest. “I’ve been dreaming about you for days. I need to feel you like I did then. Need to know if it’s real.”

“It’s real,” I growled, my restraint slipping as her hands explored the markings on my chest. “All of it. But once we do this?—”

“We’ll figure it out.” She pressed her lips to my throat, and the sensation sent sparks of pleasure down my spine. “I’m not asking for forever right this second. I’m asking for now.”

Her teeth grazed my collarbone, and I surrendered.

With a growl that rumbled up from deep in my chest, I gathered her close and flipped our positions, laying her back on the mat with my body hovering over hers. Her eyes

widened, pupils dilating with desire rather than fear, and the scent of her arousal filled my senses.

“Now,” I agreed, my voice barely recognizable even to my own ears. “But understand this, Jasmine. I will not hold back. Not completely.”

Her answer was to pull me down for another kiss, her legs wrapping around my waist to bring our bodies into full contact. The heat of her against my hardness tore a groan from my throat.

I let my hands explore her body, learning the curves and planes of her in reality rather than dreams. Her skin was softer than I’d imagined, warmer, more responsive to my touch. When my palm cupped her breast through the thin fabric of her tunic, her back arched beautifully, seeking more contact.

“Please,” she breathed against my mouth. “I need to feel you. All of you.”

I sat back on my heels, pulling her up with me to remove her tunic. The sight of her bare skin in the low light nearly stopped my heart. Beautiful. Perfect. Mine.

Her hands reached for me again, tugging at my own clothing until we were both bare to the waist, skin against skin. I lowered her back to the mat, careful of my weight, and began a slow exploration of her body with my hands, my mouth, my tongue.

The taste of her skin was intoxicating—salt and sweetness and something uniquely Jas. I learned what made her gasp, what made her moan, what made her fingers tighten in my mane. When my mouth closed around her nipple, her cry of pleasure sent a surge of primal satisfaction through me.

“More,” she demanded, her hands pushing at the waistband of my pants. “I want to feel all of you.”

I helped her remove the rest of our clothing, revealing us both completely to each other. Her eyes widened slightly at the sight of me, fully aroused and very different from a human male in ways that would be impossible to miss.

“Just like in the dream,” she whispered, reaching out to touch me.

The first contact of her fingers around my length nearly undid me. I closed my eyes, fighting for control as she explored, learning the ridges and textures unique to my species. When her thumb circled the sensitive head, already slick with desire, I growled her name.

“Show me,” she said, leaning back and pulling me with her. “Show me what it’s like when it’s real.”

I settled between her thighs, taking my weight on my arms as I positioned myself at her entrance. She was wet, ready, her body opening for me as I pressed forward slowly, giving her time to adjust to my size and shape.

The feeling of her around me was beyond description—tight, hot, perfect. I moved carefully at first, shallow thrusts that had her gasping and clutching at my shoulders.

“You won’t break me,” she insisted, nails digging into my skin as she tried to pull me deeper. “I want all of you.”

With a growl, I gave her what she asked for, thrusting fully into her in one smooth motion. Her cry of pleasure echoed in the small space as I filled her completely, our bodies joining in a way that felt like coming home.

I established a rhythm, slow and deep at first, watching her face for any sign of discomfort. But there was only pleasure there, her eyes half-closed, lips parted, cheeks flushed with desire.

“Rhaekar,” she moaned, my name a prayer on her lips. “God, you feel amazing.”

“Kassari,” I growled in response, unable to stop the word from escaping. “My fate. My mate.”

Her inner muscles clenched around me at the words, drawing a groan from deep in my chest. I increased my pace, driven by her responses, by the way she met each thrust with equal hunger.

I felt the change beginning—the base of my cock starting to swell, preparing to lock us together when release came. It was too soon for that, too much for her first time with me in reality rather than dreams.

I slowed, trying to hold back the biological response that would bind us together.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded, eyes opening to meet mine. “I can feel it—like in the dream. Let it happen.”

“It will lock us together,” I warned, voice strained with the effort of control. “For some time.”

Her answer was to wrap her legs tighter around my waist, pulling me deeper. “I want it. Want to feel you come inside me. Want to be yours.”

The words broke the last of my restraint. I claimed her mouth in a fierce kiss as I drove into her with renewed purpose, chasing our shared pleasure with abandon. My hand slipped between us, finding the sensitive bundle of nerves that would bring her release.

She came with a cry that I swallowed with my kiss, her body clenching rhythmically around mine, pulling me deeper. The sensation triggered my own climax, hot pulses

of release as the knot swelled, locking us together as completely as our shared dreams had promised.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed through me, more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. I buried my face against her neck, breathing in her scent, letting it imprint on my very soul.

"Mine," I murmured against her skin, unable to stop the possessive declaration. "My kassari."

Her fingers stroked through my mane, gentle and soothing as the aftershocks of pleasure continued to ripple through us both.

"Yours," she agreed softly, the word settling into my bones like truth. "And you're mine now too, aren't you?"

I raised my head to meet her gaze, seeing no regret there, only wonder and satisfaction and something deeper I wasn't ready to name.

"Yes," I answered simply. "I am yours."

And as we lay there, joined in the most intimate way possible, I finally allowed myself to believe that perhaps fate hadn't been cruel after all. That perhaps it knew exactly what it was doing when it brought her to me across the stars.

My kassari. My fate. My mate.

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I lay in Rhaekar's arms, our bodies still joined, the aftershocks of my release pulsing around him in gentle waves.

His heat radiated through me like a solar flare, burning away any doubt, any hesitation I might have clung to.

The bond between us—this cosmic connection he called fate-marking—throbbed like a living thing, golden threads weaving through my veins, lighting me up from the inside.

And yet, something in me knew we weren't finished.

This wasn't complete. The way his eyes tracked my face, pupils still dilated with desire, the tension in his powerful frame—he was holding back.

Still holding back, even after everything we'd shared.

His tail remained wrapped possessively around my ankle, a living tether binding us together.

I shifted slightly, feeling him still thick and hard inside me, the slight swell at his base keeping us locked together.

The sensation was foreign but perfect—like he was made to fit within me, to stay there until I'd taken everything he had to give.

“You're thinking too loudly,” he murmured, one clawed finger tracing the curve of

my cheek with impossible gentleness.

“I’m thinking about you,” I admitted, pressing my palm against the center of his chest where I could feel his heartbeat, strong and steady beneath my touch. Something pulsed there—warmer than the surrounding skin, a spot that seemed to call to me. “About this.”

His eyes darkened, those vertical pupils narrowing to thin slits. “The bond.”

“Yes.” I rolled my hips experimentally, gasping as the movement sent sparks of renewed pleasure shooting through my core. He was still so hard, still so deep. “It’s not finished, is it? There’s more.”

A growl rumbled from deep in his chest, vibrating against my palm. “There is. But you don’t have to?”

I silenced him with a kiss, soft but insistent. “I want to know. All of it.”

He studied me for a long moment, those alien eyes searching mine for any hint of hesitation. His hand settled on my hip, large and warm, its weight both possessive and steadying.

“The full claiming,” he said finally, voice rough with restraint. “Among my people, fate-mates complete their bond through marking. A physical exchange that seals the connection. Makes it permanent.”

“The bite,” I breathed, remembering fragments from our shared dreams. The way his teeth had grazed my neck, the primal urge I’d felt to sink my own into his skin. “That’s what you’ve been holding back.”

His jaw tightened, muscles flexing beneath his spotted skin. “Yes.”

I traced the pattern of darker spots across his chest, fascinated by their symmetry, the way they seemed to lead me toward that warm pulse-point at his center. “And if we complete it? What happens?”

“We become one,” he said simply, the words heavy with meaning. “Your pleasure becomes mine. Your pain, mine to bear. Your life...” He hesitated, something vulnerable flickering across his face. “Bound to mine. Until death.”

The weight of his words should have terrified me. Should have sent me running for whatever portal had dropped me into this alien world. Instead, they settled into my bones like truth—inevitable, undeniable.

“Show me,” I whispered, shifting my weight, feeling his cock pulse inside me in response. “Show me what it means to be yours.”

His control snapped—just for an instant—his hands gripping my hips hard enough to bruise before he mastered himself again. “What you’re asking for...”

“I know what I’m asking for.” I braced my hands on his chest and lifted myself slowly, feeling him slide almost completely out of me before I sank back down, taking him deep. We both groaned at the sensation. “I’ve known since the first dream.”

Something fierce and primal flashed in his eyes as I began to move, setting a slow, torturous rhythm that had us both panting. His hands came to my waist, supporting but not controlling, letting me take what I wanted at the pace I chose.

I’d never felt power like this—astride this massive alien warrior, his body taut with restraint beneath mine, his eyes burning with need as I took him deeper with each roll of my hips.

He could have overpowered me at any moment, could have flipped me onto my back and taken control.

But he didn't. He let me lead this dance, his breath coming in sharp bursts as I found an angle that sent sparks of pleasure shooting up my spine.

"You feel..." I gasped, circling my hips, feeling him fill me completely. "So good inside me."

His claws extended slightly, pricking my skin just enough to make me shiver. "Made for you," he growled, the words strained. "Kassari."

The endearment—heart's match—sent another wave of heat pulsing through me. I leaned down, pressing my body against his, skin to skin, letting my hardened nipples drag against his chest as I continued to ride him. The friction was exquisite, the weight of him inside me almost too much to bear.

"I feel it," I murmured against his throat, feeling his pulse jump beneath my lips. "The bond. Like golden threads between us."

His tail tightened around my ankle, his head falling back as I quickened my pace. "It will be stronger," he promised, voice rough. "When the claiming is complete."

I wasn't sure when the line between wanting him and needing him had fully vanished. Maybe it was when he touched me like I was precious. Or maybe it was the moment I saw that flash of restraint in his golden eyes—when he was inside me, holding back even when I begged him not to.

But now?

Now I was riding him, my knees braced against his hips, and he was letting me lead.

His hands gripped my waist, steady and reverent, but his jaw was tight, his body trembling beneath me. It wasn't because he didn't want more. It was because he was holding back. For me.

I leaned down and kissed him.

Not like I had before.

I kissed him like he was mine. Like I knew the truth of every dream, every whispered promise, every soft growl he'd ever buried in the back of his throat.

He groaned into my mouth. "Jas..."

"Mark me," I whispered against his lips. "Now."

His hands clenched on my hips, but he didn't move. "You need to be sure. Once it's done?—"

"I am sure."

I didn't wait for his permission. I leaned in, and with a rush of boldness I didn't even recognize in myself, I pressed my mouth to the thick curve of muscle where his neck met his shoulder—and bit.

Not to hurt him. But enough to say yes.

His breath caught.

And then something changed.

His body snapped beneath me like a cord had been cut. He flipped me gently,

cradling me as he moved, and then lowered his mouth to my skin—just above my collarbone.

There was reverence in his eyes. And then heat.

The bite was sharp and deep.

But it wasn't pain I felt. It was completion.

I cried out, not from the bite but from the sensation that followed—a rush of heat that flooded through my veins like liquid fire, pleasure so intense it bordered on agony.

The connection between us—already strong—burst into something transcendent, golden light pulsing behind my eyelids as I felt him everywhere, in me, around me, part of me.

“Rhaekar,” I gasped, clutching at his shoulders as he moved within me, his rhythm now fierce and claiming.

He withdrew his teeth from my skin, licking the mark he'd left, sealing it with something that felt like magic. His eyes, when they met mine, were wild with need, the vertical pupils fully dilated in a sea of molten gold.

“Mine,” he growled, the word more animal than human. “My kassari. My fate-mate.”

“Yours,” I agreed, wrapping my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper. “And you're mine.”

The admission seemed to break something loose in both of us.

He drove into me with renewed purpose, each thrust hitting places deep inside that

had me seeing stars.

His mouth found mine in a kiss that tasted of copper and desire, his tongue mimicking the rhythm of his cock as he claimed me completely.

I felt him everywhere—not just where our bodies joined, but deeper, in my mind, my soul, my very being. His pleasure fed mine in an endless loop, each sensation doubled, tripled, multiplied until I couldn't tell where I ended and he began.

And at the base of his shaft, I felt it—the beginning of a swell that hadn't been there before, pressing against my entrance, stretching me further with each thrust.

“What—” I gasped, the new pressure both alarming and intensely pleasurable.

“My knot,” he growled against my throat, his rhythm faltering slightly. “The claiming is complete. We'll be locked together until my seed takes root.”

The primal nature of his words should have shocked me.

Instead, they sent another wave of heat crashing through my system.

The idea of being claimed so thoroughly, of being filled with his essence, marked me as his in the most ancient way possible—it triggered something deep and instinctual within me.

“Yes,” I breathed, tilting my hips to take more of him, to accommodate the growing swell. “All of you.”

He roared—a sound of triumph and possession—as his knot fully formed, locking us together completely. The pressure against my most sensitive spots was overwhelming, pushing me toward another peak just as his rhythm became erratic.

“Let go,” he commanded, one hand sliding between us to circle my clit. “Fall with me.”

The dual sensations—his cock buried impossibly deep, his knot pressing against nerves I hadn’t known existed, his fingers working magic against my sensitive flesh—combined with the doubled pleasure flowing through our newly completed bond pushed me over the edge.

I shattered with a cry that tore from the depths of my soul, my body clenching around him in rhythmic pulses that seemed to go on forever.

He followed immediately, his release triggered by mine, hot spurts of his seed filling me as his body jerked against mine. But unlike before, I could feel his pleasure as if it were my own—white-hot and all-consuming, racing through my veins alongside my own release.

The doubled sensations sent me spiraling into another climax, this one even more intense than the last. I clung to him, tears streaming down my face from the overwhelming pleasure, my body wracked with aftershocks that had me trembling in his arms.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured, gathering me close, rolling to his side to avoid crushing me with his weight. We remained locked together, his knot keeping us joined as the bond pulsed and settled between us. “I’ve got you, kassari.”

I buried my face against his chest, overwhelmed by the intensity of what we’d just shared. The mark on my collarbone throbbed, but not with pain—with a pleasant warmth that seemed to echo the one in my chest where my own bond-mark had formed.

“I can feel you,” I whispered, amazed. “Not just...physically. Inside my head. My

heart.”

His arms tightened around me, one large hand stroking down my spine with infinite tenderness. “The bond is complete,” he confirmed. “We are one now, in all ways that matter.”

I traced patterns on his chest, fingers lingering over the spot where his bond-mark pulsed in time with mine. The connection between us was tangible now—a golden tether that hummed with energy, binding our souls together across species, across worlds.

“And now?” I asked, looking up at him.

His expression softened, those fierce predator eyes warming as they met mine. “Now we face whatever comes together,” he said simply. “As mates. As equals.”

I nodded, settling against him, feeling the steady thrum of his heart against mine. His knot would keep us joined for some time yet, a physical manifestation of the deeper bond that now linked us across dimensions more profound than mere flesh.

“The desert tech,” I remembered suddenly. “The Legion. Your duty?”

He silenced me with a gentle kiss. “All secondary to you now,” he murmured against my lips. “You are my primary mission, kassari. My purpose. My home.”

The word—home—settled into my chest like a missing piece falling into place. I hadn’t had a true home in years, had been wandering from assignment to assignment, never putting down roots, never letting myself belong anywhere or to anyone.

Yet somehow, here on this alien world, in the arms of this warrior with his spotted skin and his fierce devotion, I’d found what I’d been searching for without even

knowing I was looking.

“Mine to protect,” Rhaekar continued, his voice a low rumble against my ear. “Mine to cherish.”

I smiled against his skin, feeling the tug of sleep at the edges of my consciousness, my body satisfied and replete in a way I’d never imagined possible.

“And I’ll protect you too,” I promised, pressing a kiss to his bond-mark, feeling the answering pulse in my own. “Whatever comes for us in that desert, we face it together.”

His tail tightened around my ankle in silent agreement, his arms cradling me close as our breathing synchronized, our heartbeats finding the same rhythm.

The desert might hold dangers we couldn’t yet name. The Legion might demand answers we weren’t ready to give. The path ahead remained uncertain, fraught with challenges neither of us could foresee.

But we were bonded now—claimed and marked, two souls forged into one by forces older than either of our civilizations. And whatever storms awaited us beyond the shelter’s walls, we would weather them together.

Fate had decreed it. And for once in my life, I was perfectly content to follow the path the universe had laid out for me—so long as it kept me in the arms of my alien warrior, my protector, my heart’s match.

My Rhaekar.

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The weight of her body pressed against mine felt like an anchor to reality—the one thing keeping me from floating away into the vastness of what we'd just become together.

Her heart beat in perfect sync with mine, our shared rhythm echoing through the bond that now pulsed gold and vibrant between us.

Jas's scent filled my lungs with each breath—citrus and earth spice mixed with something deeper now, marked with my essence as thoroughly as I was marked with hers. Fate-bonded. Claimed. Mine.

I traced the mark on her collarbone with reverent fingers, feeling the raised edges where my teeth had broken her skin.

The bond-mark glowed faintly in the shelter's low light, a subtle shimmer that marked her as kassari—heart's match—to any Rodinian who might see her.

My own mark throbbed in response, a pleasant warmth pulsing at the center of my chest where she had pressed her teeth into my flesh.

We remained joined, my knot keeping us locked together, a physical manifestation of the cosmic connection we now shared.

I could feel everything—her racing thoughts, her wonder, the slight soreness in her body from our claiming, the pulsing aftershocks of pleasure that still rippled through her core at random intervals.

Her emotions flowed through me like a river finding its natural course, settling into spaces within me I hadn't known existed.

"Is it always like this?" she whispered, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest. Her touch sent sparks of sensation through both of us, doubling back through the bond until I couldn't tell where my pleasure ended and hers began.

"I don't know," I admitted, pressing my lips to her temple. "The bond is rare. Sacred. I've never..."

"Never thought you'd find it," she finished for me, the bond allowing her to pluck the thought from my mind as easily as picking fruit from a low-hanging branch.

I nodded, tightening my arms around her smaller frame.

The truth was I'd purposely avoided it—sought isolation in this wasteland to minimize the chance of ever encountering a fate-mate.

I'd seen what happened to Reapers who found their fated pairs—how they changed, how their priorities shifted, how duty became secondary to the needs of their mates. I'd judged them weak. Compromised.

Now, with Jas in my arms, our souls intertwined through ancient blood rites, I understood. This wasn't weakness. This was transformation—something primal and necessary, written into our genetic code since the first Rodinians looked to the stars.

"You're thinking too loud again," she murmured against my skin, a smile in her voice. The sensation of her lips moving against my chest sent another wave of pleasure rippling through us both.

I growled low in my throat, the sound vibrating between us. "Just realizing how

wrong I was. About everything.”

Her hand found mine, our fingers interlocking with perfect ease. “We both were. I spent my whole life running from anything that felt permanent.” She lifted her head, her gaze meeting mine with unnerving clarity. “And now I can’t imagine being anywhere but here.”

The admission hit me like a physical blow, the sincerity of her words flowing through the bond with undeniable truth. No one could lie through a fate-bond—not about something this fundamental. She meant it. Every word.

I lifted our joined hands and pressed my lips to her knuckles. “I will spend every day making you glad you stayed,” I vowed, the words tearing from somewhere deeper than thought, somewhere ancient and true.

She smiled, the expression lighting something warm in my chest. “I think I can feel your heart,” she said wonderingly, pressing her palm flat against her own chest. “Like it’s beating alongside mine.”

“It is,” I confirmed, my tail curling more tightly around her ankle. “Part of the bond. We share life force now.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “You mean literally? Like, if I get hurt?—”

“I’ll feel it,” I finished for her. “And if I’m wounded, you’ll know. Distance won’t matter. The bond transcends physical space.”

She processed this, her brow furrowing slightly. I could feel her mind working, cataloging the implications, the advantages, the potential complications. Always the journalist, even now.

“So if something happens to one of us...” she began.

I pressed a finger to her lips, silencing the dark thought before she could fully form it. “Nothing will happen to you,” I said fiercely. “Not while I draw breath.”

The knot binding us together had begun to ease, my body slowly releasing her as the initial phase of the bond settled. I shifted carefully, mindful of her comfort as we began to separate. She gasped slightly at the sensation, a ghost of pleasure-pain rippling through the bond between us.

“Sorry,” I murmured, stroking her hair. “The first time is...intense.”

She laughed softly, the sound like music in the quiet shelter. “You can say that again.” She shifted, wincing slightly as our bodies finally came apart. “Worth it, though.”

I rolled to my side, keeping her tucked against me, unwilling to break contact completely. The completion of the bond had intensified every protective instinct I possessed. The thought of being separated from her—even by inches—made my chest tight with an anxiety I’d never experienced before.

“The bond will settle,” I explained, reading her confusion as she felt my sudden spike of tension. “The first few days, the urge to maintain physical contact will be...strong.”

“I can tell,” she said, amusement coloring her voice as my tail refused to unwrap from her ankle. “Your tail has a mind of its own.”

I huffed, not bothering to deny it. “It knows what it wants.”

“And what’s that?”

“You,” I said simply. “Always you.”

She traced the line of my jaw with gentle fingers, her touch igniting small fires beneath my skin. Through the bond, I felt her satisfaction at my response, the way my breathing quickened, my pulse jumped.

“We need to leave soon,” I said reluctantly, forcing my thoughts back to the dangers waiting beyond our temporary haven. “The tech is stirring. The longer we stay, the greater the risk.”

She nodded, sobering at the reminder of the world beyond our bond. “How long do we have?”

“Until morning, at most,” I said, glancing at the shelter’s environmental display. “The sensors picked up increased activity while we were...occupied.”

Her lips curved in a small, private smile at the understatement. “Where will we go?”

“The nearest outpost is three days’ journey on foot,” I explained, running a mental inventory of our supplies. “If we travel at night and shelter during the hottest part of the day, we should make good time.”

“And then what?” she asked, the question layered with uncertainty that flowed through the bond like a cold current. “Will your people accept me? Accept us?”

I hesitated, unwilling to lie to her, especially now when she would feel any deception through our connection.

“Fate-bonds are sacred among my kind,” I said carefully.

“Even one with an off-worlder would be respected. But there will be questions.

Concerns about the tech that brought you here, about what it means that Legion systems recognized you as...something to investigate.”

She absorbed this, her mind working through the implications with impressive speed. “You think I triggered something. When I arrived.”

“I know you did,” I confirmed, stroking her back in a soothing rhythm. “The question is why. What is it about you—about humans—that ancient Legion tech finds interesting enough to wake for?”

She shivered slightly, and I felt her fear—not for herself, but for what it might mean for us, for this bond we’d barely begun to explore. I pulled her closer, wrapping my larger frame around her as if I could shield her from the universe itself.

“Whatever comes,” I promised, my voice a low rumble against her hair, “we face it together now. The bond gives us strength beyond what either of us possesses alone.”

She nodded against my chest, her determination flaring through our connection like a beacon. “Then we should get ready. If we only have until morning...”

I released her reluctantly, both of us feeling the loss of contact like a physical ache as we separated.

We moved around the small shelter, gathering supplies, checking equipment, preparing for the journey ahead.

I noticed how she kept glancing at me, how I constantly tracked her movements, how we found excuses to brush against each other as we worked.

The bond, new and hungry, demanded proximity.

I calibrated the sand-pulse rifle while she packed the portable water purifier, her movements quick and efficient.

Through our connection, I could feel her focus sharpening, her journalist's mind categorizing and analyzing our situation with pragmatic clarity.

Pride swelled in my chest—my mate was no fragile thing to be coddled.

She was strong, adaptable, fierce in her own way.

“Your commander,” she said suddenly, looking up from her task. “Leontis. Will you report to him about me? About us?”

The question struck at the heart of the conflict that had been brewing inside me since I'd first caught her scent. Duty versus fate. Legion versus bond.

“I'm supposed to,” I admitted, setting the rifle aside. “Protocol demands immediate notification of any anomalies, especially those relating to the buried tech. You qualify as both.”

She absorbed this without visible reaction, but I felt the spike of apprehension through our connection. “And what would happen then?”

I moved to her side, unable to bear the distance between us any longer. My hands found her shoulders, turning her to face me. “They would take you for questioning. Study you. Try to understand how you triggered the systems.”

Fear flashed in her eyes, but she didn't look away. “And you? What would happen to you for...for bonding with me instead of reporting me?”

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“Discharge, most likely,” I said bluntly. “Possibly detention, depending on what they discover about the tech activation.”

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. “I won’t let that happen.”

I smiled, cupping her face between my palms. “Neither will I. Which is why we’re going to the outpost first. Commander Kale is stationed there—he’s an old friend, one who understands the sacred nature of fate-bonds. He’ll help us navigate this...diplomatically.”

Relief flowed from her through the bond, easing the tension that had built between us. She rose on her toes, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss that sent sparks racing along every nerve ending. I growled low in my throat, deepening the kiss, my hands sliding down to her waist to pull her closer.

The bond flared between us, golden threads of connection pulsing with renewed heat. I could taste her desire, feel it building alongside my own, the feedback loop of sensation threatening to consume us both again.

With reluctance born of necessity, I broke the kiss. “We should finish preparing,” I said, voice rough with want. “As much as I’d prefer to take you again.”

She smiled against my lips, the curve of her mouth both teasing and genuine. “Later,” she promised, and the word sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

We resumed our preparations, moving with purpose now, the shelter a flurry of focused activity. I packed weapons, tools, navigational equipment—all the essentials

for traversing the wasteland—while monitoring the shelter’s external sensors for any sign of Legion activity.

A ripple of unease passed through me as I checked the latest readings. The buried tech was more active now, sending out pulse signals at regular intervals. Searching. The patterns were unmistakable—reconnaissance protocols designed to locate and track anomalies.

Tracking Jas.

My jaw tightened as I loaded an extra power cell into my gauntlet. Through the bond, I felt Jas’s awareness of my tension, her own apprehension rising in response.

“What is it?” she asked, coming to my side, her hand finding mine with instinctive ease.

“They’re scanning actively now,” I said, showing her the display. “Looking for you.”

She studied the readout, her brow furrowed. “How far can they reach?”

“Not far yet,” I assured her. “The systems are old, degraded. But they’re waking up more fully with each scan. We need to be beyond their range by dawn.”

She nodded, squeezing my hand. “Then we leave now.”

I checked the time—barely midnight by local standards. The desert would be cold but navigable, the twin moons providing enough light to travel safely if we were careful. It wasn’t ideal, but it was better than waiting for morning when the Legion tech would be at full scanning capacity.

“We leave now,” I agreed, gathering the last of our supplies.

As we made final preparations, I felt something shift in our bond—a deep, solid certainty flowing from her to me. I looked up to find her watching me, her eyes clear and determined.

“Whatever happens out there,” she said quietly, “I don’t regret this. Us. The bond. I need you to know that.”

The words hit me with the force of a physical blow, reaching past my carefully constructed defenses to touch something vital and vulnerable. Through our connection, I could feel the absolute truth of her statement—no hesitation, no doubt, only certainty that blazed like a sun.

“Kassari,” I murmured, the word carrying all the reverence I couldn’t express otherwise. “You are my heart’s match. My home.”

She smiled, and I felt her love—bright and fierce and uncompromising—flood through the bond between us.

It staggered me, this alien emotion I’d never allowed myself to imagine experiencing.

I’d been prepared for desire, for partnership, for the biological imperative of the bond.

I hadn’t been prepared for this—this overwhelming tide of feeling that threatened to drown me in its intensity.

“Let’s go,” she said, shouldering her pack with determination. “Together.”

I checked the perimeter one last time, scanning for any immediate threats before disabling the shelter’s security protocols.

My mate was right beside me, her presence a solid comfort through our newly formed bond.

Whatever awaited us beyond these walls—Legion tech, command protocols, the unknown dangers of the wasteland—we would face it as one.

I adjusted the sand-pulse rifle on my shoulder and reached for her hand, our fingers interlocking with perfect ease. The contact sent a ripple of reassurance through our connection, steadying us both.

“Stay close,” I said, pressing one last kiss to her bond-mark. “Trust the connection between us. It will guide us even when words fail.”

She nodded, squeezing my hand. “Lead the way, warrior. Your mate is ready.”

The words—so simply spoken, yet carrying the weight of ancient tradition—settled into my chest like a physical presence. My mate. My kassari. Mine to protect. Mine to cherish. Mine to journey with across this unforgiving landscape and whatever lay beyond.

I opened the shelter door, and together, we stepped into the desert night, bound by fate and choice and something stronger than either—the unbreakable golden threads of a bond that would last until we drew our final breaths.

And even then, the elders said, fate-bonded souls remained together—traveling the stars as one, never to be parted again.

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The stars glittered above us like someone had scattered diamonds across black silk as we lay tangled together on the cooling desert sand.

Rhaekar's body radiated heat against my skin, his powerful arms cradling me against his chest while his knot kept us physically joined in the aftermath of our claiming.

Through our newly forged bond, I could feel waves of his satisfaction and protectiveness washing over me, mingling with my own sense of completion and wonder.

I'd never felt so connected to another being in my life—so seen, so wanted, so completely accepted. And yet...

My thoughts drifted beneath the vastness of the alien sky.

We'd paused just beyond the shelter's perimeter, neither of us quite ready to begin our journey after the intensity of our bonding.

The physical need to remain close had overwhelmed the urgency to depart, and Rhaekar had spread his thermal cloak across the sand, drawing me down with him for this brief, stolen moment of peace.

I traced my fingers over the claiming mark he'd left on my collarbone, feeling its subtle heat, the raised edges of skin where his teeth had broken through.

It pulsed with a gentle rhythm that matched the golden threads of energy I could now sense flowing between us.

His marking on me. My marking on him. Equal. Connected.

His tail tightened slightly around my thigh, the tip flicking with contentment. One large hand splayed possessively over my hip while the other stroked my hair with surprising gentleness. The contrast between his raw power and his tender touch made something twist in my chest.

“I can feel you thinking,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that vibrated against my back.

I smiled faintly. “That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“The bond?”

“Having someone actually in my head.” I shifted slightly, careful of our still-joined bodies. “Someone who can feel what I’m feeling.”

His chest expanded against my back as he inhaled my scent. “Does it bother you?”

“No,” I admitted, surprised by my own certainty. “It should, but it doesn’t.”

We fell silent again, the desert winds whispering secrets across the dunes.

I stared at the unfamiliar constellations, wondering what stories the Rodinians told about them, what legends shaped their understanding of the universe.

So different from my world, and yet the stars themselves—distant, burning, eternal—felt somehow familiar.

“You know...back home, I was always a lot,” I said finally, the words spilling out before I could reconsider them.

His rumble was curious, low. “A lot?”

I huffed a small laugh, but there was little humor in it.

“Too loud. Too opinionated. Too bold. Too brown. Too much.” My fingers traced idle patterns on his forearm.

“Every guy I ever dated made it clear I was something they needed to tone down or tuck away. And I tried, for a while. Tried to make myself smaller. Easier.”

Through our bond, I felt his immediate reaction—a flash of something hot and protective that bordered on anger, though none of it was directed at me.

He shifted, adjusting our bodies so he could see my face while keeping us joined. His amber eyes glowed in the starlight, vertical pupils dilated as they focused on me with unnerving intensity.

“That was foolish of them,” he said, his voice carrying a sharpness that surprised me.

I blinked, unprepared for the vehemence in his tone. “What?”

“The males of your world,” he clarified, one clawed finger gently tilting my chin up. “They were fools to make you feel that way.”

The bond between us flared with the strength of his conviction, washing away any doubt that he might be simply offering platitudes.

“You are not too much,” he continued, cupping the side of my face with a tenderness that stole the air from my lungs. His eyes never left mine, fierce and certain. “You are everything. Your voice. Your fire. Your truth. I would not change one breath of you.”

The words hit harder than they should have. They soaked into my chest like balm, smoothing over scars I hadn't realized I still carried. For a moment, I couldn't speak, could only stare into those alien eyes that somehow saw me more clearly than anyone on Earth ever had.

"You can feel that I mean it," he added softly, his thumb brushing my cheekbone. "The bond doesn't allow for lies between us."

And he was right—through our connection, I could sense the absolute truth behind his words. There was no hesitation, no reservation, no hidden wish that I might become something else for his comfort. Just acceptance. Complete and unconditional.

"You mean that," I whispered, not quite a question.

I felt the slight easing of pressure as his knot began to recede, our bodies gradually separating in the natural conclusion of the claiming process. He gently shifted us, gathering me against him so we lay face to face, my head tucked beneath his chin, his arms wrapped securely around me.

"I do," he said simply, pressing a kiss to my temple. "Among my people, the universe gives us only one fate-mate. One heart's match. You are mine, Jasmine Navarro Cruz. Not despite your fire, but because of it."

I closed my eyes, savoring the weight of those words, letting them sink into places that had been empty for too long. The voice that had whispered I was too much grew quieter, fading beneath the steady pulse of the bond between us.

For the first time since I'd fallen through that portal in the Sahara, I felt something close to peace.

Not because the dangers around us had diminished—we still needed to leave before

dawn, still needed to evade whatever Legion tech was stirring beneath the dunes, still faced an uncertain reception at the outpost.

But those concerns seemed less overwhelming now. Whatever challenges awaited us, we would face them together—bound not just by fate or circumstance, but by choice. By recognition of something in each other that neither of us had found elsewhere.

I nestled closer into Rhaekar's embrace, letting myself believe that maybe, just this once, I could be exactly who I was and still be exactly what someone needed.

The ground shivered beneath us. So subtle at first that I might have missed it if not for the heightened awareness our bond had given me.

A faint tremor, barely more than a whisper through the sand, like something large taking its first breath after a long sleep.

I stilled, my body tensing against Rhaekar's, my fingers digging slightly into his arm.

"Did you feel that?" I asked, voice barely above a whisper, as if speaking too loudly might draw the attention of whatever stirred below.

Rhaekar was already moving, his body transitioning from relaxed to alert in a heartbeat. "Yes."

He sat up, pulling me with him, our bond thrumming with sudden vigilance that replaced the peaceful contentment of moments before.

His eyes scanned the horizon, pupils narrowing to thin vertical slits as they adjusted to the darkness.

I felt his senses sharpening through our connection—smelling, listening, analyzing in

ways my human capabilities couldn't match.

Another tremor followed. Stronger this time.

A distinct ripple that made the sand beneath my palms shift and resettle.

The dunes around us seemed to sigh, sending cascades of fine grains sliding toward the lower basin.

Tiny avalanches of silver-blue sand caught the starlight as they fell, beautiful and somehow ominous.

"That wasn't just my imagination," I said, scrambling to my feet.

"No." Rhaekar stood in one fluid motion, his massive frame casting a long shadow across the sand. His tail lashed behind him, a sure sign of agitation I was learning to read. "Something's waking."

My heart kicked into high gear, blood rushing in my ears. "Is it the storm again?" I asked, though I already knew the answer from the tight coil of dread forming in my stomach.

"No." He reached for me, helping me gather our scattered gear with practiced efficiency. His movements were controlled but urgent, his focus absolute. "It's coming from beneath us."

I didn't need him to explain further. The tech he'd found earlier—the buried Legion weapons systems, the ancient war machines—they were stirring more fully now, responding to something. To me. To my alien presence on this world.

Through our bond, I caught flickers of Rhaekar's knowledge—broken images of

mechanical sentinels emerging from sand, of metallic tendrils seeking unknown targets, of automated systems designed to contain and examine anything they deemed a threat.

The images weren't memories but fragments of reports, briefings, warnings passed among Reapers tasked with monitoring the desert's deadly secrets.

A third tremor rolled beneath us, strong enough that I had to widen my stance to maintain balance. The vibration hummed through the soles of my boots, up my legs, settling in my chest like a second, discordant heartbeat.

"How much time do we have?" I asked, fastening my pack with trembling fingers.

Rhaekar's eyes met mine, his gaze intense in the starlight. "Not enough."

The ground shifted again, and this time the movement was accompanied by a sound—a deep, resonant hum that seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at once. It raised the fine hairs on my arms, set my teeth on edge. Not mechanical, not quite. Something between organic and artificial.

"We need to move." Rhaekar handed me the sand-pulse rifle, ensuring I had a secure grip before releasing it. "Now."

I nodded, slipping the weapon's strap over my shoulder as I'd been taught. My hand automatically checked that the power cell was properly seated, the safety disengaged. The training he'd given me earlier felt more vital now, less theoretical.

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A sudden crack split the night—sharp and final, like ice breaking on a frozen lake.

Twenty yards to our right, a fissure opened in the sand, blue-white light spilling upward from depths I couldn't measure.

The glow illuminated the desert in harsh relief, casting everything in sterile, clinical brightness that felt wrong against the natural darkness.

“Legion protocols,” Rhaekar growled, positioning himself between me and the light. “Active scanning.”

Through our bond, I caught his meaning with crystal clarity. The tech wasn't just awake—it was hunting. Searching. For me.

Another fissure opened to our left, then another beyond it.

The desert was splitting apart, revealing veins of artificial light running beneath its surface like luminescent blood vessels through pale skin.

With each new crack, the humming intensified, vibrating through my bones, making my teeth ache.

“Let's go.” Rhaekar grabbed my hand, his grip firm but gentle. We began moving away from the spreading light, our pace quick but measured. Running would waste energy we'd need for the long journey ahead, but dawdling wasn't an option either.

I glanced back once over my shoulder. The fissures had connected, forming a

geometric pattern that reminded me of circuit boards or ancient petroglyphs—precise lines and angles that had no place in the natural world. The pattern was expanding. Growing. Seeking.

My skin crawled with the certainty that we were being watched by something inhuman. Something that calculated and assessed with cold efficiency.

“Can it track us?” I asked, my voice sounding thin against the desert’s growing chorus of mechanical awakening.

“Yes,” Rhaekar answered simply. “But not quickly. Not yet. The systems are old, degraded. It will take time for them to fully reactivate.”

Time we could use to put distance between us and whatever was waking.

We moved like shadows across the dunes, our steps quick but controlled.

Rhaekar led the way, his superior night vision and desert knowledge guiding our path.

Our bond hummed between us, a golden thread that kept us connected even when we weren’t speaking.

I could feel his heightened senses—the way he processed scents on the wind, the subtle vibrations through the sand, the distant sounds my human ears couldn’t detect.

“Stay in my footsteps,” he instructed, voice low. “The sand here is loose. Easy to leave trails.”

I followed precisely, placing my boots where his had been.

Behind us, the network of glowing fissures continued to spread, geometric patterns splintering across the desert floor like cracks in glass.

The blue-white light they emitted felt wrong—too sterile, too cold against the natural darkness of the night.

“What exactly are we running from?” I asked, breath coming in controlled bursts as we navigated a steep incline.

Rhaekar paused at the crest, scanning the terrain ahead. “Legion containment systems. Automated drones and sentinels programmed to capture and examine anything anomalous.”

“Like me.”

“Like you,” he confirmed, helping me up the final stretch. His hand lingered on mine, the contact sending reassurance through our bond. “But they’re old. Sluggish. We have the advantage of speed.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a mechanical whine cut through the night air.

We both turned to look back across the basin we’d just crossed.

Something was rising from one of the larger fissures—a slender metal pillar that unfurled like a deadly flower, extending upward until it towered fifteen feet above the desert floor.

At its top, a sensor array rotated slowly, scanning methodically in widening circles.

“Shit,” I breathed.

“Perimeter marker,” Rhaekar explained, pulling me down into a crouching position. “It’s establishing a containment zone.”

Through our bond, I caught glimpses of knowledge—technical schematics, training briefings, field reports about these systems. The markers formed the boundaries; what came next would be the hunters.

As if responding to my thought, the ground thirty yards from the first marker bulged upward.

Sand cascaded down as something pushed its way to the surface—something metallic and articulated, with multiple limbs and a housing unit where a head should be.

It rose fully from the desert floor, shaking off sand like a dog coming in from rain, its movements unnervingly organic despite its clearly mechanical nature.

“Sentinel unit,” Rhaekar growled, the sound vibrating through his chest against my back. “Mark II. Crowd control and capture.”

The sentinel swiveled what passed for its head, a ring of sensors glowing the same eerie blue as the fissures. It began to move across the sand with surprising grace, each leg finding perfect purchase despite the shifting terrain.

“We need to move. Now.” Rhaekar pulled me up, guiding me toward a jagged rock formation half a mile east. “If we can reach those outcroppings, we can mask our heat signatures.”

We half-ran, half-slid down the back side of the dune, using its bulk to shield us from the sentinel’s sensors. I could feel Rhaekar’s strategic mind working through our bond—calculating angles, evaluating risks, formulating and discarding options with military precision.

“What happens if those things catch up to us?” I asked, though part of me didn’t want to know.

His grip on my hand tightened fractionally. “They’re designed to subdue and contain. Not kill. But their methods aren’t...gentle.”

More sentinels were emerging now, at least five that I could count, spreading out in a search pattern from the central marker. Behind them, smaller units skittered across the sand—disc-shaped machines that moved like crabs, leaving faint blue trails of light in their wake.

“Trackers,” Rhaekar explained, following my gaze. “They detect biochemical signatures, residual energy patterns. They’ll be looking for yours.”

We reached the base of the rock formation just as one of the trackers changed direction, heading toward the path we’d taken across the dunes. Its blue sensor light brightened as it picked up our trail.

“It’s found us,” I whispered, fingers tightening on the rifle strap.

Rhaekar’s eyes narrowed, his calculating gaze taking in our surroundings. “Not yet. It’s found where we were. Come.”

He led me into a narrow crevice between two massive sandstone boulders.

The passage twisted sharply, opening into a small natural chamber barely large enough for the two of us.

The stone walls would block our heat signatures, and the winding entrance would prevent direct line of sight from the trackers’ sensors.

“How long can we stay here?” I asked, setting down my pack.

“Not long,” Rhaekar answered, positioning himself so he could see the entrance while keeping me behind him. “But long enough to let the first wave pass.”

Through our bond, I felt his tactical assessment—the positioning of the sentinels, their likely search patterns, the optimal timing for our next move. His mind worked with impressive efficiency, mapping escape routes and contingencies.

“I can feel you strategizing,” I said, pressing a hand to his back.

He glanced down at me, a hint of surprise in his eyes. “The bond is strengthening. You’re adapting to it quickly.”

“Is that unusual?”

“For non-Rodinians, yes.” His tail curled around my ankle in that now-familiar gesture of possession and comfort. “It suggests the compatibility between us is...exceptional.”

A surge of warmth flowed through our connection—pride, affection, something deeper I wasn’t ready to name. It momentarily eclipsed the danger surrounding us, reminding me that amid all this chaos, we’d found something rare and precious.

The moment shattered as a mechanical whirring sound passed by our hiding place. Through a crack in the rocks, I glimpsed a tracker unit sliding past, its sensors pulsing with blue light. It paused, rotating as if tasting the air, then continued onward.

“They’ll double back,” Rhaekar murmured, his voice barely audible. “We have minutes, not hours.”

I nodded, swallowing back fear. “What’s the plan?”

“We wait for the main search group to move northwest, then we head east.” He pointed toward where the twin moons hung low on the horizon. “There’s a dried riverbed two miles in that direction. If we follow it south, it will lead us toward the outpost.”

“And put us farther from the Legion tech?”

His expression tightened. “No. The entire region is honeycombed with buried systems. But it will take them time to activate units in other sectors. Time we can use to reach the outpost.”

I processed this, looking for angles he might have missed. “What if we used the tech against itself?” I suggested. “Create false trails, mislead the trackers?”

Interest sparked through our bond. “What do you have in mind?”

“You said they track biochemical signatures. What if we leave some of mine going in the wrong direction? Hair, skin cells, maybe even...” I hesitated, then pushed forward. “Blood. A few drops on some rocks heading northwest.”

Rhaekar studied me with new appreciation, the tactical part of his mind immediately grasping the strategy. “It could work. Confuse their tracking algorithms long enough for us to gain distance.”

We quickly assembled a decoy kit—strands of my hair wrapped around small stones that could be thrown, a cloth wiped across my forehead to collect sweat, and yes, three precious drops of blood from a small cut on my finger, smeared on a piece of fabric.

“This,” Rhaekar said, pressing his forehead to mine in a gesture that sent warmth rushing through our bond, “is why fate brought us together. You see solutions where others see only threats.”

The compliment settled in my chest like a physical weight. No one had ever valued my mind quite this way—as an equal partner in survival, not just someone to be protected.

When the sentinel units had moved far enough northwest, we slipped from our hiding place.

Rhaekar deployed our decoys with precise calculation, creating a false trail that led away from our actual route.

We then headed east as planned, keeping to hard rock when possible to minimize footprints, moving swiftly but cautiously through the night.

The bond between us served as an early warning system—his heightened senses detecting dangers before they became visible, my intuition filling in gaps his military training might overlook.

We functioned as a seamless unit, communicating without words, anticipating each other’s movements with uncanny precision.

As we crested a rise that revealed the silvery line of the dried riverbed below, I cast one last look behind us. In the distance, the desert glowed with unnatural blue light, expanding outward from where we’d been. The Legion tech was fully awake now, searching, hunting.

Hunting me.

“We’ll make it,” Rhaekar said, reading my fear through our connection. His hand found mine, fingers interlocking. “Together.”

I squeezed his hand, drawing strength from the certainty in his voice, in his soul that now brushed against mine. The danger hadn’t lessened. If anything, it had grown. But so had we—becoming something stronger, more resilient, more determined than either of us had been alone.

“Together,” I agreed, and we descended toward the riverbed, the first step of many on our journey to safety.

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It started with a whine—high-pitched, unnatural.

The shard pulsed beneath the containment mesh where I'd buried it deep in the sand, but it wasn't deep enough.

I felt it through the soles of my boots.

Like the desert itself was snarling awake.

Jas was nearby, hunched over her datapad, trying to extract meaning from Legion archives I hadn't exactly granted her clearance for.

Her hair was up in that chaotic knot she twisted it into when she was focused.

Sweat beaded at her brow from the midmorning heat.

She looked beautiful. She looked doomed.

Because the shard responded to her.

It had been dormant—dead tech, by all visible scans. But the second she'd stepped near it that first day, it had surged with color. Pale green—Swarm protocol. Now, it pulsed again. And this time, the desert answered.

We'd established a temporary camp in the dried riverbed, seeking shelter from the twin suns that had risen with brutal efficiency two hours prior.

The journey through the night had been long but uneventful after our initial escape from the awakening tech.

We'd made good time, putting seven miles between us and the primary activation site.

Distance that meant nothing if the Swarm's network extended as far as Legion intelligence suggested.

I should have insisted we keep moving. But Jas had needed rest, and I'd needed to assess the shard I'd contained. My mistake. My arrogance. Thinking I could study the very thing hunting us without consequence.

"This is fascinating," Jas murmured, oblivious to the danger literally glowing beneath us. "These archives suggest the Swarm wasn't just a weapon. It was trying to communicate."

I grunted, attention split between her words and the increasing frequency of the shard's pulses. "Communication through assimilation isn't dialogue," I replied, moving closer to her while trying to appear casual. "The Legion classified it as a contagion for a reason."

She looked up, those dark eyes sharp with the journalist's hunger I'd come to admire and fear in equal measure. Our bond hummed between us, allowing me to feel her curiosity like a physical sensation—bright, insistent, compelling. It made protecting her both easier and infinitely more difficult.

"But look at this pattern recognition," she insisted, tilting the screen toward me. "It's not just targeting random genetic material. It's looking for specific markers, specific traits."

I leaned over her shoulder, inhaling her scent while scanning the data she'd managed to extract.

My hackles rose. She'd dug deeper than I'd realized, accessing restricted files that should have been encrypted beyond civilian reach.

The fact that she'd broken through spoke to both her resourcefulness and the degraded state of the outpost systems.

"How did you access this level?" I asked, my voice carefully neutral.

Her smile was quick and unrepentant. "Your access codes aren't as secure as you think. You say them in your sleep."

Under different circumstances, I might have been impressed. Amused, even. But the whine from the buried shard had risen in pitch, becoming more insistent. Through our bond, I could sense that Jas hadn't noticed it yet—her hearing less acute than mine, her attention consumed by the data before her.

"We need to move," I said, closing the datapad with firm gentleness. "Now."

She frowned, sensing my unease through our connection. "What's wrong?"

I didn't answer immediately, scanning our surroundings with heightened senses.

The dried riverbed offered minimal cover—just enough to shield us from orbital scans but not from ground-based sensors.

The rocky outcroppings to either side provided better defensive positions, but would expose us to the worst of the midday heat.

“The shard is active,” I finally said, helping her gather our supplies. “And it’s transmitting.”

Her eyes widened slightly, fear spiking through our bond before she controlled it. “To what?”

The answer came before I could speak.

Sand exploded in a geyser ten meters away. I lunged for her, wrapping my body over hers just as a beam of raw light seared through the air where she’d been standing. My back took the brunt. Armor held. Barely.

“What the hell?” she screamed beneath me.

“Swarm drone,” I growled, lifting my head to assess. It hovered, gleaming and skeletal, with spindled limbs and a glowing red eye that tracked her like prey.

Target Acquired: Anomalous Entity – Terran DNA – Retrieval Priority.

The machine’s voice hissed in a corrupted version of Universal Standard.

“Oh no,” Jas whispered. “It thinks I’m a sample?”

“No,” I snapped, drawing my pulse blade. “It thinks you’re a threat.”

And it was right. She was a threat—to its programming, to its purpose, to everything it had been designed to contain and control.

Her very presence on this world represented an unknown variable the Swarm couldn’t categorize.

And what the Swarm couldn't categorize, it sought to dismantle. Study. Consume.

I activated my beacon with one hand, sending a tight-band signal across every channel I could still access. "Code Black. D-7 site compromised. Requesting immediate extraction. Active Swarm relic. Civilian under threat. Repeat, civilian under threat."

No response.

I didn't wait. I charged.

The drone shrieked and fired again. I zigzagged through the dunes, drawing its fire, trying to lure it away. But it kept glancing back at Jas. It wanted her.

She was its directive now.

The pulse blade hummed in my grip, its molecular edge designed to sever even the densest alloys. Legion tech at its finest, meant specifically for encounters like this. Yet the Swarm drone moved with unnatural speed, its articulated limbs bending at impossible angles as it evaded my first strike.

Its core glowed sickly green—the same color as the buried shard. Not coincidence. They were communicating, coordinating. And where there was one drone, others would follow.

"Run for the rocks!" I shouted to Jas, who had taken cover behind a jutting piece of ancient riverbed debris. "I'll draw it off!"

Through our bond, I felt her resistance. Her refusal to leave me. Stubborn, brave, foolish woman. My mate. Mine to protect.

“Like hell I will!” she called back, already scrambling for the Legion-issue sidearm I’d given her earlier. Not powerful enough to damage the drone, but enough to distract it, perhaps.

The drone twisted mid-air, sensors focusing on her movement. I used its momentary distraction to close the distance, blade arcing toward one of its spindly limbs.

The blade connected with its joint—once, twice. Sparks flew. It screeched like metal in pain and spun mid-air, slicing at me with one elongated claw. Blood spilled from my arm. I ignored it.

Pain was irrelevant. The mission—protecting Jas—was all that mattered.

I pressed the attack, forcing the drone to engage with me rather than pursue my mate. Its movements were becoming more erratic, less predictable. Adapting. Learning. This wasn’t a simple sentinel unit like those we’d encountered before. This was something older, more sophisticated. A hunter.

It slashed again, faster than I anticipated. The claw caught my shoulder, tearing through the reinforced fabric of my combat suit. Pain flared, hot and immediate, but the wound wasn’t deep. My augmented healing would seal it within minutes.

“Rhaekar!” Jas shouted. “Duck!”

I dropped instantly, training and trust overriding any hesitation. She hurled a chunk of scorched equipment at the drone. It hit. Not hard, but enough to knock it off its axis. I lunged, blade buried in its core.

It screamed once—and exploded.

Sand and smoke.

I stumbled back, panting. My comm crackled to life.

“Legion Command to D-7. Receiving partial signal. Confirm civilian safety.”

I grabbed the comm. “Jas is alive. Situation hostile. Request evac window now.”

As I turned, she was already at my side, eyes wide, hand shaking as she reached for mine.

“I’m fine,” she said breathlessly. “But that thing... it wanted to take me.”

I pulled her into my arms, my voice rough and sharp. “Over my dead body.”

And judging by the way the sand still trembled... that wasn’t out of the question yet.

The drone’s remains smoldered in the sand, circuits and alien metallurgy still twitching with residual energy.

Not completely dead. Nothing of the Swarm ever truly died—it just reconfigured, adapted, evolved.

Given enough time, these fragments would reconstitute, combine with other tech, create something new.

We couldn’t give it that time.

“We need to destroy it completely,” I said, reluctantly releasing Jas. “And we need to move. That explosion will draw attention.”

She nodded, understanding immediately. Through our bond, I felt her fear, yes, but also her determination. Her resolve. The strength that had called to me from the first

moment I'd scented her in the desert.

"Your arm," she said, reaching for the tear in my combat suit where blood darkened the fabric.

"It's nothing." I glanced at the wound, already clotting. "Rodinian physiology. Accelerated healing."

"Still." Her fingers probed the edges of the cut with gentle insistence. "At least let me clean it before it seals with sand inside."

I allowed her this small comfort, this moment of caretaking, while I surveyed our surroundings. The riverbed no longer felt secure. The drone had found us too easily, too quickly. And my buried shard...

The containment mesh had ruptured during the fight. The shard was gone.

"Jas," I said, keeping my voice steady despite the cold dread seeping through me. "Did you see where the shard went?"

She looked up from tending my arm, brow furrowed. "No. Why?"

I gestured toward the empty depression in the sand. "It's missing."

Understanding dawned on her face. "You think the drone took it?"

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“Or it moved itself.” I didn’t elaborate on the implications. I didn’t need to. Through our bond, she grasped the severity immediately.

The comm crackled again, breaking the tension.

“D-7, this is Command. Extraction window confirmed in six hours at coordinates Delta-Nine-Seven. Can you reach? Over.”

Six hours. The journey to Delta-Nine-Seven would take at least four at a brisk pace. Longer if we encountered more drones or had to evade Legion patrols. And all while being hunted by tech that seemed specifically attuned to Jas’s presence.

“Affirmative, Command,” I responded. “Will reach extraction point. Be advised, subject shows particular interest in civilian. Recommend immediate quarantine protocols upon arrival.”

There was a pause, longer than standard communication delay.

“Understood, D-7. Quarantine protocols... acknowledged.”

The hesitation told me everything I needed to know. Command was already considering what to do with Jas. With my fate-mate. The anomaly that had awakened dormant tech and threatened an entire containment zone.

Standard procedure would be isolation, study, memory modification.

The bond between us would be noted, recorded, then dismissed as an unfortunate

complication.

She would be returned to Earth with no memory of me, of us, of what we'd become together.

And I would be reassigned, possibly after disciplinary action for allowing a civilian to access restricted data. For bonding with her.

I would lose her.

The thought sent a surge of primal fury through me, strong enough that Jas gasped, feeling it through our connection.

"Rhaekar?" she questioned, her hand finding mine. "What is it?"

I couldn't lie to her, not through the bond. "Command will try to separate us," I said simply. "Standard protocol for civilians who encounter classified Legion operations."

Her fingers tightened around mine. "They can try."

The fierce determination in those three words sparked something warm in my chest, pushing back against the cold calculations of duty and protocol. She meant it. My brave, stubborn Terran was prepared to fight the entirety of Legion Command for what we'd found together.

I allowed myself a moment—just one—to marvel at what fate had given me. Then I returned to the tactical realities of our situation.

"We need to move," I repeated, gathering our remaining supplies. "That drone won't be the last. And the longer we stay in one place, the easier we'll be to track."

Jas nodded, slinging her pack over her shoulders with practiced efficiency. She'd adapted to this harsh environment, to the rhythms of survival, with impressive speed. Pride swelled in me, tempered by the knowledge that her adaptability would soon be tested even further.

I took point, leading us out of the riverbed and toward higher ground where we could better survey our surroundings.

The twin suns beat down mercilessly, their combined heat enough to blister unprotected skin.

I monitored Jas through our bond, alert for any signs of heat stress or dehydration.

Terrans were notoriously vulnerable to extreme temperatures.

But she kept pace without complaint, her determination a steady pulse against my consciousness. Only when we reached the ridge overlooking the vast expanse of desert did she pause, breath coming in controlled gasps.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked, pointing toward a distant shimmer on the horizon.

I followed her gaze, enhanced vision focusing on the anomaly. A cold weight settled in my stomach.

"Yes," I confirmed. "The Swarm is fully awake."

Across the desert floor, a network of glowing green lines spread like veins beneath the sand, pulsing with unnatural life. Where they intersected, small eruptions of sand marked the emergence of more drones—dozens of them, rising from their long slumber to join the hunt.

And they were all moving in our direction.

“How did it find us so quickly?” Jas asked, voice tight with controlled fear.

I met her gaze, unable to soften the truth. “It didn’t need to find us. It’s been waiting for you. Since the moment you stepped through that portal.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “The Swarm... it knew I was coming?”

“Not you specifically,” I clarified. “But something like you. Something it was programmed to recognize and respond to.”

The implications hung between us, unspoken but clear. Whatever had created the portal that brought Jas to this world, whatever had drawn her across galaxies to my side, it wasn’t coincidence. It was something older, something planned.

Something the Swarm had been designed to prevent.

“We have six hours to reach the extraction point,” I said, gently redirecting her focus to our immediate survival. “We need to stay ahead of that expansion. Move fast, stay quiet, leave no trail.”

She squared her shoulders, the brave facade barely hiding the tremor of fear I could feel through our bond. “And when we reach the extraction point? What then?”

I met her eyes, allowing her to see the fierce determination in mine. “Then we fight for us. Together.”

Her smile was small but genuine, strengthened by the resolve flowing between us. “Together,” she echoed.

As we turned to begin our journey toward Delta-Nine-Seven, I cast one last glance at the spreading network of Swarm tech behind us. It moved with purpose, with hunger, with ancient programming that saw Jas as something to be contained, studied, eliminated.

It would have to kill me first.

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The first shot from the drone sizzled past my ear like a cosmic mosquito with anger management issues, close enough that I felt the heat ripple through my hair.

I dropped to my knees behind the half-buried Legion turret, swearing in every language I knew—which, admittedly, was just English plus the three Rodinian curse words Rhaekar had taught me.

Sand cascaded into my boots as I frantically pried open the control panel.

The wiring inside looked like a technological spaghetti nightmare, all corroded connections and fried circuits that had been baking in alien desert heat for who knows how long.

I was not trained for this.

I mean, sure, I could dig into ancient internet forums about skinwalkers and rogue AI sightings in the Nevada desert like nobody's business. But rigging up a half-dead Legion defense turret in the middle of a sandstorm while an alien death Roomba chased us? Yeah. That was new.

“Okay, old turret,” I whispered, crouched behind the partially buried control panel with wires like angry noodles and more sand in my bra than should be legally allowed, “it's just you, me, and whatever leftover tech magic the galaxy forgot to unplug.”

Somewhere behind me, a plasma blast scorched the sand.

The thing—the ancient alien drone that had apparently decided I was today’s main character—hovered closer.

Its skeletal frame gleamed under the twin suns, sensor array glowing that sickly green that screamed “I’m going to dissect you for science and not in the fun way. ”

We’d spotted the half-buried Legion outpost just twenty minutes after leaving our previous position.

Rhaekar had recognized it immediately—an emergency bunker from the original Swarm containment campaign, mostly buried by decades of shifting sands.

He’d decided it might offer temporary shelter and potentially useful equipment for our journey to the extraction point.

What we hadn’t counted on was being followed so quickly.

The drone had appeared just as we’d cleared enough sand to access the bunker’s entrance. Bigger than the one we’d destroyed earlier, this unit moved with more purpose, its targeting systems locking onto me with deadly precision the moment it crested the dune.

Rhaekar had shoved me toward the half-exposed defense turret with a growled instruction to “make it work” while he drew the drone’s fire. Which, in Rhaekar-speak, meant “I’m going to play tag with a murder machine while you figure out billion-year-old technology, no pressure.”

And Rhaekar? Of course he was busy playing meat shield.

He leapt over a dune like some post-apocalyptic gladiator, deflecting a shot with the shield rigged to his arm and snarling something probably heroic in his deep gravel-

voice. Sexy as hell. Infuriating.

“Stop trying to die in slow motion!” I shouted, fingers untangling what I hoped was the turret’s main power coupling.

“I am distracting it!” he barked back, rolling behind a rock formation as another blast superheated the air where he’d been standing.

“By bleeding on everything?!”

And he was bleeding—a thin trail of darkish blood streaking down his arm where a previous shot had grazed him.

Not enough to slow him down, but enough to make my heart clench with protective fury.

Through our bond, I could feel his determination, his focus, and beneath it all, a steady current of fear—not for himself, but for me.

Another spark jumped from the wiring I was finessing like a very hot, very annoyed MacGyver. My fingers were shaking. The heatwave had turned the control panel into a toaster oven. My thighs were on fire. My temper? Already fried.

I connected what looked like a power conduit to the main relay, mentally thanking whatever cosmic entity was responsible for making alien tech work on roughly the same principles as Earth electronics. Red to red, blue to blue, don’t touch the glowy bit that’s probably radioactive. Simple.

“Come on, you beautiful piece of junk,” I muttered, forcing my trembling hands to steady. “Wake up and show me what you’re made of.”

The drone fired again, this time hitting close enough to shower me with sand. I yelped, ducking lower behind the turret's base. Through the bond, I felt Rhaekar's spike of panic, followed by the cold fury that meant he was about to do something stupidly heroic.

"Don't you dare!" I shouted, knowing exactly what he was thinking. "Stay behind cover!"

Too late. He was already moving, drawing the drone's attention with a display of Rodinian agility that under different circumstances would have been breathtaking to watch. He rolled, sprang upward, and flung a piece of debris at the drone's sensor array with deadly accuracy.

It connected with a satisfying clang, knocking the drone off-balance for a precious few seconds.

But the victory was short-lived. The drone recovered quickly, recalibrating its targeting systems with mechanical efficiency.

Its next shot caught Rhaekar as he was mid-dodge, searing across his side in a flash of green energy.

I felt the pain through our bond—sharp, hot, then deliberately muted as he shielded me from the worst of it. That selfless gesture made me want to kiss him and kick his ass in equal measure.

"I swear to god, Rhaekar, if you die before I get to show you Netflix and actual Earth tacos, I will personally drag you back from whatever alien afterlife you have just to yell at you!"

His response was a grunt of pain followed by a rumbling chuckle that, despite

everything, made my stomach do that stupid little flip it always did when he laughed.

“I look forward to these... tacos,” he called back, the words strained but determined.

“Then stop getting shot!” I wedged my hand deeper into the control panel, feeling for the activation switch I was certain had to exist. Legion tech was nothing if not practical—there had to be a manual override, a backup system, something I could...

My fingers brushed against a recessed panel. Bingo.

“I swear, if this turret doesn’t fire?—”

The panel lit up beneath my palm, ancient systems humming to life with a sound like an old refrigerator contemplating retirement.

“Oh thank god.” I slammed my palm on the activation plate, and the turret groaned to life like a pissed-off dinosaur coming out of retirement. It rotated, sensors scanning, mechanisms whirring as it oriented itself.

For one horrible moment, I thought it might target Rhaekar instead of the drone. But the Legion programming held—it recognized the drone as a threat, locked on with a series of staccato beeps, and fired.

Direct hit.

The drone staggered mid-air, green light pulsing erratically as the turret’s energy beam tore through its central processing core. It popped, sparked, made a sound like a dial-up modem having an existential crisis—and collapsed in a gloriously dramatic heap of twitching metal limbs.

I jumped up, triumphant. “Who’s the boss now, huh? Me! That’s who!”

Pride surged through me, amplified by the relief flowing through our bond from Rhaekar. I'd done it. I'd taken down one of these nightmare machines with nothing but some wire-crossing and determination. Not bad for a human journalist who'd never even changed the oil in her own car.

But the victory dance was short-lived because Rhaekar collapsed two seconds later, his tall frame crumpling to the sand like a marionette with cut strings.

"Rhaekar!" Terror seized my chest as I scrambled over the dunes toward him. Through our bond, I felt his pain—no longer muted but sharp and pulsing, his consciousness flickering like a faltering light. "No, no, no..."

"Hey! No dying!" I dropped to my knees beside him, catching his massive frame before he face-planted in the sand.

The wound along his side was worse than I'd thought—a deep, scorched furrow that had burned through his combat suit and into the flesh beneath.

Blood seeped slowly from the edges, dark against his copper-toned skin.

"You are not allowed to die after that stunt. Or ever. That's the deal. "

His lip curled in a weak smirk, those golden eyes finding mine with effort. "Would've died happy."

"Not on my watch, desert daddy," I growled, heaving him up with all the strength I could muster and dragging him back toward the shelter like a warrior with zero upper body strength and one giant alien boyfriend.

My arms screamed in protest, but adrenaline and sheer stubborn determination kept me moving.

The bunker entrance gaped ahead, partially cleared of sand during our earlier efforts. Just twenty more feet. Fifteen. Ten.

He stumbled, barely keeping upright, his weight threatening to take us both down. “My mate,” he murmured, voice slurred with pain. “Fierce little human...”

“Damn straight,” I puffed, nearly collapsing under his weight. “You try to bleed out on me again and I’ll staple your wounds shut myself.”

We finally made it to the bunker. I got him inside, grateful for the relative coolness compared to the scorching desert heat. The space was small but functional—a standard Legion emergency outpost with basic survival equipment, a communications array, and most importantly, a medical station.

I dumped him onto the nearest med mat, wincing at his grunt of pain, and immediately activated every healing protocol I could find.

The systems were old but operational, humming to life with the same reluctant energy as the turret outside.

A holographic display flickered above Rhaekar’s prone form, showing a schematic of his body with the damaged areas highlighted in angry red.

“Multiple thermal lacerations to the torso,” the automated system announced in a voice that sounded like it had been gargling sand for a decade. “Moderate blood loss. Administering cellular regeneration protocol.”

I hovered anxiously as the med station deployed a series of slender arms tipped with instruments I didn’t recognize. They moved with precision over Rhaekar’s wound, applying something that looked like liquid silver, sealing the damaged tissue with methodical efficiency.

Through our bond, I felt his pain begin to ease, replaced by a floating sensation that suggested the system had administered some form of painkiller. His thoughts brushed against mine—jumbled but tender, filled with relief that I was safe and a fierce pride in what I’d accomplished.

Rhaekar blinked up at me, dazed. “You saved me.”

I brushed damp hair off his forehead, marveling at how soft it was despite its wild appearance. “That’s what mates do, right?”

He smiled, slow and reverent. “Mine.”

And despite the aching muscles, the scorched boots, and the mild concussion I was probably rocking—I grinned back.

“Yours.”

For now.

And forever.

I settled beside him on the med mat, careful not to disturb the healing systems still working on his wound. My fingers intertwined with his, our bond humming with contentment despite the chaos surrounding us.

“So much for making good time to the extraction point,” I said, glancing at the bunker’s chronometer. We’d lost at least an hour to this detour, and Rhaekar would need time to recover before we could travel safely.

“We will make it,” he assured me, his thumb tracing circles on my palm. “This bunker has transport capabilities. Once the systems are fully activated.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Transport capabilities? You mean like a vehicle?”

“Of sorts.” His eyes drifted closed, fatigue evident in every line of his body. “Short-range teleportation grid. Can get us... closer to Delta-Nine-Seven.”

Hope flared in my chest. “Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“Most outposts... systems dead. Didn’t expect this one... functional.” His words slurred as the medication pulled him toward sleep. “You... remarkable. Making things work.”

I smiled softly, leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead. “Rest. I’ll check out this teleportation grid while the med station does its thing.”

He nodded, already drifting off, his hand still clutching mine as if afraid I might vanish if he let go.

I waited until his breathing deepened, then gently extracted my hand and moved to the bunker’s main console.

Like everything else in this forgotten outpost, it was covered in a fine layer of sand and showed signs of long disuse.

But if I’d learned anything in the past few hours, it was that Legion tech was built to last.

The console responded to my touch with a reluctant flicker of lights. Systems that had been dormant for decades sluggishly came online, one by one. Environmental controls. Communication arrays. Defense protocols.

And there, at the bottom of the list: Transport Grid.

I tapped the option, holding my breath as the system processed the request. A schematic appeared, showing the bunker's location relative to a network of similar outposts scattered across the desert.

Most were marked in gray—offline or destroyed.

But three glowed with a faint blue light, indicating operational status.

And one of them—Outpost Delta-Eight-Four—was just two miles from our extraction coordinates.

“Jackpot,” I whispered, hope rising in my chest like a bubble.

If I could get the teleportation grid working, we could bypass the expanding Swarm network altogether.

Jump directly to Delta-Eight-Four and make our way to the extraction point from there.

We'd arrive with time to spare, and Rhaekar wouldn't have to push his injured body through miles of hostile desert.

I glanced back at his sleeping form, his face relaxed in a way I rarely saw when he was awake. Always vigilant, always protective. Always putting himself between me and danger without a second thought.

Well, this time I'd be the one doing the protecting.

I rolled up my sleeves, cracked my knuckles, and set to work. The teleportation grid needed power—more than the bunker's aging systems could currently provide. But with a little creative rewiring and maybe some energy siphoned from that defense

turret outside...

I smiled to myself, already planning the next impossible task. Because that's what mates did—they saved each other, over and over again, finding ways through problems that seemed insurmountable.

And I'd be damned if I was going to let a little thing like ancient alien technology stop me from getting my mate to safety.

“Hang tight, big guy,” I murmured, fingers already busy with the console's innards. “Your fierce little human's got this one covered.”

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The Legion extraction vessel descended through the thick atmosphere like an angry predator, its engines howling against the desert winds as it touched down beside the wreckage we'd left behind.

Sand and debris swirled in violent eddies, stinging my eyes, but I didn't look away.

Didn't dare blink. After everything we'd survived to reach this extraction point—the teleportation grid that had nearly fried us both, the three-mile trek through Swarm-infested terrain, the final desperate dash as the twin suns set behind us—I half-expected the ship to be an illusion that would vanish if I took my eyes off it.

Jas stood at my side, her small hand gripping mine with surprising strength.

The teleportation had worked—mostly. It had deposited us five miles from our target rather than the promised two, and the landing had knocked us both unconscious for ten precious minutes.

But she'd gotten us out. My fierce, brilliant little human had rewired ancient Legion tech with nothing but determination and those clever fingers that now clung to mine like I might float away if she let go.

She looked like she'd wrestled a sand devil and lost—hair wild with static electricity from the jump, face streaked with dirt and dried sweat, makeshift bandage wrapped around her forearm where she'd caught it on a jagged piece of equipment.

But her eyes—those dark, fierce eyes that had captivated me from the first—were bright with triumph. Alive. Radiant.

And despite my own injuries—the drone’s blast had left a nasty scar along my ribs that the med station had only partially healed—I felt invincible with her beside me.

My kassari. My fate-mate. Mine to protect, yes, but also mine to be protected by, as she’d proven when she’d dragged my unconscious body through the desert like a stubborn pack animal.

The ship’s ramp extended with a pneumatic hiss, and three Legion officers disembarked in perfect formation.

I recognized the insignia of Technical Division on their uniforms—research specialists, not combat personnel.

They approached cautiously, their attention darting between us and the smoldering remains of the Swarm drone that lay half-buried in the sand twenty paces away.

The lead officer—tall and lean with the distinctive metal implants of a senior tech specialist gleaming beneath his jawline—stopped short when he saw the drone, his composure slipping momentarily.

“That’s a D-7 Alpha sentry unit,” he said, voice hushed with something between awe and horror. “Fully intact design. We’ve only ever recovered fragments.”

“Well, it’s in fragments now,” Jas quipped, her thumb tracing idle circles on the back of my hand. “You’re welcome.”

The tech specialist’s eyes snapped to her, finally registering the small human female who was very definitely not Legion personnel. His implants pulsed with a soft blue light as he scanned her—a biosignature reading, most likely, categorizing and analyzing the alien presence in their midst.

“You’re not from this sector,” he said finally, stating the obvious with the confident authority that only Legion bureaucracy could instill.

“Nope,” Jas replied, popping the ‘p’ with deliberate irreverence.

The specialist blinked, clearly not accustomed to having his observations met with such casual dismissal.

The two officers behind him exchanged glances that spoke volumes about their uncertainty regarding protocol.

I felt a surge of pride through our bond—my mate, disarming hardened Legion officers with nothing but attitude and consonant manipulation.

“You’re Terran,” the specialist continued, regaining his footing. “Earth origin. Your genetic signature is unmistakable.” He glanced at his data pad, frowning slightly. “There’s no record of authorized personnel transfers to The Burn. How did you?—”

“Fell through a portal in the Sahara,” Jas interrupted with a shrug, as if dimensional displacement was a minor inconvenience rather than a galaxy-altering event. “Ended up here. Got chased by murder drones. Made friends with your grumpy cat warrior. You know, Tuesday stuff.”

I couldn’t help the rumble of amusement that escaped my chest. The specialist’s expression cycled through confusion, disbelief, and finally a resigned acceptance that he was dealing with something well beyond standard protocol.

“There’s a jump window to Earth opening from Aeron Alpha in two days,” he said, adopting the measured tone of someone navigating a potentially explosive situation. “We can transport you there. I’m sure your family will want word?—”

“Unless you’re going to Earth, I’m not going.”

Her words fell like stones into still water, creating ripples I felt through our bond. Absolute certainty. No hesitation. No doubt.

I turned to look at her, heart thundering against my ribs like it was trying to break free. “You would stay,” I said slowly, each word carefully measured, “in The Burn. With me.”

She rolled her eyes with such magnificent disdain that I nearly laughed despite the gravity of the moment. “Wherever you are, that’s home. Get it through your thick skull, furball.”

The simplicity of her declaration struck me with the force of a plasma blast. She would stay.

Here, in this hostile world of sand and death and buried horrors.

With me. Not because she had no choice, not because she was trapped, but because she wanted to.

Because she had chosen me as completely as I had chosen her.

I barely managed a growl of agreement before drawing her against my chest, uncaring of the Legion officers’ stares or the protocol violations I was committing.

My tail curled around her hip in a gesture of possession and protection that spoke what words could not—that she was mine, claimed and marked, bound by something older and stronger than Legion regulations.

“My home,” I murmured, pressing my forehead to hers in the traditional Rodinian

gesture of devotion. “My mate.”

The specialist cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable with the display of emotion. “Reaper Onca, I must remind you that bringing unauthorized personnel into Legion space requires?—”

“She stays with me,” I said, not bothering to look at him. My eyes remained fixed on Jas, on the stubborn set of her jaw and the fierce light in her eyes that had first called to something primal within me. “She’s my fate-mate. Bound by blood and choice. The old laws protect such bonds.”

I felt rather than saw the specialist’s recognition of what I was invoking—ancient Rodinian mating laws that predated the Legion itself, recognized and honored in the founding charter. He might not like it, but even Legion bureaucracy knew better than to challenge a blood bond.

“We’ll need to document this,” he said stiffly. “And run full diagnostics on both of you. The Swarm tech?—”

“Later,” I interrupted, finally turning to fix him with a stare that had made hardened warriors step back. “She needs medical attention. As do I.”

To his credit, the specialist merely nodded and gestured toward the ship. “The medical frigate is in orbit. We’ll transport you directly to their facility.”

They took us both aboard, the ramp sealing behind us with a finality that should have felt like the closing of a chapter. Instead, it felt like the opening of a new one—one where Jas remained at my side, her hand in mine, her future tangled with my own by choice rather than circumstance.

The ship ascended through the atmosphere, leaving The Burn behind.

Through the viewing portal, I watched the desert shrink beneath us, its deadly beauty reduced to abstract patterns of gold and amber.

The place where I'd found her. Where she'd saved me.

Where we'd become something neither of us had expected to find.

Even bruised and half-delirious from blood loss, I didn't let go of her.

The medics aboard the frigate raised an eyebrow at our constant contact, at the way she refused to leave my side even during treatment.

I growled until they stopped looking, until they learned to work around us rather than try to separate what fate had joined.

She slept at my side that night in the sterile medical bay, curled against my chest as if she'd always belonged there, her breath warm against my skin, her heartbeat a steady rhythm that grounded me more surely than any planet's gravity.

And me?

I lay awake long into the cycle, counting the beats of her heart against mine.

Not because I feared losing her.

Because I finally believed I never would.

Three days in Legion medical care had erased most of our physical wounds.

The advanced healing chambers had sealed my side where the drone's blast had torn through flesh and muscle, leaving only a pale line of new skin in its wake.

Jas's scratches and burns had vanished, her body restored to its full, vibrant strength.

But neither medical science nor Legion protocols could sever the bond between us.

If anything, it had grown stronger in the sterile confines of the medical frigate, our connection deepening with each shared glance, each brush of fingers, each night spent curled together despite the medics' disapproval.

Now, finally released from observation, we'd been assigned private quarters—a concession to my rank and the ancient laws I'd invoked that protected fate-bonds.

The suite was standard Legion issue: minimalist, functional, but with actual privacy and a bed large enough to accommodate my frame without Jas having to sleep half on top of me.

Not that I minded her using me as a mattress.

In fact, I'd grown to crave her weight against my chest, her scent surrounding me in the night.

The door sealed behind us with a soft hiss, and for the first time since The Burn, we were truly alone. No drones hunting us. No medics monitoring our vitals. No Legion officers cataloging our every interaction for their endless reports.

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Just us. Mate to mate.

Jas turned to me, her eyes dark and hungry in a way that made my pulse quicken. Through our bond, I felt her desire—hot and insistent, too long contained by necessity and circumstance.

“So,” she said, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth as she stepped closer. “No imminent death. No Legion medics interrupting every five minutes. No sand in uncomfortable places...”

I growled low in my throat, the sound rumbling up from somewhere primal and possessive. “No excuses not to claim you properly.”

Her breath caught, the scent of her arousal spiking in response to my words. “I seem to recall being very thoroughly claimed already.”

“That was survival claiming,” I said, prowling toward her with deliberate slowness, savoring the way her pupils dilated as I approached. “Quick. Desperate. Necessary.”

My tail flicked behind me, betraying my eagerness even as I maintained a predatory pace. “This will be pleasure claiming.”

She backed up until her legs hit the edge of the bed, her smile growing wider. “Is there a difference?”

“Let me show you.”

I reached for her, hands settling on her hips with possessive certainty.

Through our bond, I felt her anticipation, her eagerness, her absolute trust in me despite the differences in our size and strength.

It humbled me even as it inflamed my desire to mark her, claim her, worship her in ways I'd been unable to in the harsh desert environment.

My mouth found hers in a kiss that started gentle but quickly blazed into something more demanding. She responded with equal hunger, her small hands fisting in my mane, pulling me closer as if she could erase the space between our bodies through sheer determination.

I lifted her easily, depositing her on the bed and following her down, my larger frame caging her beneath me as I continued to explore her mouth. Her taste was intoxicating—sweet and spicy and uniquely Jas. I'd never get enough of it.

"I've been thinking about this," she murmured against my lips, her hands already working at the fastenings of my Legion-issued clothing. "Every night in that sterile medical bay. Wanting you. Needing you."

I growled in agreement, helping her remove the offending garments that separated her skin from mine. "The medics nearly sedated me the second night," I admitted, nipping at her lower lip. "Said my pheromone levels were 'disrupting the medical environment.'"

She laughed, the sound bright and perfect. "Is that what we're calling your perpetual hard-on?"

"Perpetual only for you, kassari."

Her eyes softened at the endearment, and she reached up to trace the line of my jaw with gentle fingers. “I love when you call me that.”

“It’s what you are,” I said simply, lowering my head to trail kisses down her throat, pausing to linger over the mark I’d left on her collarbone—the physical manifestation of our bond.

It glowed faintly in the dim light of the quarters, pulsing in time with her heartbeat. “My heart’s match. My fate-mate.”

I helped her out of her own clothing, revealing inch by inch the body I’d come to know in desperate moments between danger and survival. But this time, there was no sand to scrape her skin, no threat looming on the horizon, no need to rush what should be savored.

She was beautiful in ways that transcended species—curves and planes that fit against mine as if designed for that purpose, skin that flushed with arousal as I explored it with hands and mouth.

I traced the line of her collarbone with my tongue, savoring the salt-sweet taste of her as I moved lower, capturing a nipple between my lips and reveling in her gasp of pleasure.

Through our bond, I felt every sensation doubled—her pleasure feeding mine, creating a feedback loop of desire that threatened to overwhelm us both.

I lavished attention on her breasts, learning what touches made her arch beneath me, what pressure made her moan my name in that breathy voice that drove me to the edge of control.

“Please,” she whispered, her hands guiding me lower, making her desires clear. “I

need to feel you.”

I obliged, trailing kisses down her stomach, over the slight curve of her hip, down to the junction of her thighs where her scent was strongest. My first taste of her essence drew a growl from deep in my chest—she was already wet, ready, her body responding to mine with an eagerness that satisfied something primal in my nature.

I explored her with my tongue, learning the secrets of her pleasure with deliberate thoroughness.

Each swipe, each gentle suck, each careful press of my lips drew new sounds from her throat—whimpers and moans and breathless pleas that fed my desire to please her, to worship her, to make her come apart beneath me.

Her first orgasm caught her by surprise, her body tensing and then breaking like a wave as she cried out my name. Through our bond, I felt the intensity of it, the ripples of pleasure that coursed through her, and I growled with satisfaction against her sensitive flesh.

But I wasn’t done. Not nearly.

I rose above her, positioning myself between her thighs, the tip of my cock nudging at her entrance.

Unlike humans, Rodinian males were built differently—thicker, with textured ridges along the shaft designed to stimulate our mates, and the distinctive knot at the base that would swell to lock us together when release came.

“Look at me,” I commanded softly, needing to see her eyes as I entered her for the first time without fear or urgency driving us.

She met my gaze, her eyes dark with desire and trust, and nodded once.

I pushed forward slowly, watching her face as I filled her inch by inch.

Her eyes widened, her lips parting on a silent gasp as she stretched to accommodate me.

Through our bond, I felt the exquisite mix of pleasure and fullness she experienced, the slight burn that quickly melted into satisfaction as her body welcomed mine.

“Rhaekar,” she breathed, her hands clutching at my shoulders. “You feel.. god, you feel amazing.”

I growled in agreement, holding still once fully seated within her, giving her time to adjust to my size. The heat of her around me was exquisite torture—tight, wet, perfect. Made for me as I was made for her.

When she began to move beneath me, hips rolling in invitation, I started a slow, deep rhythm.

Each thrust drew gasps and moans from her lips, her nails digging into my back in a way that only heightened my pleasure.

Through our bond, I felt every sensation she experienced—the delicious friction of my ridged length against her inner walls, the pressure against places that made her see stars, the building tension that promised another release.

“I’m going to mark you again,” I growled against her ear, my control slipping as our rhythm intensified. “Renew our bond. Make it stronger.”

“Yes,” she gasped, tilting her head to expose her throat in a gesture of submission

that spoke directly to the most primal part of my nature. “Make me yours. Again. Always.”

I increased my pace, driving into her with controlled power, each thrust bringing us closer to completion. My knot began to swell, pressing against her entrance with each movement, not yet locking us together but promising that it would.

When I felt her teetering on the edge of another climax, I lowered my mouth to the mark on her collarbone and bit down—not breaking the skin this time but applying enough pressure to reactivate the bond-mark.

The response was immediate. She cried out, her body convulsing around mine as pleasure crashed through her.

“Now you,” she managed between gasps, pulling my head down to offer my own mark to her teeth. “Together.”

She bit down on the mark she’d left on my chest, harder than I expected, sending a jolt of pleasure-pain straight to my core. The sensation pushed me over the edge, my knot swelling fully as I thrust deep one last time, locking us together as my release flooded her in hot pulses.

The dual sensation—her teeth on my mark, my knot locked within her—triggered another orgasm for her, this one even more intense than the last. Through our bond, I felt it ripple through her in waves, her inner muscles clenching rhythmically around my cock, milking every drop of my essence.

We collapsed together, still joined, my larger frame carefully positioned to avoid crushing her. I gathered her against my chest, nuzzling her hair, breathing in her scent now mixed with my own.

“That was...” she began, then laughed softly. “I don’t even have words.”

“Neither do I,” I admitted, stroking her back in long, gentle motions. “But I felt it. All of it.”

We lay in contented silence for a few moments, our heartbeats gradually slowing, our breathing synchronizing. My knot would keep us joined for some time yet, a biological imperative that ensured my seed had the best chance of taking root.

“I meant what I said,” she murmured against my chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my skin. “About staying with you. About not going back to Earth.”

I tightened my arms around her, something fierce and protective swelling in my chest. “You would give up your world? Your life there?”

She lifted her head to meet my eyes, her expression serious despite the flush of pleasure still coloring her cheeks. “What life? Chasing stories no one believes? Living out of a backpack? Never belonging anywhere or to anyone?”

Her hand found mine, fingers interlocking. “You’re the first person who’s ever wanted all of me. The loud parts, the stubborn parts, the parts that ask too many questions and won’t back down.”

The simple truth of her words humbled me. Through our bond, I felt her absolute certainty, her complete confidence in the choice she was making.

“Besides,” she added with a mischievous smile, “Earth doesn’t have sexy cat aliens with magical knotting abilities. Major design flaw, if you ask me.”

I laughed, the sound rumbling up from deep in my chest. “Is that all I am to you? A convenient knot?”

“Well, that and your cooking skills. A girl’s gotta eat.”

I rolled us gently, careful of our still-joined bodies, positioning her atop me so I could see all of her. “I will give you a home,” I promised, all humor fading from my voice. “Wherever we go, whatever comes next. You will always belong with me.”

Her eyes softened, and she leaned down to press a gentle kiss to my lips. “And I’ll watch your back,” she said. “Keep you from doing stupidly heroic things. Make sure you come home safe.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said, remembering how fiercely she’d fought for me in the desert. “My warrior mate.”

I felt my knot beginning to ease, our bodies gradually separating as nature took its course. But instead of moving away, Jas rolled her hips experimentally, a wicked smile spreading across her face as she felt me hardening again within her.

“Ready for round two already?” she teased, her inner muscles squeezing around my length in a way that made my breath catch.

“For you? Always.”

And as I flipped her beneath me once more, claiming her mouth in a kiss that promised pleasure beyond words, I silently thanked whatever cosmic forces had brought her to me across the stars. My kassari. My fate-mate. My home.

Mine to protect. Mine to pleasure. Mine to love for all the days that remained to us.

And judging by the way she gasped my name as I drove her toward another peak, those days would be filled with more joy than either of us had dared to imagine.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

JAS

Rodinia Tertius wasn't what I expected from an alien warrior's homeworld.

No brutal training grounds bathed in blood.

No sterile military compounds with warriors marching in formation.

Instead, it was all sweeping vistas of amber mountains and valleys filled with vegetation that shifted colors with the passing hours—from deep crimson at dawn to vibrant gold at midday.

The air tasted like cinnamon and metal, and the gravity was just light enough that sometimes I felt like I could jump and never come back down.

Here, I was free in ways I'd never been on Earth, untethered from expectations I'd never realized were weighing me down.

Most mornings, I trained with Rhaekar's squad—though “trained” was a generous word.

Mostly I talked trash, and occasionally remembered a half-decent kick from my blue belt days back on Earth.

I'd arrive at the outdoor combat arena just as the twin suns crested the eastern ridge, my hair pulled back in a messy braid, wearing the modified Legion training gear that actually fit my human proportions.

Today, I ducked under Tag's massive arm as he swung at me with deliberately telegraphed slowness.

"Come on, big guy," I taunted, dancing backward on the balls of my feet. "My grandmother moves faster than that, and she's been dead for fifteen years."

Tag's lips pulled back in what passed for a Rodinian smile—all teeth and predatory intent, but with genuine amusement glinting in his yellow eyes. "Your grandmother must have been a formidable warrior."

"Nah, she just had a mean right hook when you tried to steal her cookies." I feinted left, then aimed a kick at his knee that he easily sidestepped.

From the sidelines, Rhaekar watched with arms crossed over his massive chest, his tail flicking with what I now recognized as pride rather than irritation.

Through our bond, I felt his constant awareness of me—a golden thread of connection that hummed with protectiveness, but no longer with the panic that had marked our early days together.

His Reaper squad loved me. Probably because I brought snacks.

Possibly because I talked smack. Definitely because I'd helped their commander—the most fearsome warrior in their ranks—discover a softness they'd never believed him capable of.

I'd caught them exchanging knowing looks when Rhaekar's tail would curl possessively around my ankle during squad briefings, or when his rumbling purr would escape involuntarily when I'd bring him food during long planning sessions.

"Enough play," Rhaekar called, ending the sparring session with a command that

brook no argument. “Mission prep in twenty. Tactical assessments due by midday.”

The squad dispersed, each warrior nodding respectfully to me as they passed.

“You’re getting better,” Rhaekar said as I approached, tossing me a hydration pack. “Your footwork is improving.”

I gulped the sweet, electrolyte-rich liquid. “Still can’t land a hit on any of you mountain-sized cats.”

“You’re not meant to.” His hand settled at the small of my back, warm and possessive. “Your strength is here.” He tapped my temple. “And here.” His finger moved to the center of my chest.

“And here?” I asked with a grin, guiding his hand lower to cup my ass.

A growl rumbled in his chest, and I felt a spike of desire through our bond. “Especially there,” he agreed, squeezing appreciatively.

We walked back toward our quarters, the morning sunlight casting long shadows across the training grounds. The commlink on my wrist pinged with an incoming message—the third this week from the same source.

“Everly reached out again,” I said, glancing at the notification. “She wants to know if we will be attending the next meeting at Central Command.”

Rhaekar’s ears perked up with interest. “The human female with the two bondmates?”

“That’s the one.” I scrolled through her message with a smile. We reached our quarters—a spacious dwelling carved into the side of a cliff that overlooked a valley

of swaying red grasses. The door slid open at Rhaekar's biometric signature, and cool air washed over us as we stepped inside.

"You know," I continued casually, dropping onto our massive bed built to accommodate Rhaekar's size, "I didn't realize having two mates was even an option. The whole fate-mate thing seemed like a one-and-done deal."

Rhaekar went very still, his tail freezing mid-swish. Through our bond, I felt a sudden surge of possessiveness so intense it nearly knocked the breath from me.

"Is one Rodinian warrior not enough for you?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm while his eyes began to glow with an inner light that signaled rising emotion.

I bit back a laugh. "I don't know...two of you might be fun. One to make me breakfast while the other one makes me?—"

I didn't finish the sentence. Rhaekar crossed the room in two strides, pulling me up from the bed and against his chest with effortless strength. His growl vibrated through my entire body.

"You do not need two mates," he said, his voice dropped to that rough register that made heat pool between my thighs. "I am more than sufficient."

"Prove it," I challenged, tilting my chin up defiantly.

His pupils narrowed to slits, and then his mouth was on mine—hot, demanding, claiming. I melted into him, my arms winding around his neck, fingers threading through his mane as he devoured my mouth like he was starving and I was the only meal that would satisfy.

"Two mates," he growled against my lips, backing me toward the bed. "Ridiculous

concept.”

“I don’t know,” I teased, even as my body responded to his touch, nipples hardening beneath my training top. “Sounds pretty appealing to me—oh!”

He tore my top down the middle with one swift motion, exposing my breasts to his hungry gaze. “I will ruin you for anyone else,” he promised, lowering his head to take one nipple between his lips, teeth grazing the sensitive peak just hard enough to make me gasp.

“You already have,” I admitted, arching into his touch as his hands made quick work of the rest of my clothing.

I lay naked beneath him, my skin flushed with desire as he stripped off his own training gear with military efficiency. His cock sprang free, thick and ridged in that deliciously alien way, already hard and glistening at the tip. My mouth watered at the sight.

“See something you want?” he asked, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Just one mate,” I said, reaching for him. “Just you.”

He growled his approval, positioning himself between my thighs, the tip of his cock nudging at my entrance. I was already wet, my body primed and ready for him as it always was. Through our bond, I felt his satisfaction at finding me so eager, so responsive to him.

“Look at your perfect pussy,” he murmured, running one clawed finger along my folds with exquisite gentleness. “So wet for me. Only for me.”

“Only for you,” I agreed, lifting my hips in silent plea. “Please, Rhaekar.”

He teased me, rubbing the head of his cock against my clit in slow circles that had me whimpering with need. “Tell me again about wanting two mates,” he challenged, a dangerous glint in his eye.

“I don’t,” I gasped as he pressed just the tip inside me, then withdrew. “I only want you. Only ever you.”

“Good.” He thrust forward in one powerful motion, filling me completely. “Because this cunt is mine.”

The crude word on his lips sent a thrill through me. He rarely used Terran vulgarities, but when he did, it was impossibly hot.

“Yes,” I moaned, wrapping my legs around his waist to draw him deeper. “Yours. All yours.”

He established a relentless rhythm, each thrust hitting spots inside me that made stars explode behind my eyelids.

His hands gripped my hips, lifting me to meet each powerful drive of his cock.

The ridges along his shaft stimulated me in ways no human male ever could, each drag and catch against my inner walls sending jolts of pleasure racing through my nervous system.

“You think—” thrust “—two mates—” thrust “—could fuck you like this?” His voice was a feral growl, his control slipping as our pleasure built through the bond, feeding back on itself in an endless loop of sensation.

“No,” I cried out, nails raking down his back as he hit a particularly sensitive spot. “Only you. Fuck, Rhaekar, only you!”

He lowered his head to my bond mark, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. “Mine,” he growled, and bit down.

The simultaneous sensations—his teeth on my mark, his cock driving deep inside me, the knot at its base beginning to swell and press against my entrance—sent me hurtling over the edge. I came with a scream, my inner muscles clamping down on him as wave after wave of pleasure crashed through me.

“That’s it,” he praised, his rhythm faltering as my orgasm triggered his own. “Take my cock. Take all of me.”

With a final thrust, he buried himself to the hilt, his knot swelling fully to lock us together as he came.

Hot pulses of his release flooded me, triggering another climax that had me sobbing his name.

Through our bond, our shared pleasure magnified, reflecting back and forth between us until I couldn’t tell where my pleasure ended and his began.

We collapsed together, his massive frame carefully positioned to avoid crushing me while keeping us joined. His purr rumbled through his chest, vibrating against me in a soothing rhythm as we both caught our breath.

“Still want two mates?” he asked, a hint of smugness in his voice as he nuzzled my hair.

I laughed weakly, too blissed out to form complex sentences. “One is more than enough to handle.”

His tail curled possessively around my thigh, and through our bond, I felt his

satisfaction—not just at having proven his point, but at the bone-deep certainty that I was his, completely and irrevocably, as he was mine.

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“Besides,” I added, trailing my fingers through his mane, “who else would put up with my trash-talking and inappropriate jokes?”

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through both our bodies. “No one, kassari. Absolutely no one.”

And as we lay there, still joined, twin suns casting golden light across our tangled limbs, I knew with absolute certainty that I’d found everything I needed in this one, fiercely possessive alien warrior. My fate-mate. My home.

We had a cliffside shelter now—a sprawling structure that nestled into the rocky outcropping like it had grown there naturally.

Legion architects had worked with Rodinian craftsmen to create something that honored both worlds: sleek tech and primal comfort coexisting in perfect harmony.

The highest of technology but in a den that worked with the natural world around us.

Like Hobbiton if the hobbits lived in suburbia—with a courtyard open to the stars yet chockfull of Legion tech and Rodinian comforts.

I’d fallen in love with it the moment Rhaekar had brought me here, claiming this territory as ours with a formal ceremony that involved a lot of growling and scent-marking that had made his fellow Reapers rumble with approval.

The central space—an open-air atrium—was my favorite.

Retractable shields could close it off during storms, but most days we left it open to the elements, letting the amber light of Rodinia Tertius's twin suns pour in like honey.

Flowering vines that changed color with my mood (a housewarming gift from one of Rhaekar's battle brothers) trailed along the stone walls, currently a contented shade of blue-violet.

There were nights I'd lie in bed and listen to the wind outside, tangled in the arms of the fiercest, grumpiest alien the galaxy had ever seen, and wonder how I'd ever lived without him.

Without this. The connection that hummed between us had only grown stronger over the months, a golden thread that bound us together across distances, through dreams, beyond what I'd ever thought possible when I'd been that skeptical journalist chasing stories in the Sahara.

Then, there were the other nights. The very active, very loud nights.

The ones where Rhaekar would return from a mission with that particular glint in his eye, and I'd barely make it to the bedroom before finding myself pinned beneath two hundred pounds of possessive alien male.

The nights where our bond would flare so bright with shared pleasure that neighbors half a mile away swore they could see our dwelling glow.

Those nights had led to this morning—me stretching out on a smooth stone bench in our atrium, soaking up the early sun like a contented cat. Three months since my last cycle. Two weeks since the medical scanner had confirmed what Rhaekar had already known from scent alone.

That morning, I lay back on the sun-warmed stone, lazily drawing circles on my belly with my fingertips. No more sandstorms. No more drones—for now. Just me, my mate, and the suspicious bloating that had kept me from buttoning my favorite shorts.

“You think it’s weird?” I whispered to the little life growing inside me. “That your dad is part giant cheetah, part growly teddy bear?”

I traced the barely-there curve of my abdomen, still flat enough that only I would notice the change.

“Your dad’s going to teach you to track prey across the desert and growl at inappropriate moments.

I’ll teach you to hack Legion security protocols and make dirty jokes that scandalize his commanding officers. ”

Rhaekar’s purr rumbled behind me. I hadn’t even heard him approach. Typical sneaky catman.

“Our cubs,” he corrected softly, kneeling beside me. “Plural.”

I raised a brow, propping myself up on my elbows. “That’s optimistic.”

He placed one large hand over mine on my belly, his warmth seeping into my skin. Through our bond, I felt his absolute certainty—not a guess, but knowledge.

“I can hear their heartbeats,” he said, his voice filled with wonder. “Two distinct rhythms. Different from yours. Faster.”

My own heart skipped a beat. “Twins?”

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, a gesture so tender it made my throat tight with emotion. “Twins,” he confirmed.

“That’s fate,” I whispered, echoing his favorite explanation for everything from our initial meeting to why he always found the ripest fruit at the market.

“Yes,” he agreed solemnly, though I could feel his amusement through our bond. “Fate has blessed us doubly.”

I snorted, relaxing back against him as he settled behind me on the bench. “Desert Daddy strikes again.”

He chuckled low, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me into his lap like I weighed nothing. I didn’t protest. His chest was warm. His tail curled around us both—a protective circle that somehow included my still-flat belly in its sweep.

“You are pleased?” he asked, a hint of vulnerability in his voice that few besides me ever heard.

I turned my head to meet his golden eyes, now soft with an emotion that would have shocked his fellow warriors. “Terrified,” I admitted. “Excited. Overwhelmed.” I paused, feeling for the right word. “Complete.”

His purr intensified, vibrating through my back. One clawed finger gently traced the mark on my collarbone.

“I never thought to have this,” he said quietly. “A mate. Cubs. Peace.”

“You thought you’d die gloriously in battle and have songs sung about your heroic end?” I teased.

“Something like that.”

“Sorry to ruin your plans with domestic bliss.”

He nipped lightly at my ear. “Not sorry.”

I laughed, settling more comfortably against him.

We sat in contented silence, watching as the twin suns climbed higher in the sky, casting our shadows long across the stone floor.

From this vantage point, we could see the desert stretching out below—the same desert that had nearly killed us both, that had brought us together, that had changed everything.

I looked out over the dunes—burnished gold under twin suns—and smiled.

“They’re going to be trouble.”

“Like their mother,” Rhaekar agreed, his hand splayed protectively over my abdomen.

“And stubborn like their father.”

“Strong,” he countered. “Fierce.”

“Loved,” I added softly.

His arms tightened around me, and through our bond, I felt a surge of emotion so powerful it brought tears to my eyes—protectiveness, pride, and a love so deep it defied the language of any world.

From Earth to exile to everything I'd never dared hope for...

The desert hadn't taken anything from me.

It gave me everything.

I placed my hand over his, feeling the slight roughness of his palm, the careful way he kept his claws retracted whenever he touched me. My fierce warrior. My mate. The father of my children.

"They're going to have your eyes," I said with sudden certainty.

"And your spirit," he replied.

I leaned back against his chest, our heartbeats finding the same rhythm as they always did when we were close.

And somewhere beneath our joined hands, two tiny hearts beat in their own distinct pattern—new lives created from our impossible bond, proof that fate, the universe, or whatever cosmic force had brought us together knew exactly what it was doing.

Desert wind swept through the atrium, carrying the scent of distant rain. Life-giving water coming to transform the arid landscape, just as love had transformed us both.

"Come," Rhaekar said, lifting me easily in his arms. "The healer wants to see you today."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, letting him carry me back inside. "Worried?" I asked, though I could feel through our bond that he wasn't.

"No," he said simply. "But I want to hear our cubs' heartbeats with more than just my

ears.”

Our cubs. Our future. Our fate.

And as he carried me through the home we’d built together, I sent silent thanks to whatever portal, wormhole, or cosmic accident had dropped me into this world—into his arms—and changed the course of both our lives forever.

Next Up in the Legion: Savage Lands Sector ...

Snared

One human. One jungle. One silent protector who was never meant to love.

When cryptid podcaster Miri De León stumbles through a rift and lands on a remote, sentient jungle planet, she doesn't expect to meet a lethal alien with glowing eyes, a deadly tail...and a touch so gentle it undoes her.

But Lor Pardus has been alone too long. Scarred by war, shaped by nature, and haunted by dreams of a female he's never met—until now.

She’s the key to unlocking the jungle’s secrets...and the mate fate refused to let him lose.

Scroll through to read an excerpt.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

SNARED

ONE WRONG STEP

The sign read NO TRESPASSING – U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY in faded red letters that screamed both authority and neglect.

I traced my fingers over the rusted edges, feeling the decades of secrets underneath.

Most people would turn back, citing common sense or self-preservation.

But when you’ve built your entire brand on chasing the unexplained into dark corners, common sense becomes a quaint concept for other people.

Besides, the electromagnetic readings I’d picked up from my drone flyover last week were off the charts—the kind of signature that screams “something worth finding” to someone like me.

So obviously, I went in.

The fence wasn’t much of a deterrent—eight feet of chain link with a section near the back that had partially collapsed under a fallen oak.

I slipped through the gap, pausing only to make sure my recording equipment was secure in my backpack.

The locals called this place “The Sinkhole,” but official military documents—the

ones I'd managed to unearth after three months of Freedom of Information Act requests—labeled it Site 37-B, Decommissioned 1983.

Except it wasn't decommissioned. Not really. The satellite imagery I'd compiled showed regular activity until 2002, and then? Nothing. Like someone had thrown a digital blanket over the entire complex. No heat signatures, no radiation readings, nothing the government's toys could detect.

But my equipment wasn't government issue.

I picked my way through the underbrush, noting how the vegetation changed the closer I got to the center of the complex.

The oak and maple trees gave way to twisted pines with needles that grew in spirals rather than straight lines.

The air grew heavier, charged with something that made the hair on my arms stand at attention.

I'd felt this before—in those places where reality wears thin.

“Day one at Site 37-B,” I narrated quietly into my recorder. “Vegetation shows signs of mutation. Temperature has dropped approximately ten degrees despite moving into a valley structure. EMF readings are...holy shit.”

The device in my left hand was spinning wildly, its digital display flashing between numbers too quickly to read before finally settling on a glowing red ERROR message. I'd never seen it do that before, not even when I was investigating that abandoned nuclear research facility in Nevada.

“Something is very wrong with the energy signature here,” I continued, my voice dropping to a whisper despite being alone. “Or very right, depending on your

perspective.”

The trees opened up suddenly into what must have been the central complex.

Once, it might have been buildings and concrete pads.

Now it was a massive crater, perfectly circular, like something had taken a giant ice cream scoop to the earth.

Moss and vines crawled over crumbling concrete structures, nature reclaiming what man had built.

But that wasn't what made me stop dead in my tracks.

At the center of the crater was a pedestal. Untouched by the destruction around it, the concrete cylinder rose about four feet from the ground, and embedded in its top was...something. Something that shouldn't exist.

It pulsed with a soft, rhythmic light. Blue-white, like lightning trapped in metal. The object was maybe the size of a basketball, geometrically perfect in ways my eyes couldn't quite process. It seemed to shift between shapes—hexagonal one moment, then suddenly all curves and spirals the next.

“Found something at the center,” I whispered, already moving toward it like a moth to flame. “Some kind of...device? Artifact? It's giving off light but no detectable heat. Predates the facility by...I don't know. It feels ancient.”

This was it. This was the story that would take my podcast from popular niche to mainstream sensation. The mysterious object at an abandoned government site, the bizarre energy readings, the local legends of people disappearing in these woods—it all connected to this thing.

I approached carefully, circling the pedestal.

No wires, no obvious power source. The concrete it sat in looked like it had been poured around the object, not like the object had been placed there after.

That made no sense. The facility was built in the 60s, but this thing...

this thing had the weight of millennia about it.

“I’m going to attempt to capture footage,” I said, pulling out my specialized camera. The moment I pointed it at the artifact, the viewfinder went white, then black. Dead. My phone followed suit seconds later, the battery draining to zero instantly.

“Okay, so it doesn’t like technology,” I muttered, shoving the useless devices back into my pack. “That’s...concerning.”

The humming I’d been hearing since entering the crater grew louder, more insistent. It wasn’t coming from the object—it was coming from everywhere, like the air itself was vibrating with anticipation.

I should have turned back. Any reasonable person would have. But I’ve never been accused of being reasonable, especially not when I’m this close to a breakthrough.

“If you’re listening to this,” I said into my now-dead recorder out of habit, “and I’ve disappeared mysteriously, check Site 37-B. And maybe don’t touch the shiny thing that I’m absolutely about to touch.”

The artifact pulsed faster as I approached, as if it sensed my intentions. I reached out slowly, my fingertips hovering inches away. The air between my skin and the object seemed to thicken, to resist, and then suddenly to pull.

Touch.

The world exploded into light.

I'd like to say it was painful, but it wasn't. It was beyond sensation—like every cell in my body was suddenly everywhere and nowhere at once. I saw patterns in the light, geometric perfections and impossible mathematics that made perfect sense for one blinding moment before being forgotten.

There was no sound. Just light. Light everywhere. White-gold and blinding and alive. The world flipped sideways, or maybe inside out, and then?—

Nothing.

I came to with my cheek pressed against moss. Not the dry, patchy stuff that had covered the concrete at Site 37-B, but lush, verdant cushions of it that seemed to cradle my head like a pillow. It smelled like crushed leaves and petrichor and a little bit of oh no I'm not in Kansas anymore.

I groaned, pushing myself up to my hands and knees. The world spun briefly before settling into a view that made me question my sanity, my sobriety, and possibly my continued existence on Earth.

Because this? This was not Earth.

The sky—what little I could see of it through the canopy above—was the wrong color.

Not blue, not gray, but a deep violet that shimmered with streaks of turquoise.

The trees surrounding me towered impossibly high, their trunks the color of polished obsidian with bark that seemed to flow like liquid in slow motion.

And the foliage...some of it was moving. Not swaying in a breeze, but actually

expanding and contracting in rhythmic patterns.

Breathing.

“Okay, Miri,” I whispered, afraid that speaking too loudly might attract attention from whatever lived in this place. “You didn’t die. That’s the good news.”

I did a quick body check. No injuries, all limbs present and accounted for.

But my backpack was gone, along with my boots.

My feet were bare against the moss, which seemed to shimmer slightly where I touched it.

My clothes remained—jeans and my favorite worn leather jacket—but my phone was dead, its screen black and lifeless when I pulled it from my pocket.

I turned in a slow circle, taking stock of my surroundings.

The jungle buzzed with strange sounds—birds or insects that chirped with an almost electronic precision, distant bellows that might have been thunder or might have been something with very large teeth.

Above me, vines hung from the massive trees, glowing with soft bioluminescence in shades of azure and emerald.

“This is...” I struggled to find words adequate for the situation. “This is either the best or worst day of my career.”

I’d been studying the paranormal for years, hunting cryptids and anomalies across six continents. I’d seen things that defied explanation, recorded phenomena that mainstream science refused to acknowledge. But this? This was beyond unexplained.

This was another world entirely.

I had about two minutes of awe before something brushed my ankle.

I screamed.

Like, full-body, windmill-armed panic squeal.

Because when you've just been yeeted through a mystery portal and wake up barefoot in a glowing alien rainforest, the last thing you want is to feel something cold and touchy sliding over your skin.

I scrambled back, heartbeat jackhammering, and looked down.

A vine. Thin and elegant, glowing with the same soft light as those hanging from the trees. It had coiled itself gently around my ankle, like a curious snake.

"Oh no. No no no," I whispered, shaking my foot like it might detach. "I am not being eaten by sentient plants today. I did not pack that kind of mental prep."

The vine didn't retreat. It didn't tighten either, which was marginally comforting. Instead, it...well, there's no other way to describe it. It petted me. A gentle, almost affectionate caress against my skin, leaving behind a slight tingling sensation.

Then another vine descended from above, reaching toward my outstretched wrist. This one pulsed with light, brighter then dimmer in a pattern that seemed almost...communicative.

"What are you?" I breathed, forcing myself to remain still as the second vine wrapped loosely around my wrist. The tingling was stronger here, a buzz that traveled up my arm and seemed to echo in my thoughts.

The jungle didn't answer with words. But as I stood there, more vines began to approach, gently investigating my clothes, my hair, the contours of my face.

They moved with deliberate care, never constricting, always with that same curious touch.

The light they emitted pulsed in synchronized patterns now, creating waves of illumination that spread through the canopy above.

"You're talking to each other about me," I realized aloud. "I'm the alien here. I'm the cryptid."

The thought was equal parts terrifying and thrilling. If I ever got back—when I got back—this would make for the greatest podcast episode of all time. First contact journalism. Assuming these plant things were friendly and not just sizing me up for digestion.

I tried to take a step, and the vines moved with me, maintaining their loose hold but not restricting my movement. It was like being wrapped in living jewelry, delicate and warm despite its alien nature.

"Okay, so we're...friends? Symbiotic? Just passing acquaintances?" I asked, not expecting an answer but feeling better for filling the silence. "Because I could really use a guide right now. Preferably one who knows the way back to Earth."

The vines pulsed brighter for a moment, and I felt a gentle tug on my wrist. A suggestion of direction. I hesitated, then decided to follow. What choice did I have? Stay put and wait for whatever made those distant roars to find me?

I took three steps in the indicated direction before freezing.

Deep in the distance, beyond the glowing undergrowth, something moved. Something

massive. The ground trembled slightly beneath my bare feet, and a sound rolled through the jungle—low, rumbling, unmistakably predatory.

A growl. But not like any animal I'd ever heard. This was deeper, more resonant, vibrating in my chest like bass at a concert.

The vines around my wrist and ankle constricted slightly, pulling me in the opposite direction of the sound. Their pulses quickened, no longer synchronized but chaotic, urgent.

“Yeah, I’m with you on that,” I whispered, allowing myself to be guided away from whatever was approaching. “Away from the big growly thing seems like an excellent plan.”

Great. Jungle cryptid, alien vines with boundary issues, and absolutely no idea how to get home. If I survived this, my subscriber count was going to explode.

But first, I had to survive.

I moved deeper into the strange forest, guided by my luminous companions, painfully aware of my bare feet and lack of supplies.

The vines seemed to sense paths I couldn't see, pulling me around obstacles hidden in the undergrowth, steering me toward what I hoped was safety rather than something worse.

Behind me, the growling came again. Closer. Whatever it was, it was following me.

And judging by how frantically the vines were now pulsing, it wasn't something I wanted to meet.

Ready to fall into the vines?

Preorder Book 3: Snared now and get ready to be wrapped up in danger, desire, and the most primal bond yet.