



Devil's Night (Vinduthi Captured Mates #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Im trapped in a haunted house that warps time and space, with a dangerous alien bounty hunter as my only ally. Sargon is lethal grace and raw power, with eyes that strip my soul bare and set my blood on fire. As we face deadly horrors and a fiery attraction, I must decide how far Ill go to escape—and if Im ready to trade my old life for a chance at love among the stars.

Devils Night was previously published in the Celestial Seductions anthology. This is a steamy stand alone Vinduthi adventure!

Total Pages (Source): 14

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:35 am

NICOLE

“Get a grip, ,” I muttered under my breath, tightening my grip on my satchel. “This is the scoop you’ve been waiting for.”

I’d spent months chasing down leads, sifting through online forums and urban legends about the most haunted places in Detroit. This mansion kept popping up, the stories growing wilder and more disturbing with each retelling. It was the best chance I’d found for making a stunning scoop and getting out of my dead-end retail job.

Slipping through a gap in the rusted gate, I picked my way across the weed-choked yard toward the house’s shadowy maw. Dry vines clawed at my boots as I climbed the creaking steps to the porch. The door hung open, its hinges groaning in protest as I shouldered it wider.

Inside, a musty scent hung heavy in the air, like a damp blanket smothering me. Dust motes danced in the fading light filtering through filthy windows. Cobwebs draped tattered furniture, and the floorboards creaked underfoot, as if the building itself was holding its breath.

“Okay “ I exhaled shakily. “Let’s do this.”

Clutching my phone’s flashlight, I started my exploration on the ground floor, sweeping the beam across peeling wallpaper and water-stained ceilings. In what must have once been a parlor, broken ornaments were strewn over the fireplace mantle. Beside it, an overturned end table lay next to a shattered mirror, shards of glass glittering in my light like diamonds.

As I moved deeper inside, a strange energy thrummed through the air, raising the fine hairs on my arms. It felt like the charged calm before a thunderstorm, that heavy expectant silence. My pulse quickened as I climbed the main staircase, each step protesting with an ominous groan.

Upstairs, the hallway stretched into darkness, doors opening onto vacant bedrooms. I poked my head into each one, the beam of my light cutting through the gloom to reveal empty dressers, bare mattresses sagging onto the floor. Layers of dust and cobwebs coated every surface.

It was as if the house's former occupants had simply vanished. Without a struggle or any sign of their departure. An uneasy feeling coiled in the pit of my stomach.

At the end of the hall loomed the entrance to the attic, the doorway yawning like the maw of some great beast. I hesitated, my hand trembling on the doorknob. Taking a steadying breath, I turned the knob and shoved the door open.

Weak shafts of dying sunlight filtered through the small attic windows, casting a dreary pall over the cramped space. Trunks and boxes were piled haphazardly, spilling their contents across the bare floor - dolls with sightless eyes, tattered books, a rusted bicycle

My light settled on a strange object nestled among the discarded bric-a-brac. It appeared to be an antique mechanism, brass fittings and glass tubing tangled in a perplexing array. At its center, a dull violet glow pulsed steadily.

Captivated, I knelt beside it, angling my phone to get a better look. "What are you?" I murmured, extending a hand toward the strange device.

No. I shouldn't touch it. But I did want to get a photo of it.

I hit the button, and as the flash went off, a violent jolt of energy arced through me, like I'd been struck by lightning.

I cried out, stumbling backward as I clutched my stomach and fumbling for my phone as it slipped from my grasp. There was a blinding blaze of violet light, and then darkness swallowed me.

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SARGON

I carefully gathered the unconscious human female into my arms, her surprisingly solid weight contrasting with her delicate features. Laying her down on the dusty mattress, I studied her with a mixture of wariness and reluctant fascination.

Her pale skin almost glowed in the dim light, freckles dotting her nose and cheeks. Dark lashes fanned over high cheekbones as she breathed steadily. Though she appeared vulnerable, there was a determination etched into her expression, even in slumber. An intriguing strength lurked beneath that fragile exterior.

A sweet, floral scent wafted from her, carrying hints of something warm and musky that stirred an unexpected, primal response within me. I tensed, recoiling slightly from the unfamiliar sensation. It had been too long since I'd felt anything like this.

No. I'd never felt anything like this. Something about the little human called to me.

Shaking my head, I refocused on assessing potential threats. My gaze fell on the strange rectangular device she'd been holding - some type of unfamiliar communication pad, now dark and unhelpful. Frustrated, I tucked it away, promising myself I'd examine it further later. Flipping through her bag only revealed her identity card.

Nicole Carter.

For now, I needed to determine if this human was simply caught in the time trap's machinations, or if she posed a danger. I watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest,

full lips parted slightly with each breath. She looked so innocent. And that very innocence put her at grave risk here.

With a weary sigh, I resigned myself to keeping her close, protecting her from the rapidly deteriorating hazards of this place until I found an escape. The notion of a human requiring my protection would have been absurd not long ago. But the cruel reality of being trapped, watching time accelerate while I remained frozen, had shifted my perspective irrevocably.

Carefully, I gathered her up again, cradling her unconscious form against my chest as I carried her from the attic to a more secure room. One of her hands brushed my neck, sending an unexpected shock through me that I forcefully ignored.

As I laid her on the bed once more, a faint crackle of energy danced across the peeling walls. The air thickened with an unseen charge. Something fundamental had shifted within this time trap.

Striding to the grimy window, I stared out at the sudden, impenetrable blankness that had erased the world beyond. We were both trapped now.

I would have to move quickly to ensure her survival and my own escape from this rapidly disintegrating nightmare.

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NICOLE

I opened my eyes, blinking rapidly as the room swam into focus. Where was I? The last thing I remembered was the flash of light from that strange device in the attic. My heart pounded as I took in my surroundings - an old bedroom, antique wooden furniture all around me. I was sprawled on an old four poster bed, the ornate floral pattern of the cover faded.

And then I saw him.

A tall, imposing figure stood near the window, his back to me. Gray skin, pointed ears, small horns protruding from his temples. I rubbed my eyes, convinced I was hallucinating.

“What the...”

The figure turned, and I flinched. His eyes were a vivid crimson. Swirling orange markings adorned his chiseled features, dancing down his left cheek and the side of his neck to disappear behind the collar of his grey jacket. Sharp teeth poked out from his thin lips.

“You’re finally awake.” The rumble of his voice struck a nerve deep inside my core.

I scrambled backwards on the mattress. “Who...what are you?”

He held up a hand, calming me slightly. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m named Sargon.”

My mind raced as I studied him, trying to make sense of this. Some elaborate prank? A movie set? But his appearance was too realistic, too visceral to be a costume or makeup effects.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, my voice trembling. “Where are we?”

Sargon regarded me with those piercing red eyes. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

I scoffed. “Try me.”

He paused for a moment, then spoke in a measured tone. “I’m a bounty hunter. A Vinduthi, not that the name of my people would mean anything to you. My last assignment went bad. I ended up trapped here, in this house.” He snarled. “In this time.”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. Vinduthi? Trapped in this time?

Screw this. I was done. It was too much. Too much to try to believe, too much to realize that my big scoop was going to be nothing more than a big joke. Just like the rest of my life was turning out to be.

I leapt off the mattress and bolted for the door, desperate to escape this madness. Sargon called out behind me, but I didn’t stop. I flung open the bedroom door and raced down the creaky stairs, the musty air stinging my lungs.

The front door was just ahead. I grabbed the handle, throwing it open only to be met with a crackling jolt of energy that sent me flying backwards. I slammed into the wall, gasping for air as spots danced in my vision.

Sargon caught me, gripped my arms to steady me. At his touch, a different sort of

sparks ran through me. What the hell?

“Are you alright?”

I glared at him through a haze of confusion. “What did you do?”

He shook his head, his expression one of weary impatience. “I didn’t do anything. Maybe if you’d listened instead of running off, you wouldn’t have gotten yourself shocked.”

I started to argue, but the words died at my lips. He was right - I’d acted rashly without letting him explain.

Sargon helped me to a decrepit sofa and took a step back, eyeing me warily. “We’re trapped here, you and I. This place it’s not going to let us leave so easily.” He sighed. “So maybe try listening this time before doing something stupid again.”

I swallowed hard, my body still tingling from the blast. Aliens, portals, bizarre energy fields - it all seemed a little too far-fetched to be real, even for someone like me who investigated this sort of stuff for a living. But the evidence was right in front of me. I took a deep breath and met Sargon’s gaze.

“Okay,” I said shakily. “I’m listening.”

Sargon leaned back against the tattered sofa, his sharp gaze fixed on me. “My target was Doar Fuile - a brilliant scientist with more than a few skeletons in his closet. Genetic experiments that no one asked for, unethical research that crossed every line.” He paused, lips twisted into a smirk. “The bounty would’ve been enough for me to retire comfortably.”

I swallowed hard, trying to process this insane situation. “So why was he wanted?”

A humorless smile twisted Sargon's lips. "Where do I start? The man was a menace. Rumor had it he'd tampered with things he had no business messing with - spacetime continuum, dimensional rifts, that kind of madness." He shook his head. "I didn't believe it at first, but my information was faulty. I never expected to end up trapped here because of his deranged tinkering."

My eyes went wide as my brain scrambled to absorb what he was saying.

Spacetime continuum? Dimensional rifts? It sounded like the plot of a bad sci-fi movie, but the haunted look in Sargon's eyes told me he wasn't joking around. A chill ran down my spine. This was real - as insane as it was, we were trapped somewhere -- somewhen.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. What could I possibly say to that? This went so far beyond a regular haunted house investigation. Swallowing hard, I gave a shaky nod. "That's not the sort of thing you'd expect, no."

Sargon studied me for a moment, then grunted in what might've been agreement. An awkward silence stretched between us as I struggled to collect my scattered thoughts. How did I go from a simple ghost hunt to being stuck in wherever the hell this was?

An alien bounty hunter from the future, trapped here with me by the machinations of a mad scientist? It was almost too outlandish to process. Part of me wondered if I'd finally cracked, lost myself in some delusion. But no, the throbbing ache in my shoulder from slamming into that energy barrier was all too real.

I eyed Sargon warily, taking in his imposing figure, those horns, that burning gaze. Even if this insane situation was real, he was dangerous.

Yet he'd helped me up after that shock, warned me about doing anything rash. And there was something about his touch that made my head spin.

For now, at least, my best option was to hear him out.

A spark of determination flickered in my chest, burning away the icy tendrils of panic. Wasn't this what I'd always been looking for? A mystery that couldn't be explained by any other means?

Ok, yes. And now I was trapped with it. That was a minor detail I couldn't get away from.

But surely a temporary one. There had to be a way out of this nightmare. I just had to find it.

"I guess we're partners, then." I stuck out my hand. "I'm Carter." After a long moment of him simply looking at me, I dropped my hand to my side and squared my shoulders. "We'll figure this out. Somewhere there's a solution." I frowned. "You've searched this whole place, right?"

He scoffed, those sharp teeth glinting. "What do you think I've been doing? Sitting around twiddling my thumbs?"

Fair point. I pressed on, undeterred. "But the barrier at the front door - that wasn't there before, was it?" At his grudging shake of the head, I felt a flicker of hope. "So something changed. Maybe if we can figure out what, we can change it back and get out of here."

Sargon grumbled something unintelligible. "Even if something did change," he growled, "it was probably for the worse, knowing my luck."

I ignored his pessimism, rising to my feet. He could wallow in doom and gloom if he wanted, but I wasn't giving up that easily. "Well, I'm going to take another look around. See if I can find anything you missed." I shot him a pointed look. "You don't

have to help if you don't want to."

Without waiting for his response, I turned and headed for the stairs, my pulse quickening. We had to start somewhere. Start at the top, work my way down.

Any plan was better than waiting around for things to make more sense, right?

As I climbed the creaky steps, I could feel Sargon's presence behind me, those heavy footsteps following close behind. He might act all gruff and indifferent, but I had a feeling the bounty hunter was more invested in escaping this trap than he let on.

The attic door loomed ahead, slightly ajar. My heart thudded in my chest as I reached for the handle.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I pulled the door open and stepped through.

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SARGON

“This didn’t look like this before.” Nicole turned in wonder.

She was right. The dusty room filled with boxes was now a sleek laboratory. Gleaming metal cabinets lined the walls, topped by obscure devices and blinking readouts. A long console dominated the center, bristling with controls and holographic displays.

“This looks like one of Doar’s labs.” I ran a hand along the smooth surface, taking in the cutting-edge tech. “He must have incorporated this space into his experiments.”

Nicole didn’t flinch, eyeing the bizarre setup with open curiosity. For a civilian, she had an impressive lack of fear. “If Doar was conducting shady business, it makes sense he’d need a hidey-hole.” She tapped her lip thoughtfully. “You said people were after him, right? Maybe he rigged this place as an escape route.”

I nodded, keeping one hand near the knife at my hip. “The Federation wasn’t thrilled when they discovered he’d gone rogue. They put a galaxy-wide bounty on him.”

“But if this was meant as a bolt-hole, why didn’t he come here himself?” She shrugged, unfazed by the tale of a wanted criminal. “You know, since he was the mad scientist and all.”

She was not only brave and curious, I realized, but logical.

An important quality in a mate.

What? I shook my head. Maybe my time here alone had done more damage to my mind than I realized.

With effort I returned my focus to the problem before us.

“Good question. You’d think he’d want the safety of his own hideaway.”

Nicole bit her lip, a small crease appearing between her brows. “Well, if he did intend this as a refuge, there has to be an exit. At least back to your timeline.”

I watched her carefully, impressed by the calmness of her logic. But something shifted in her scent, a hint of distress leaking through her composed veneer. She was worried.

The realization struck me like a plasma bolt - I didn’t want her upset. An uncomfortable tightness gripped my chest at the thought of her fear or unhappiness.

Frowning, I shoved the feeling away. Such useless sentiment served no purpose. “When we decipher Doar’s work, I’m sure we’ll find a way to send you home as well.” I gentled my tone, an oddity for me. “To your own place and time.”

She exhaled slowly, giving me a tight nod and straightening her shoulders. “Right. Let’s see what clues this lab can give us.”

I felt a grudging respect as the worried crease vanished, her hazel eyes regaining their keen sparkle. Clever female. She wouldn’t be a hindrance, at least.

I surveyed the lab anew, searching for anything that could unravel Doar’s twisted mind and secure our escape.

Nicole busied herself examining the equipment, occasionally picking up an object to

scrutinize it before carefully returning it to its place.

“Over here,” she called out.

I turned to find her standing before a control panel, her fingers hovering over a large red button. Our eyes met and she raised one inquisitive eyebrow. I gave a slight nod, bracing myself.

Nicole pressed the button and immediately holographic screens flickered to life around us, bathing the room in an ethereal blue glow. Line after line of text rapidly scrolled across their surfaces - Doar's research notes, if I had to guess.

“Can you read this?” Nicole asked, gesturing at the displays.

I stepped closer, squinting at the unfamiliar script. “Yes, but it's complete gibberish to me. Advanced theoretical physics and higher dimensional mathematics from the look of it.”

She exhaled a frustrated sigh. “I don't suppose you have a background in temporal anomalies or something?”

I snorted. “Because that's always useful as a bounty hunter.”

Reaching out, I waved my hand through the projection, cycling through the different files. Inscrutable equations and diagrams flashed by, none of it meaning anything to me.

“Wait!” Nicole gripped my arm, stilling my movements. “Go back, there was something...”

I retraced the last few screens until she gestured for me to stop. A three-dimensional

rendering hovered before us - a sleek, compact device with a titanium alloy casing. It featured a glowing slot on one side and an array of precisely labeled buttons.

“That looks like something I saw,” Nicole murmured.

She turned on her heel, gaze roving around the lab until she spotted something on a nearby workbench. Crossing the room, she snatched up what appeared to be the very device depicted in the diagram.

Nicole carried it back, holding it out for me to examine. “This has to be it, right?”

I took the object, turning it over until I noticed a small display screen on one side. A few taps activated it, and text began scrolling across the narrow panel.

“It says ‘Temporal Reset Initiator’,” I read aloud, the words sending an unexpected chill down to my toes. “And there are instructions “

Giving the device a firm shake did nothing, and neither did pressing any of the buttons. Whatever mechanics allowed it to function clearly required a specific procedure.

Nicole leaned in closer, the sweet floral scent of her caressing my senses. “What do the instructions say? Maybe it can get us out of here.”

I angled the screen so she could see, slowly reading through the convoluted text. “It says the Initiator can reset the local timeline by creating a contained singularity that unravels the surrounding spacetime continuum.”

Her hazel eyes went wide. “You’re kidding. A miniature black hole?”

“Essentially, yes.” I frowned down at the deceptively innocuous device. “Though it

claims the effect only extends to a limited radius determined by the amount of power channeled into it.”

Nicole worried at her full lower lip, considering. “So in theory, if we activated this thing, it could undo whatever Doar did to trap us here? Send everything back to before his experiment started?”

“Potentially.” I turned the words over carefully. “Though there’s no way to know the extent of the reset. Or what unintended consequences it might have.”

She met my gaze steadily, resolve hardening her features. “At this point, I’m willing to risk it if it’s our best chance of escape.”

My mouth went dry as she held my stare, her delicate human features set in determination. A strange tension crackled, its unseen energy pulling me towards her.

Mentally shaking off, I forced my focus back to the device. “Very well. According to these instructions, we need a release card to stick into this slot.” I turned the device over in my hands, examining it closely.

“Have you seen anything that would fit?” I asked Nicole.

She shook her head, one finger twisting a strand of hair as she thought. “No, nothing like that. Just the initiator device itself.”

We both scanned the lab space, but there was no sign of the required card anywhere amidst the tangle of equipment and displays.

Nicole blew out a frustrated breath. “I guess we’ll have to search the rest of the rooms. Doar could have stashed it anywhere.”

The thought of wandering aimlessly through Fuile's twisted maze held little appeal, but she was right - we had no other choice if we wanted to find a way out. Nodding tersely, I secured the initiator in a deep cargo pocket and headed for the door.

As I pulled it open, the hallway beyond shimmered and distorted, resolving into an iridescent corridor that shifted with an inner light. Where the stairs leading down should have been was now an arched entryway, the space beyond a disorienting kaleidoscope of bending planes.

"What the hell " Nicole breathed, coming up beside me to peer out.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled as I studied the pulsing, ever-changing passage. Something about it set my instincts on edge, every sense screaming danger. "This doesn't look like part of the original house."

"You think?" she muttered dryly. "More like something out of an acid trip."

Despite the strangeness, her scent held only mild trepidation rather than outright fear. Good - a useless emotion that would only hinder us. I felt an unexpected flicker of approval.

Stepping out into the corridor, I turned a slow circle, searching for any sign of the stairs or even a solid wall to orient us. But the kaleidoscopic tunnel stretched on endlessly, its planes and angles shifting in a dizzying array of refractions.

A low thrumming noise reverberated through the space, more a vibration felt in the chest than any true sound. The unmistakable hum of power, like the buildup before an energy discharge.

"I don't like this," I growled, my grip tightening on the knife hilt as I tensed for combat. "It feels like we're being herded."

“Herded?” Nicole’s brows hiked. “By who? Or what?”

I started to respond, but at that moment a tremor shook the hallway, nearly knocking me from my feet. The planes blurred, their geometry warping sickeningly as the hum rose to a bone-rattling pitch.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, everything fell still and silent once more. Except

The corridor had reformed into a completely different configuration, the tunnel branching off into multiple pathways like an intricate maze.

“Okay, that’s not good,” Nicole murmured, shooting me a quick look. “Any ideas?”

My jaw clenched hard enough to grind teeth as I studied the shifting labyrinth stretching out before us. Every battle-honed instinct screamed to turn back, find another way. But we both knew there was no other option.

Letting out a low rumble of frustration, I turned to Nicole. “We’ll have to risk it. Stay close and keep your eyes open.”

She shouldn’t be here. She should never have come here. Because of this damned place, now she was in danger. And everything in my blood screamed at me that she must be protected at all costs.

She met my gaze levelly, giving a sharp nod of understanding. “You got it.”

The tension between us thrummed like a taut wire as we ventured into the maze, the iridescent corridors pulsing around us in a hypnotic display. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were being watched. But by what?

Step by step, the geometry warped and distorted in ways that set my mind reeling.

Gravity itself seemed to shift, the floor transitioning to walls and ceilings in a dizzying spiral of fractured dimensions.

I fought to keep my bearings, relying on my other senses to ground me. The dry, metallic tang of ozone filled the air, sharp against my tongue. Nicole's faint, flowery fragrance was a strangely grounding anchor amidst the madness.

We lapsed into silence as we navigated the twisting corridors, her soft footfalls and the whisper of her breath the only sounds aside from the omnipresent thrum. I found myself acutely aware of her presence just behind me, close enough that the heat of her body prickled along my skin.

Tension tightened my gut, an electric charge sparking unexpected flashes of awareness. The firm curves beneath those deceptively thin Earthly fabrics. The tantalizing glimpses of soft skin at her neckline.

I clenched my jaw harder, struggling against the distracting lure of my body's baser instincts. There wasn't time for such nonsense. We needed to focus, stay alert.

Another tremor shuddered through the space, more violent than before. I whirled, one hand shooting out to grasp Nicole's arm in a steely grip, hauling her against me as the world tilted in sickening arcs.

For an endless heartbeat, we clung together, her slender frame crushed to my chest as the maze collapsed and re-formed around us in a whirl of fractured geometries.

Then everything stilled once more. Silence fell, the oppressive thrum of power fading away to leave only the sound of our mingled breaths.

Nicole lifted her head, tendrils of her auburn hair tickling my jaw. Our gazes collided, a shock of hazel to crimson that sent a jolt arrowing straight to my core.

Heat blazed, a molten awareness that seared away every thought, every instinct except one - the need to claim, to take, to possess. The rest of the universe fell away, narrowing to this single point of scorching need.

Her lips parted on a ragged exhale, and I watched, entranced, as her tongue swept out to moisten them in an unconscious gesture. My gaze caught on the glistening fullness of her mouth, and a bolt of pure, visceral lust punched through me with staggering force.

I wanted - needed - to taste her. To shove her against the nearest surface and ravage her until she screamed my name. Until she branded herself on my soul as indelibly as I knew she would be seared into mine forever.

Clenching my fists until my nails dug into my palms, I pulled myself together.

Had I finally lost my mind after being trapped here for all of these years?

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NICOLE

I led Sargon down another winding corridor, the walls rippling and shifting around us in unsettling patterns. Despite the bizarre surroundings, my eyes kept drifting back to study the striking alien figure beside me.

Sargon moved with a predatory grace, his lean muscular frame taut with wariness. Those intense red eyes constantly scanned our path, missing nothing. I found myself transfixed by the stark lines of his face, the delicate swirling patterns adorning his skin. Even those small horns at his temples held a strange allure.

And to be honest, his grim determination, the way he'd kept searching, kept fighting was just as attractive.

I gave myself a mental shake. Now was not the time to be ogling the bounty hunter, no matter how striking his looks.

We needed to focus on finding an escape route. And then, well, I'd deal with my inappropriate attraction later. If there was a later.

"How are we even communicating right now?" I blurted out, desperate to distract myself from inappropriate thoughts. "Back in the lab, you were clearly reading an alien script on those displays. But here you are, speaking perfect English with me."

Sargon's eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't understand your meaning."

"Well, I obviously don't speak whatever language you were using before," I

persisted. “So unless you’ve got a universal translation implant or something, you must have learned English at some point. Which means “ My voice trailed off as realization struck. “You’ve dealt with humans before, haven’t you?”

An uncomfortable silence stretched out as we continued picking our way forward. Sargon’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly before he finally spoke. “I have encountered your kind during my travels, yes. But humans do not possess much status or power within the Federation’s worlds.”

His tone held the barest hint of disdain, setting my hackles rising instinctively. I began to protest, but Sargon raised a hand, forestalling me.

“I do not mean insult. It is simply a fact. Your species is still viewed as relatively inconsequential by many.” He shrugged those broad shoulders. “Why bother learning the language of such a minor race?”

I snorted, unable to keep the sarcasm from my voice. “Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence in humanity’s worth.”

To my surprise, Sargon actually chuckled - a low, rumbling sound that made my heart skip. “Your species may lack power and standing, but you possess a certain...” He paused, those red eyes raking over me in an unconsciously sensual appraisal. “tenacity that I’ve found intriguing.”

Was it my imagination, or did his gaze linger a little too long on my curves? I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry as a desert.

Forcing a casual tone, I prodded, “So if humans are so unimpressive to your mighty Federation, why’d you bother learning our language?”

Sargon’s lips quirked in a half-smile that somehow managed to be both sardonic and

darkly amused. “Vinduthi have an innate gift for absorbing new languages quickly. And after being stuck on this world for so long, I’ve had ample time to study yours.”

He leaned closer, those sharp teeth glinting as he continued in a lower tone. “Besides, not long before I took the contract to hunt down Doar, I heard rumors that an old comrade had become intrigued by a human female he’d taken as a mate. So I decided to investigate what could possess a fellow Vinduthi to bind himself to one of your kind.”

My breath caught in my throat as Sargon moved to stand over me, his towering figure looming over me, the faint, musky scent of him, the swirls of his markings drawing my eye.

“I must admit,” he murmured in that deep, gruff timbre, “After spending time in your fascinating company, I’m starting to understand the appeal.”

Oh.

The heated undercurrent of his words was unmistakable. Part of me wanted to back away, put some safer distance between us. But another part - a reckless, hungry part - longed to reach out and trace the whorling patterns etched into that alien skin.

I could feel the rapid staccato of my pulse thundering in my ears as Sargon held my gaze. Those eyes blazed even brighter, filled with a heat that bordered on smoldering.

Then the moment shattered as a tremor ripped through the corridor around us. The walls blurred and distorted sickeningly, knocking me off-balance. Sargon’s arm whipped out with blurring speed, his iron grip catching me against that powerful chest before I could fall.

“We need to keep moving,” he growled, steadying me. “This reality grows more

unstable by the moment.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded mutely and let him propel me forward once more. My skin still tingled from the lingering heat of his touch, my body hyper-aware of his looming presence at my back.

The word “mate” echoed through my thoughts, its implications dancing like static electricity.

I’d seen sensationalized tabloid stories about alien abductions and bizarre interspecies affairs. But those were pure fantasy, nothing like the compelling reality of the massive alien now guiding me through these shifting corridors.

I snuck a sidelong glance at Sargon. His stark alien features – the sharp cheekbones, the swirling tattoos – had taken on a strange allure.

Imagining this otherworldly creature as a “husband” conjured visions of his nimble fingers tracing patterns across my skin, exploring every curve with a thrilling, terrifying possessiveness. I could almost feel the ghostly warmth of his breath on my neck?—

“Nicole.” Sargon’s voice shattered my reverie, making me jump. “You seem distracted. Is something wrong?”

Heat flooded my cheeks as I struggled to regain composure. “No, nothing’s wrong. Just thinking.”

Sargon’s eyes narrowed slightly with concern or curiosity. “Thinking about what?”

“Just what you said before. About your friend and his human ...partner.” I admitted in a whisper. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes and he nodded. “Ah yes, I can see how that might be jarring for you.”

“Jarring,” I repeated with a humorless laugh. “That’s one way to put it.”

We walked in silence, the shifting walls humming around us.

“Would you like to know more?” he asked carefully. “About what it means for a Vinduthi to take a mate?”

I took a half-step towards him. This felt right. He felt right.

But then reality crashed back. We were trapped, our lives hanging by a thread as we navigated this surreal labyrinth.

“Maybe later,” I said, tucking my hair behind my ear as I refocused. “But right now, we should keep moving, don’t you think?”

Sargon’s expression subtly shifted, as if suppressing a smirk. “Of course. Your safety is my primary concern.”

Sure it was.

I was about to press Sargon further when I noticed a strange flickering in the corridor walls around us. Little shimmers of light, like heat distortions, rippled and danced across the surfaces.

“Do you see that?” I asked, pointing toward the nearest flicker.

Sargon’s eyes narrowed as he examined it. “Yes, almost like spatial disturbances. But localized, contained.”

He stalked closer, reaching out one long-fingered hand to hover just shy of the flickering patch. I could have sworn I saw his talons extend slightly as he tensed.

With a suddenness that made me jump, Sargon thrust his arm forward - and it disappeared into the wall up to the elbow.

“What the--?!” My eyes went wide.

Sargon grunted, but when he pulled his arm back, it looked no worse for wear.

“It appears to be some kind of rift or portal,” he murmured, studying that section intently. “But highly unstable. Almost like an unfinished transition between quantum states.”

I blinked at the technobabble. “You lost me, but go on “

Shaking his head, Sargon refocused on me. “It may be our way out of this labyrinth. If I can stabilize and widen one of these rifts, we could pass through to another area.”

“Another area?” My heart leapt at the possibility of escape. “You mean like back into the real house?”

“Perhaps.” Sargon flexed his hand, claws extending fully as some unseen force shimmered around his fingertips. “Only one way to find out.”

With a sudden forceful thrust, he plunged that clawed hand straight into the rift. This time his entire arm disappeared up to the shoulder as fractal patterns of scintillating energy sparked outward.

I held my breath, watching in awe and trepidation as Sargon’s features contorted in intense concentration. Muscles ridged and straining, he looked like a sculptural study

of focused power.

With a final heave, Sargon wrenched his arm sideways - and the rift split wide in a dazzling kaleidoscope of light and color. A massive rent had been torn in the very fabric of the shifting corridor, revealing

“A bedroom?” I squinted through the haze.

It was indeed a child’s bedroom, complete with gabled windows, floral wallpaper, and a canopy bed with tasseled curtains. Plush stuffed animals littered the floor, along with scattered toys and picture books.

“I’ll be damned,” Sargon growled, already pushing through the rift. “We’re back in the house - one floor down from the attic where we started.”

I hurried after him, ducking beneath the low, slanted ceiling as I emerged into the dimly lit chamber. The heavy curtains were drawn, lending everything a gloomy, dusty pall.

“How is this possible?” I swept my gaze around the decidedly mundane setting, so at odds with the shifting labyrinth we’d been walking through moments before. “We didn’t go down any stairs...”

Sargon’s eyes glinted as he nodded toward the canopy bed. “The rifts must allow passage between spaces, circumventing normal physical laws. Doors within doors, if you will.”

“Freaky,” I murmured, unable to look away from the slightly sinister air of the shadowy bedroom. Beneath the dust and neglect, I could envision a child happily at play amid the stuffed toys and books.

I shuddered, feeling the weight of the decades pressing down. What had happened here, in this once-loved space? What had turned this warm sanctuary into a haunting tomb of lost innocence?

“Over here,” Sargon called, already rifling through the room’s scattered detritus. “We should search for any sign of that missing release card.”

Nodding mutely, I set to work, sifting through the debris and detritus with a cautious hand. My fingers brushed over smooth leather binding, and I pulled free an ancient photo album from beneath a pile of moldering toys.

The cover creaked in protest as I carefully opened it, the ancient adhesive cracking. I drew in a sharp breath at the images contained within.

Faded, sepia-tinted photographs showed a smiling family - father, mother, and three young children, two boys and a girl. Their faces beamed with simple joy, caught in warm domestic scenes around a cheerfully decorated Christmas tree, or gathered at a birthday celebration with a lavish cake.

“So they were happy, once,” a gruff voice rumbled near my shoulder, making me start.

I hadn’t even heard Sargon approach, but there he loomed over me, scanning the tender family portraits with an inscrutable expression.

Clearing my throat, I carefully turned another page, revealing more images. The children clearly growing older with each successive snapshot, their smiles becoming more rare, their expressions more somber and withdrawn.

“I wonder what happened,” I murmured. “To take them from that bright, loving home to well, whatever nightmare transpired here in the end.”

Sargon uttered a soft grunt, but said nothing more as I gently closed the album's covers once more. I couldn't bear to look at the remnants of that lost family any longer, to see the inevitable deterioration into misery and darkness.

"Nothing here that can help us," the bounty hunter pronounced after one final sweep of the room. "We need to locate another of those rifts and keep searching."

Giving the album one last mournful look, I rose and rejoined Sargon. He was right - wallowing in past tragedies would get us nowhere. Our own survival took priority right now.

My gaze landed on the bedroom's antique armoire, its once-gleaming wood now dull and scarred. A strange, flickering luminescence seeped from the seams around the closed doors, like heat distortions shimmering in a desert mirage.

"I think I found our next door," I said, pointing toward the wavering glow.

Sargon's gaze sharpened as he studied the phenomenon, then gave a curt nod. Crossing the room in three long strides, he grasped the armoire's handles and wrenched the doors open.

A blast of searing light and sound exploded outward, forcing me to throw up an arm to shield my eyes. When the roar and brilliance faded, I found myself once more confronted by the reality-defying geometries of that maddening, kaleidoscopic maze.

With a quick glance at Sargon's impassive features, I steeled myself and stepped through the rent, the Vinduthi falling into stride beside me.

Our quest to find that elusive release card and unravel this cosmic trap continued. But at least this time, I felt the first faint stirrings of hope flickering to life.

If we could make it through this ever-shifting labyrinth, maybe - just maybe - I could find my way back to the normal life I'd once known.

But was I going to be anywhere close to normal anymore?

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SARGON

I had not expected to be so impressed by a little human.

She'd caught the shimmering that indicated a break in the maze, her curiosity giving us a new clue.

Despite the baffling circumstances we found ourselves in, despite her lack of understanding of the advanced technology at play, she refused to be deterred. An admirable tenacity for a primitive species.

This time the portal dumped us in a dimly lit corridor, the wooden panels creaking underfoot. It led us into a spacious kitchen, cluttered and coated in thick dust. Faded wallpaper peeled from the walls, patterns of roses and vines distorted by age. The air hung heavy with the musty scent of decay and disuse.

Sunlight filtered through grimy windows, casting slanted beams that made the dust motes swirl like miniature galaxies. Nicole ran her fingers along the battered countertop, dislodging a small cloud of grit.

"Looks like no one's been here in a long time," she murmured.

"This kitchen is another floor lower than where we were before." I turned around slowly. "I've searched it before during my time trapped here, but I wasn't looking for something like a card."

"Then we can start looking now." Nicole began opening cupboard doors, peering into

the shadowy recesses. I admired her willingness to help despite her disadvantages. Did humans even have night vision?

As I checked under the ancient stove, something skittered in the corner of my vision. A rodent, no larger than my palm, scurried along the baseboard before disappearing into a gap in the wainscoting. My body tensed, predatory instincts flaring.

“Ugh, did you see that?” Nicole wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I hate rats.”

“Why waste such contempt on such a resourceful creature?” I cocked my head, tracking the sounds of its movement within the walls. “They survive against all odds, thriving where others perish.”

She shot me an incredulous look. “You’re not actually praising them, are you?”

I couldn’t resist teasing her, just a little. “I am. They make excellent sustenance when other food is scarce.”

Nicole froze, comprehension dawning across her delicate features. “You’ve been eating them?”

“Among other things.” I rose in a fluid motion, lips curling to reveal a hint of fang. “I could catch one for you, if you’re feeling peckish.”

She paled, swallowing hard as her gaze darted toward the nearest exit. “I, uh I’m good, thanks.”

A low chuckle rumbled from my chest at her discomfiture. So easy to unsettle, these humans. Yet her reactions amused me. An unexpected delight amid the endless stretches of solitude and despair.

As we continued our fruitless search, a peculiar ache settled within me. I found myself wishing I could offer her more - a proper meal, a taste of the wonders that awaited beyond this dilapidated prison. To show her the sublime beauty of my home galaxy, the celestial splendor that dwarfed even her most vivid dreams.

On the ringed planet of Elaar, fields of luminescent flora stretched to the horizon, their soft blue radiance bathing the landscape in an ethereal glow. The air carried the sweet, heady fragrance of night-blooming valkath blossoms, their delicate petals unfurling beneath the light of three moons.

The Tenyrth colonies on Kri'vak boasted cities carved into the sides of towering crystal peaks, their spires and arches refracting the crimson light of the system's dying star. At dusk, the mountains appeared to bleed fire, casting the world in shades of garnet and cinnabar.

And on the jungle moon of Taranis, entire forests thrummed with life - from the kaleidoscopic plumage of native avians to the trilling songs of insects woven into a symphony of alien beauty. Glowing spores drifted on warm breezes, dusting the air with glittering motes like stardust.

My chest constricted with a profound sense of loss. Once, I could have taken her to experience such transcendent vistas. Could have opened her eyes to the vastness of creation, the marvels that spanned the cosmos.

Now, we were trapped in this crumbling, insignificant backwater, our fates bound to the whims of forces beyond our comprehension. The injustice of it burned like acid in my gut.

Nicole sighed, straightening from her crouch with empty hands. "I don't think it's here. Maybe we should-"

Her words cut off as the room around us wavered, the edges bleeding into indistinct smears of color. A tremor ran through the floorboards, nearly toppling her. I caught her elbow to steady her, the heat of her skin searing my palm.

“What’s happening?” she whimpered, alarm flickering across her features.

“Maybe Doar’s experiment isn’t as stable as he thinks,” I growled.

Another violent quake rocked the space, picture frames and knickknacks clattering from shelves. Plaster rained down in chalky clouds as cracks snaked across the ceiling. Nicole cried out, clutching my arm in a grip as unyielding as a durasteel vise.

Then, as abruptly as it began, the tremors ceased. The dust settled in eerie stillness.

My hearts pounded in my ears as I drank in her scent - warm and vital, tinged with the acrid bite of fear. She stared up at me, lips parted in silent shock.

Suddenly, the urge to reassure her, to soothe the rabbit-quick flutter of her pulse overwhelmed me. I wanted to pull her into my embrace, let her feel the solidity of my form, the strength that could shield her from any threat.

Instead, I gently extricated myself from her grasp, my fingertips lingering against her skin for a beat too long.

“We should go,” I rasped, forcing my tone to remain level. “There’s no need to stay here.”

Nicole nodded mutely, expression unreadable. With a final glance around the ravaged kitchen, we turned and continued our search through the ever-shifting labyrinth.

I struggled to contain my irritation as Nicole’s scent wafted around me, light and

floral yet carrying an underlying richness that stirred unfamiliar yearnings. Attachments were a liability I could ill afford, especially in our precarious situation.

I was Khor of the Vinduthi, a relentless hunter beholden to no one. Yet this slight human provoked reactions in me that bordered on distraction. Unacceptable.

Forcing my gaze away from the sweet soft spot where her neck met her shoulder, I asked gruffly, “What were you doing in this place to begin with? Seems an odd locale for one of your kind.”

Nicole blinked, her hazel eyes refocusing as she processed my question. A rueful smile twisted her lips. “I’m a journalist, I guess you could say. Though these days, that’s just a fancy term for blogger.”

She let out a self-deprecating chuckle that sparked an unexpected warmth in my chest. “I’m interested in paranormal research, all the weird and unexplained stuff. I’d been looking into some of the most haunted places around Detroit, and this old mansion always made the lists. Supposedly it only became active on Devil’s Night, though.”

I furrowed my brow ridge. “Devil’s Night?” The human turn of phrase eluded me.

“Oh, right, you wouldn’t know about that.” Nicole pushed back her hair. “It’s the night before Halloween - a human holiday. There’s this dumb tradition among the youth in Detroit of pulling pranks and starting fires. Sort of a warm-up for the real night of spooky stuff.”

She shrugged. “I’d heard rumors this place would light up with ghost sightings and EVP recordings on that one night every year. Thought it would make for an interesting blog piece.”

“Ghosts “ I muttered at the human superstition with a derisive snort. “I suspect it wouldn’t be the first time your species attributed unexplained phenomena to the supernatural rather than advanced technology beyond their comprehension.”

Nicole’s cheeks flushed, but she lifted her chin defiantly. “Well, excuse me for not having intimate knowledge of alien science from across the galaxy. Next time I’ll just--”

The words died on her lips as my rumbling laughter filled the space. She gaped at me, caught off guard by the unexpected reaction. In truth, I surprised myself - it had been decades since I last allowed my amusement to show so openly. Her indignant sputtering proved endearing.

“Forgive me,” I managed once my chuckles subsided. “I meant no insult. Your vibrance and insatiable curiosity can be refreshing at times.”

Nicole’s blush deepened, but the ghost of a smile played about her lips. “If you say so, .”

“This paranormal research,” I said, arching a brow ridge. “It seems a dangerous pastime for one as soft and ill-equipped as yourself. Does your family not worry for your safety?”

Her expression clouded, that spark of humor extinguished as quickly as it had flared. She averted her gaze, suddenly finding great interest in studying the tattered remnants of wallpaper.

“It’s usually not dangerous at all. Nothing like this, at any rate.” Her tone turned pensive. “As for family...I don’t have any. Not anymore.”

A muscle twitched in her jaw as she swallowed hard. “My parents died when I was

just a kid. A car accident “ She trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken.

My throat constricted at the naked sorrow swimming in those hazel depths. A strange ache blossomed within me, one I couldn't readily identify. All at once, I felt an overwhelming urge to reach out, to offer some small comfort against the loneliness that so clearly haunted her.

Before I could act on the impulse, Nicole's chin lifted. “I've wondered sometimes if maybe that's why I got into this whole paranormal thing. Like maybe I was looking for a way to contact them somehow. To find out if there was more out there, you know? Some greater meaning or plane of existence beyond our own.”

Her lips curved in a wan, self-mocking smile. “Stupid, I know.”

“No.” The word slipped out, unbidden. I held her gaze, allowing the sincerity of my tone to resonate. “Not stupid at all.”

Nicole's pupils dilated as she searched my face with an unguarded longing that mirrored my own burgeoning desire. For a crystalline instant, everything else fell away - the maze, the card, even the ponderous weight of duty and honor. There was only her, and the strange pull coiling tighter within me.

Then a skittering noise like metal scraping stone shattered the fragile connection.

My senses sharpened, every muscle coiling as I whipped my head toward the source of the disturbance. From the darkened recesses of a doorway across the room, something emerged - a skeletal, multi-limbed construct of bone and metal. Spindly legs carried it forward in a stuttering, jerking gait.

With a harsh bellow, I flung myself at the abomination, drawing my plasma blade in a single fluid arc. Energy crackled along the humming length as I brought it down in

a vicious overhand strike.

The shriek of rending metal split the air as my weapon carved through the construct's outermost limbs in a shower of sparks, then it knocked my knife from my hand.

Well. There was more than one way to take this thing apart.

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NICOLE

The nightmare lunged at Sargon, its bony claws extended in a lethal swipe. I gasped, my heart pounding in my ears as I watched the deadly dance unfold before me.

Sargon moved with blinding speed, his lithe form twisting and dodging the monster's strikes with uncanny grace. His red eyes narrowed, calculating each move with razor-sharp precision.

The construct's jaws snapped mere inches from Sargon's face, but he didn't flinch. Instead, he seized the opening, driving his fist into its ribcage with a sickening crunch. Shards of bone exploded outward, raining down on the tiled floor.

I flinched, covering my mouth to stifle a cry.

Sargon didn't relent, raining blow after blow upon the skeletal monstrosity. His fists were like jackhammers, pulverizing bones with each calculated strike. The air filled with the acrid stench of charred marrow and the sickly-sweet scent of decay.

The construct retaliated, its claws leaving deep gashes across Sargon's chest and arms. But the wounds barely fazed him. Rivulets of deep purple blood trickled down his gray skin, only serving to heighten the feral brilliance of his eyes.

I had to do something, anything to help. My gaze darted around the kitchen, searching for a weapon, a tool, anything that could give Sargon an advantage.

That's when I spotted it – a heavy cast-iron skillet sitting on the stovetop.

Without a second thought, I snatched it up, the weight of it solid and reassuring in my grip. Gritting my teeth, I waited for my chance, my knuckles whitening as I gripped the pan's handle.

The construct reared back, its maw gaping wide as it prepared to lunge at Sargon once more. This was my opening.

"Sargon, get down!" I shouted, putting every ounce of force I could muster into my swing.

The skillet connected with the back of the thing's skull with a sickening crunch, its vertebrae shattering under the impact. The construct collapsed, twitching and thrashing in its death throes.

Sargon didn't hesitate. In a blur of motion, he pounced, pinning the creature's thrashing form to the ground. With a vicious snarl, he grabbed its skull in both hands and twisted with all his might. The construct's neck snapped like a dry twig, and it went limp, finally still.

Silence descended over the kitchen, broken only by the ragged sound of our breathing. Sargon slowly rose to his feet, his piercing gaze fixed on me with a look that made my blood run cold.

"What in the Void were you thinking?" he growled, his words sharp with a dangerous edge. "You could have been killed!"

I swallowed hard, adrenaline still keeping me on the knife's edge. "I... I couldn't just stand by and watch."

Sargon stalked towards me, his movements fluid and predatory. "You're a fool, human. This is no place for your kind."

His words stung, but I refused to back down. “Maybe not, but I’m not just going to cower and wait for someone else to save me.”

Sargon’s face was mere inches from mine now, his warm breath fanning across my skin. Up close, I could make out every detail of his features – the sharp planes of his face, the patterns of his intricate markings, the faint ridges of his horns.

And those eyes...cold and compelling, like twin pools of liquid fire.

“You have no idea what you’re dealing with,” he rumbled. “We are predators, hunters born and bred for the kill.”

He reached out, tracing the curve of my cheek with one calloused fingertip. “You would do well to remember that, little human.”

I tried to steady my breathing, to ignore the way my pulse quickened at his touch. “Is that a threat?”

The ghost of a smirk tugged at the corner of Sargon’s lips, revealing a glimpse of those wicked fangs. “Perhaps. Or merely a warning.”

Our gazes locked, charged with an electric tension that crackled like static electricity. For a long, breathless moment, neither of us moved, the air thick and heavy with unspoken challenge.

Finally, Sargon broke the silence with a low chuckle that rumbled deep in his chest. “You intrigue me, Carter. Few would dare defy me as you have.”

He leaned in closer, his lips nearly touching mine. I could taste the danger rolling off him in waves, sharp and intoxicating.

“But make no mistake,” he murmured, his words a velvet threat. “I am not one to be trifled with.”

I leaned closer. “I’m not trifling with you, Sargon.”

My voice was only a whisper, but it carried a weight, a challenge. Throwing caution to the wind, I pressed my lips against his.

For a heartbeat, he went rigid, his body tensing like a coiled spring. Then Sargon seized me, his powerful arms encircling my waist and crushing me against him.

He moved over me with a hunger that stole my breath away. There was nothing gentle about his kiss – it was all heat and need, a demand more than a request. His sharp teeth grazed my bottom lip, sending a jolt of electric desire coursing through me.

One of Sargon’s hands slid up my back, tangling in my hair and angling my head to deepen the kiss. The other roamed lower, his calloused fingers tracing the softness of my hip before gripping my thigh and hitching my leg up against his waist.

A strangled whimper escaped my lips as his hard length pressed against my core through the thin fabric of my pants. Instinctively, I rocked against him, craving that delicious friction.

Sargon snarled into my mouth, the sound rumbling like a feral beast unbound. His hips surged forward, pinning me against the cool metal of the kitchen counter. There was no mistaking the thick, heavy length of him straining against his trousers, insistent and demanding.

I should have been afraid. By all rights, I should have been terrified by the strength of his desire, by the raw power he exuded. But instead, I found myself drowning in it,

craving it. Craving him.

My fingers tangled in the whorls of his intricate markings as I clung to him, drunk on the heady blend of his musk and the tang of his alien blood. The sharp ridges of his horns grazed my cheek, sending a trill of forbidden pleasure ricocheting down my skin.

Sargon's lips left a blazing trail of heat along my jawline, his sharp teeth scoring lines of fire across the sensitive skin of my throat. A low, possessive growl vibrated against my pulse point, and I groaned, arching against him shamelessly.

"So responsive," he purred, his voice laced with smoldering desire. "Do you have any idea what you do to me, little human?"

His hips ground against me in emphasis, the thick ridge of his cock leaving me aching and breathless. I whimpered, digging my nails into his shoulders as I sought an anchor against the scorching tide of need crashing over me.

"I want you," Sargon rumbled, the words a raw, carnal confession that sent a fresh gush of liquid heat pooling between my thighs. "More than anything in this blasted existence."

His tongue traced the delicate shell of my ear, his breath hot and ragged. "I crave the taste of you, the scent of your arousal thick on my tongue as I bury myself in your slick, velvet depths "

A strangled moan tore from my lips at the vivid imagery his words conjured. Need coiled low in my belly, an aching, throbbing pulse that begged for release. I shifted restlessly, silently pleading for him to put an end to this exquisite torment.

Sargon chuckled darkly, the sound reverberating through me like the rumble of

distant thunder. “Patience, little one. The Vinduthi do not rush such...intimate affairs.”

His lips found mine once more, the kiss deep and demanding as he plundered the velvet depths of my mouth with his wicked tongue. I could taste the tang of his blood, the spicy musk that clung to his skin.

When he finally broke away, I was left dizzy and breathless, clinging to him like a lifeline in a storm. My lips were swollen from the brutal onslaught of his kisses, my skin flushed and tingling with the echoes of his touch.

“Look at you,” Sargon murmured, dragging the pad of his thumb over my plump bottom lip. “So flushed and needy, aching for my touch.”

A wicked grin curved his lips. “And to think, you dared to defy a Vinduthi hunter, little human.”

His fingers slid into my hair, gripping the silken strands as he tugged my head back, baring the slender column of my throat. I shuddered, pinned by the molten heat of his gaze.

“Perhaps you’re not as fragile as you appear,” he mused, trailing scorching kisses along the sensitive skin below my ear. “But make no mistake – I could break you with a single, careless touch.”

His tongue flicked out, tasting the hammering pulse at the hollow of my throat. “The question is...do you want me to?”

“Yes,” I breathed, my voice trembling with need. “I want you, Sargon.”

Some primal part of me had been unleashed by his passion, his raw, predatory power.

I craved it, yearned for the exquisite danger he promised with every scorching caress.

Sargon's eyes flared, twin pools of molten crimson blazing with scarcely leashed hunger. A feral rumble emerged from the depths of his chest as he seized my hips, slamming me back against the counter with bruising force.

"You think you can handle it, little human?" he purred, his words filled with dark promise. "You have no idea the pleasures I can make you endure."

He crashed against me in a searing, merciless kiss that stole what little breath I had left. I moaned into his mouth, my nails scoring lines of fire down the corded muscles of his back, desperate for more of his touch, his taste, his scent.

Sargon growled in approval, the sound vibrating through me in a shudder of pleasure. One of his hands tangled in my hair, wrenching my head back to expose the vulnerable column of my throat. His wicked tongue blazed a scorching trail along the hammering pulse point as his hips rolled against me in a slow, sinuous grind.

"So responsive," he rumbled against my fevered skin. "So achingly eager for my touch. I can smell the need pouring off you in waves, thick and intoxicating "

His words painted vivid images in my mind – images of him burying his face between my thighs, lapping at the slick evidence of my desire with that wicked tongue. I whimpered, my hips bucking shamelessly against the thick, insistent ridge of his arousal straining against the fabric of his trousers.

"Look around you," he growled in my ear, his voice a low, guttural rasp of sin. "This place is a filthy, squalid hole, utterly unfit for one such as you."

My gaze swept across the kitchen, taking in the cracked tiles and peeling paint, the rusted appliances and shattered plates littering the floor. He was right – the place was

a wreck, a far cry from the cozy, immaculate homes I was used to. But instead of repulsing me, the squalor only heightened the dark, forbidden thrill.

“I don’t care,” I gasped, arching back against him with wanton abandon. “I know I’m crazy, but I just don’t care.”

Sargon tsked softly, his free hand smoothing my hair. “But I do. Besides, I do not think you would want to come undone so close to the rats.”

His words were like a bucket of cold water dumped over my head.

Good grief.

He really was a devil.

SARGON

The flickering gaslight cast an eerie glow over the dusty sitting room, illuminating faded wallpaper and antique furnishings. My gaze swept over the space, taking in every nook and cranny with careful scrutiny. Nicole stood beside me, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. I could smell the faint trace of her sweat, mixed with the tang of old books and must.

Despite my efforts to remain focused on our goal, my mind kept drifting back to the taste of her lips, the feel of her curves pressed against me. I clenched my jaw, pushing the distracting thoughts away. Getting her out of this wretched place was my priority.

“Where should we look first?” Nicole’s voice was hushed, as if afraid to disturb the stillness. Or maybe she was having just as much trouble as I was staying focused on our goal.

I grunted, eyes narrowing as I scanned the room. An ornate escritoire stood in the corner, its polished wood surface gleaming. “That might be a good place to start.”

She nodded, moving towards the antique desk with a purposeful stride. I trailed behind her, my senses heightened and alert for any shifts in our surroundings. This labyrinth had a way of changing without warning.

Nicole began rifling through the drawers, careful not to disturb their contents too much. The scent of old parchment wafted up, tickling my nostrils. I leaned against the desk, arms folded as I watched her work.

“Find anything?” I asked after a few moments, unable to ignore the adorable way her nose crinkled as she concentrated. She shook her head, strands of hair escaping her ponytail to frame her face. The urge to brush them back, to feel their silk against my fingers, was almost overwhelming.

“Nothing yet,” she murmured, biting her lower lip. “But I’m not giving up.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. Her tenacity was one of the things I found so intriguing about her. For a human, she was remarkably resilient and determined.

Nicole straightened, stretching her arms above her head with a soft groan. My gaze was drawn to the sliver of exposed skin at her midriff, the dip of her waist. Heat rose inside me, and I had to look away before my thoughts wandered down a dangerous path again.

“You know,” she began, dropping her arms to her sides. “You never did tell me what you plan to do once we get out of here.”

I arched a brow ridge, considering her question. “Drag Doar back and claim the bounty on his head.” A feral grin spread across my features at the thought. “Or better yet, just bring his severed head back as proof.”

A startled laugh escaped her lips, the sound rich and melodic. It lifted my spirits in a way I hadn’t expected, like the first rays of sunlight after a long, cold night. Her amusement was infectious, and I found myself chuckling along with her, the tension easing from my shoulders.

“You’re really committed to this whole bounty hunter thing, aren’t you?” Nicole asked, shaking her head with a smile.

“It’s what I do,” I replied with a nonchalant shrug. “Been doing it for longer than you’ve been alive, probably.”

Her eyes widened slightly at the reminder of just how ancient I truly was, at least by human standards. To the Vinduthi, a hundred years was but a blink of an eye in our long lifespan.

“Wow, I can’t even imagine,” she murmured, gaze drifting over my features as if trying to reconcile the notion.

An uncomfortable silence settled in the air, pressing down like a physical force. Nicole’s cheeks flushed a delicate shade of pink, and she averted her eyes, straightening the papers on the desk.

I watched her, mesmerized by the graceful movements of her hands, the curve of her neck as she bent over the desk. A phantom touch ghosted along my jaw, a memory of the kiss we had shared. The hunger I had felt then, the raw need to possess her, came roaring back with a vengeance.

Perhaps being trapped here wouldn’t be so terrible, after all. I could spend my days mapping every inch of her body with my hands, my mouth. Learning the sounds she made when pleasure overtook her senses. Keeping her warm, sated, and trembling with desire. She would be mine, utterly and completely.

The fantasy played out vividly in my mind’s eye. Nicole, splayed out on crisp sheets, hair a wild halo around her flushed face. Her hazel eyes dark with want as she stretched her arms out to me, an unspoken invitation. I could almost taste the salt of her sweat on my tongue.

A sharp pang of guilt lanced through me, dousing the flames of my desire like a bucket of ice water. What was I thinking? This was no mere conquest to be had, a

fleeting dalliance to while away the endless years. Nicole deserved better than to be trapped here, used for my own selfish gratification.

I was Vinduthi, a warrior bred for battle and honor. Depriving her of her freedom, her future...it went against every principle I held dear, no matter how tempting the thought. Morals had never been a strong suit of mine, but there were lines I refused to cross.

With an inward snarl, I forced the treacherous musings away. Nicole would make it back to her own time and her life. I would see to that, even if it meant denying the urges that raged within me.

A heavy thud echoed through the room, jolting me from my reverie. Nicole stood frozen, one hand outstretched as if she had just slammed the escritoire drawer shut. Her eyes were wide, lips parted in a silent “o” of surprise.

“What is it?” I demanded, already scanning our surroundings for threats. “Did you find something?”

She didn’t respond, simply pointed a shaking finger at the escritoire. Frowning, I strode over and yanked the drawer open once more.

There, nestled amongst quills and scraps of parchment, lay a tarnished metal card. A series of strange symbols were etched into its surface, glowing with an inner light that pulsed in time with my double heartbeats.

“The release card,” I breathed, scarcely daring to believe our luck. “You found it.”

Nicole nodded mutely, still staring at the object. Carefully, I plucked it from the drawer, holding it up to examine the arcane markings. Perhaps this truly was our way out, our chance at freedom from this twisted prison.

A flicker of movement in my peripheral vision had me whirling around, instincts taking over. Nicole squeaked, stumbling back a step as I shoved her behind me in one fluid motion. My other hand closed around the hilt of my blade, the familiar weight reassuring against my palm.

The shadows in the corner coalesced, shifting and contorting until they resolved into a towering, skeletal form. Bony fingers flexed, claws scraping against the wooden floor as the construct advanced with an unsettling, jerky gait. Empty sockets fixed on us, the impression of hunger and malice radiating from its eyeless gaze.

Another one of these bastards.

A low snarl built in my belly as I settled into a combat stance. So this was the price for our good fortune – another twisted creation of Doar's to bar our path.

“Stay behind me,” I ordered Nicole, the words clipped and sharp.

She nodded again, face pale but determined. Good, she knew better than to argue or try to play the hero. Keeping her safe was my priority now.

The skeletal horror lunged, claws raking through the air where I had been standing a heartbeat before. I spun away, boots skidding across the aged floorboards as I attacked. Bone met steel with a jarring clang, sparks flying from the impact.

We traded a flurry of blows, the construct's bony limbs whipping towards me with unnatural speed and strength. I parried and dodged, allowing my feral instincts to take over as the dance of battle swept me away.

A lucky strike clipped my shoulder, razor-sharp talons slicing through armored leather with ease. I hissed at the sting, dark ichor welling from the wound. The injury would heal soon enough, a mere flesh wound by Vinduthi standards.

Capitalizing on my momentary distraction, the horror lashed out again, aiming for my throat this time. I twisted aside, catching its arm and using its own momentum to send it staggering off balance. In the same motion, I spun, cleaving through bone and metal.

The construct crumpled to the floor, dismembered limbs clattering across the hardwood. I stood over its remains, chest heaving with the exertion of the fight. A thin sheen of sweat coated my brow as I reached up to swipe a trickle of blood from the corner of my mouth.

Only then did I turn to face Nicole once more. She stared at me with wide, unblinking eyes, one hand pressed to her lips. For a long moment, silence stretched out, heavy and charged.

“Are you alright?” Her voice trembled slightly.

I offered her a wolfish grin, pointed canines glinting in the low light. “It’ll take more than that to stop me, little one.”

Nicole swallowed hard, gaze dropping briefly to the sluggishly bleeding wound on my shoulder before snapping back to my face. An array of emotions flickered across her features – awe, fear, something darker that made my pulse race.

Perhaps she sensed the predator lurking just beneath my surface, the feral beast kept tightly leashed. The thrill of battle still sang in my veins, leaving me keyed up and ravenous in a different way entirely.

Slowly, never breaking eye contact, I sheathed my blades and moved to her side. Nicole’s breath caught in her throat as I reached out, calloused fingertips ghosting along the curve of her jaw.

“You’re safe,” I rumbled, allowing the barest hint of a purr to bleed into my tone. “I’ll always keep you safe, Nicole.”

She shivered at my words, at the intimate caress, but didn’t pull away. Her pupils were blown wide, her breath a trembling exhale. So responsive, so beautifully vulnerable in that moment.

It would be so easy to simply take what I craved, to claim her as mine here and now. She wouldn’t fight me, not really. Part of her wanted it too, wanted to surrender to the raw hunger that licked at both of us.

But that wasn’t going to happen. Nicole deserved more than to be rutted against like a mere conquest.

She deserved reverence, worship, her pleasures put before my own baser needs.

With a monumental force of will, I gentled my touch and made myself take a step back, getting some much-needed distance. Nicole blinked, the spell broken, and drew in a shuddering breath.

“Let’s go,” I said gruffly, jamming the release card into one of the pouches on my belt. “Now that we have this, our way out is that much closer.”

Nicole could only nod mutely, still looking somewhat dazed. Without another word, I turned on my heel and strode from the sitting room, trusting she would follow.

She always did, drawn to me in ways I didn’t fully understand. But one thing I was certain of– I would see her free of this place, no matter what dark temptations lurked along the path.

My honor, my code, demanded nothing less.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:35 am

NICOLE

A nother flicker, another opening from the maze. I tightened my grip on the rusty doorknob, the metal biting into my palm. “Ready?”

Sargon’s low rumble came from behind me. “As I’ll ever be.”

We’d tried retracing our path, but it was as if the house had turned into one of those origami fortune-tellers that I played with back in grade school. Space folded around us, shuffling the rooms of the mansion, changing the floors.

And the deeper into the maze we went, the more the horrors around us seeped into my mind.

But there wasn’t any choice. The only way out was through.

I twisted the knob and pushed. The door creaked open, revealing a dimly lit hallway lined with dusty picture frames. A musty smell wafted out, tickling my nose.

We stepped inside, the floorboards groaning beneath our feet. Sargon moved with a predator’s fluid grace despite his size, while I tried not to trip over my own boots.

Streaks of mold crept across cracked plaster like grasping tendrils. An involuntary shudder ran through me. What other nightmares awaited us?

We reached the end of the hall. A curving staircase loomed before us, the steps worn and uneven. Sargon went first, testing each tread before motioning me to follow.

Halfway up, a faint noise made me freeze. “Did you hear that?”

Sargon stopped, his pointed ears twitching. After a moment, he shook his head. “Hear what?”

“I’m not sure. It sounded like scratching? Scrabbling?” I strained to catch the sound again, but the staircase was tomb-silent once more.

We continued our ascent, the steps groaning in protest. At the top, a narrow corridor branched off to our left and right.

Sargon inhaled deeply through his flared nostrils. “This way.” He turned right without hesitation.

Trailing after the hulking Vinduthi, shadows flickered in the corners of my vision. I blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the unnerving tricks of light and darkness.

A door at the far end stood slightly ajar, a thin slice of illumination spilling through the gap. My pulse quickened as we neared it. This had to be the way to the attic, right?

Sargon reached out with one long-fingered gray hand and slowly pushed the door open. I peered around his muscular frame into a child’s bedroom.

Faded wallpaper depicted friendly cartoon animals amid sprawling trees. A twin bed stood in one corner, the covers thrown back haphazardly. Battered wooden toys were scattered across the threadbare rug.

Something twisted in my gut. Another child’s room. This place reeked of profound sorrow, of innocence lost.

Sargon turned to me. "Let's keep looking for a path to the attic."

Swallowing hard, I nodded jerkily. Don't think about the lonely teddy bear missing an eye. The thick layer of dust over everything. The smears on the wall

We split up, Sargon checking the closet while I scanned the bookshelves and toy chest. Other than a few storybooks, I found nothing useful.

Disappointment washed over me in a cold wave. We were so close! I slammed my palm against the shelf in frustration, rattling the toys.

Then the scrabbling noise came again - unmistakable this time. It emanated from the very walls around us.

Rats? Or something more?

My heart came to my throat as something moved in the shadows beneath the bed. Another form slithered into view, joints cracking like twigs underfoot. Hollow sockets burned with twin points of reddish light.

"Sargon!" I cried out in a strangled voice.

The Vinduthi whirled, his powerful body coiling with lethal grace. Twin blades materialized in his hands as if from nowhere.

The aberration lunged with startling speed, claws outstretched. Sargon met its charge head-on, shearing through desiccated bone and rotted sinew. But where one fell, more emerged from the gloom, their desiccated jaws gaping hungrily.

I flattened myself against the bookshelf, trembling, as Sargon waded into the seething mass of horrors. His lithe form was a blur of motion, his knives flashing in the half-

light. Bone fragments clattered to the floor in gruesome heaps.

Yet for every nightmare he destroyed, three more appeared to take its place. They swarmed over the bed, the toy chest, closing in from all sides. Sargon lashed out with fists and feet, but they just kept coming in a remorseless tide.

One lunged straight at me, bony claws swiping for my face. I threw up my arms just in time, screaming. Rancid ichor splattered my shirt as the blades sheared through the thing's torso.

Sargon fought with the cold, grim demeanor of one accustomed to death. But I could see the strain etching his features as he battled the onslaught. For the first time since we'd met, I glimpsed the shadow of fear in his eyes.

And in that moment, the horror of our situation crashed over me like a rogue wave. Trapped in this decaying hell-maze, with no way out. No way home. Panic bloomed in my chest, an icy knot of dread that left me breathless.

Another skeleton bore down on me. I tried to dodge, but my feet wouldn't cooperate. It loomed over me, claws raised to strike

Then a gray blur appeared, protecting me. Sargon snarled, a bestial sound that reverberated in my bones, as he tore the creature apart with his bare hands. His broad back shielded me from the gnashing horror, his powerful muscles flexing beneath smooth gray skin.

In that instant, the fight went out of me. My knees buckled and I sank to the floor, my face buried in my hands as I shook with ragged sobs.

I was going to die here, lost and unmourned in the nightmare of some madman's fevered delusions. All my hopes, my curiosity, my drive to understand the

unknown... it would all end here, unrecorded, in this crumbling tomb.

Through my gasps for air, I became aware of movement nearby. Not the skittering horror of desiccated bones, but something more substantial.

Strong arms enfolded me, drawing me against a warm, solid torso. The scent of sweat and leather and something spicy enveloped me as Sargon gathered me to his chest.

He cradled me there, one big hand splayed protectively across my back while the other stroked my hair with an awkward tenderness. His touch anchored me, a tether to sanity amid the spiraling chaos.

The world around me faded to a dull murmur as I focused on the steady thrum of Sargon's heartbeat, the reassuring rumble as he murmured wordless sounds of comfort.

Gradually, the shuddering sobs eased and my ragged breathing slowed. As the panic receded, a profound sense of safety and solace seeped through me from the solidity of his embrace.

For the first time since walking through the door to this house... no.

For the first time in my life, I felt cherished. Protected. Like I mattered to someone.

I became aware of the ticklish caress of his calloused fingertips tracing idle patterns against my scalp. The tension had melted from his powerful frame; he held me now with a gentleness that shook me to the core.

Pulling back slightly, I found myself mesmerized by the play of dim light over the lean planes of his face, throwing his sharp features into stark relief.

His expression remained impassive, yet behind that stoic mask, something had softened in his gaze.

In that moment, I glimpsed the man beneath the deadly hunter's exterior - a protector, yes, but one moved by more than cold professionalism. Someone who would go to any lengths to shield what he cared for.

The realization sparked a warmth inside me that had nothing to do with the solidity of his arms around me. This gruff, enigmatic alien had seen my fear, witnessed the crumbling of my bravado, and he hadn't flinched or retreated.

Instead, he'd drawn me near when I was at my most vulnerable, offering the shelter of his strength with a tenderness that made my throat tight.

Our gazes locked, charged and unwavering. His features were all hard angles and uncompromising lines yet I found myself tracing their stern beauty with a newfound sense of wonder. Of possibility.

"Sargon " I murmured, the syllables falling from my lips with surprising intimacy.

One corner of his mouth curled upward in a fleeting half-smile that made my pulse stutter. A few stray locks of hair had fallen over his brow; without thinking, I brushed them aside.

My fingertips grazed the ridged surface of one small horn, and Sargon tensed abruptly, his eyelids fluttering. A sharp inhalation hissed from between his clenched teeth.

I started to pull back, but his hand caught my wrist in a gentle vise, holding me in place. His smoldering gaze had darkened to a burnished garnets.

Sargon's chest rose and fell in a deep, measured cadence. When he finally spoke, his gravelly tones caressed the words with a rumbling purr. "You should not touch me so carelessly, little human."

I shook my head slowly, holding his gaze. "I'm not being careless, Sargon." My heart thrummed in my chest. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

Emboldened by the raw vulnerability I'd glimpsed in his alien eyes, I leaned forward, closing the gap. My lips brushed against his in a tender, questing kiss. A spark of electricity jolted through me, a current that ignited a fire deep in my core.

Sargon's response was immediate and overwhelming. With a low growl that resonated through his chest and into mine, he wrapped his powerful arms around me, pulling me flush against his hard, lean body, his lips firm yet yielding as he deepened the kiss.

I felt myself being lifted off the ground effortlessly, his hands splayed possessively across my back. My legs instinctively wrapped around his waist, and I clung to him, lost in the maelstrom of sensation he evoked.

As we kissed, Sargon turned and, with one muscular arm still firmly holding me, swept the bed clear with the other. Books and toys thudded softly against the threadbare rug, but neither of us cared enough to check the damage. The world around us had narrowed to the heat of our bodies, the taste of his lips, the intoxicating scent of his skin.

He broke away reluctantly, his eyes searching mine. "Tell me, ," he rasped. "Tell me if you do not want this."

I cupped the sharp line of his jaw with my hand, answering him with a smile that felt both foreign and utterly right. "I promise you, Sargon, this is exactly what I want."

A shudder ran through his body at my words, and the feral set of his face only deepened. He laid me down gently on the bed, his gaze never leaving mine as he began to undress me with a reverence that made my heart ache with unexpected tenderness.

His hands were deft and sure as he peeled away my clothing, baring my skin. The rough pads of his fingers skimmed over my flesh, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I felt exposed and vulnerable under his scrutiny, but there was no fear – only a desperate, all-consuming need for more.

Once I was naked before him, Sargon took a moment to simply look at me, his gaze roaming over me with an appreciation that made me blush from head to toe. Then, with a tenderness that surprised me, he began to kiss his way down my body, worshiping me with each caress of his lips.

Sargon's lips trailed a scorching path down my stomach, each kiss a brand that seared my skin and stoked the fire within me until he settled between my thighs with the patience of a predator closing in on its prey.

"Sargon," I breathed, my voice a plea and a benediction all at once.

He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes as if savoring a rare and exotic perfume. "Your scent, it's intoxicating," he murmured, the words vibrating against my sensitive flesh. "It's like the first breath of air after being submerged in the depths for far too long."

I squirmed beneath him, aching for his touch, but he held me firmly in place with a gentle yet unyielding hand on my hip. His control was absolute, and it both maddened and thrilled me.

"You're torturing me," I accused, the corners of my lips turning up in a smile even as my pulse hitched with anticipation.

Sargon's low chuckle rumbled through me, a sound both wicked and warm. "Patience, little human. I intend to savor every inch of you."

He explored the contours of my thighs, tracing the lines of muscle and sinew as if he were memorizing my body through touch alone. The pads of his fingertips felt deliciously rough against my skin, a stark contrast to the softness of his kisses.

"And your taste." That purr sent heat pooling in my belly. "It's sweeter than anything I've ever known. Like the most exquisite nectar, hidden away in the heart of the most dangerous flower."

I moaned as he parted my folds with the reverence of one unwrapping a precious gift. The cool air of the room was a sharp contrast to the heat radiating from his breath, and I felt myself growing slick with need.

Sargon's eyes flicked back up to meet mine, the desire in them mirroring my own. "May I?" he asked, the question a mere formality; we both knew the answer.

"Yes," I begged, the word a desperate entreaty. "Please, Sargon."

With a final, lingering look that promised worlds of pleasure, he lowered his head and tasted me fully.

His tongue was a marvel, a decadent combination of softness and skill that had me arching off the bed within moments. He explored me with a thoroughness that bordered on obsessive, each lick and suck and nibble sending me higher and higher until I was teetering on the edge of ecstasy.

I fisted my hands in his hair, the strands slipping through my fingers as I writhed beneath the exquisite onslaught. My breath came in sharp, ragged pants, every muscle in me coiling tight with the impending release.

“Sargon, I’m... I’m close,” I managed to pant out, as the sensations built within me, a tidal wave of ecstasy that threatened to overwhelm me. I could feel the pressure growing, a tight coil of pleasure winding ever tighter in my core. Sargon’s hands gripped my hips, holding me in place as he drove me relentlessly toward release.

And then, with a final, devastating swirl of his tongue, the coil snapped. I arched off the bed, a wordless cry torn from my throat as the orgasm washed over me in wave after wave of sheer, mind-blowing bliss.

SARGON

I held Nicole close as the aftershocks of her orgasm faded. Her skin glistened with a light sheen of sweat, and I breathed in the intoxicating scent of her desire mixed with my own musk. It was a heady aroma that stirred something deep within me.

At that moment, everything became clear. She was my mate - the one whose very existence made my blood sing with a fierce, possessive hunger. Every part of me yearned to claim her fully, to make her mine in every sense of the word.

But I couldn't.

As much as it pained me, I knew our union could never truly last. I was a Vinduthi bounty hunter trapped out of my own time, while she was a human female from the year 2024. Even if we found a way to escape this twisted maze, I would eventually have to return to my era where her kind were regarded as little more than lowly vermin.

The thought of subjecting her to such indignity, of stripping away her vibrant spirit, was unacceptable. She deserved better than the cruel fate that awaited humans in my world.

Nicole stirred in my embrace, her hazel eyes finding mine with a look of unguarded vulnerability. "Don't you want to... you know... do more?" she asked hesitantly.

Forcing a smile, I brushed a stray lock of auburn hair from her face. "I'll save my treat for later," I replied, my voice rougher than intended. "For now, we need to focus

on finding our way out of here.”

As I carefully helped redress her, my thoughts raced with possibilities on how to let her go once we escaped this nightmarish realm. It would be agony to walk away from her, but it was the only merciful choice.

“Blindly wandering isn’t going to work,” I said once she was decent again. “We need a better plan.”

Nicole glanced around the dimly lit chamber, her eyes settling on the shattered remains of one of the constructs I’d destroyed earlier. “How do those things keep finding us?” she wondered aloud, crossing over to examine the debris.

“They must have some sort of control chip guiding them,” I surmised, joining her. Upon further inspection, I could see the remnants of intricate circuitry amidst the shattered bones and tarnished metal.

“Which means they can navigate this maze without getting lost,” Nicole realized, her voice taking on an excited edge.

I felt a swell of pride at her quick deduction. “Brilliant,” I murmured, already sifting through the pieces in search of an intact control chip.

Nicole watched me work for a few moments before joining the search, carefully picking through the wreckage and passing me anything that looked promising. I marveled at her bravery and intelligence as we worked in silent tandem.

At last, after what felt like an eternity of meticulous reassembly, I managed to salvage enough components to construct a working control chip. Pausing, I studied Nicole’s features - the determined set of her jaw, the focused wrinkle of her brow, the slight upturn of her nose dusted with faint freckles. She was captivating.

“I think I have enough charge left in my plasma blade to reverse the tracking on this chip,” I said, snapping myself from my reverie.

True to my word, I recalibrated the intricate circuitry with practiced ease, redirecting the chip’s homing signal. From the fragments, I then assembled a small form, then held up the small construct I’d assembled, studying it with a critical eye.

It was a bit taller than my palm, vaguely reptilian in shape with spindly limbs and a skull-like head. Flecks of exposed wiring and metallic joints gave it an unsettling, otherworldly appearance.

Turning it over in my hands, I felt a twinge of unease. Would Nicole be frightened by this macabre little creation? For all her bravery, she was still a soft, delicate human easily unsettled by the harsh realities I took for granted.

The thought of her recoiling in terror from something I’d made caused an unexpected pang in my chest. I pushed the feeling aside, steeling my resolve. This was no time for such weakness. The construct was a tool, nothing more - a means to an end that could guide us to our escape.

“Nicole,” I called out, turning to face her. She looked up at me with those captivating hazel eyes, full of curiosity and trust. It simultaneously warmed and pained me. “I’ve fashioned a way to help us navigate, but you may find its appearance disturbing.”

I revealed the small figure, holding it out for her inspection. Her brows knit together as she studied it, plump lips pursing. I braced myself for her inevitable look of horror and disgust.

Instead, to my surprise, a bright smile broke across her face. “Oh, it’s so cute!” she exclaimed, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “In a creepy, kinda freaky way. Like a little skeletal action figure!”

Cute? Of all the words I expected her to use, that hadn't even crossed my mind. I blinked at her, nonplussed by her delighted reaction. "You aren't repulsed by it?"

Nicole laughed, the sound like windchimes on a warm summer breeze. "Why would I be? It's just a tiny robot made from leftover scraps. I think it's brilliant how you were able to put it together."

Her enthusiasm was infectious, coaxing an unbidden smile to my lips. Of course she would find ingenuity and practicality endearing, rather than focus on outward appearances. It was one of the many traits I'd come to admire about this remarkable human female.

"Here, let me see it," she said, holding out her hands.

I passed her the construct, unable to resist brushing my fingertips against her soft skin as I did so. A shudder ran through me, that now-familiar spark of desire igniting low in my abdomen. Gritting my teeth, I forced the feeling down.

Nicole cradled the creation tenderly, examining it from all angles with rapt fascination. "You did an amazing job putting this together from just scraps. The articulation and detail is really impressive." She beamed up at me, pride and admiration shining in her eyes. "You're a true craftsman,."

Her praise warmed me. I couldn't explain it. No, I couldn't allow myself to dwell on it. Clearing my throat, I gestured for her to hand the construct back to me. "While aesthetically pleasing is not its primary function, I'm gratified you find it appealing."

With a soft touch, I activated the creature, watching as it stirred to life. Joints whirred as its thin limbs extended, gears clicking into place as it oriented itself. Twin pinpricks of red light flickered in the empty sockets of its skull, giving it an eerie semblance of sight.

“This one will lead us through the maze,” I explained. “We need only follow where it goes.”

The construct turned, joints rearticulating with a faint metallic rasp. It began scuttling forward in a peculiar, stilted gait. I motioned for Nicole to join me as I fell into step behind it.

“Incredible,” she murmured, falling into pace beside me. Our hands brushed together, and I felt her fingers tentatively entwine with mine. The simple gesture sparked an eruption of warmth that spread through my entire body.

I risked a furtive look at her, committing every curve and angle of her lovely face to memory. Even streaked with dust and sweat, she was the most beautiful creature I’d ever laid eyes upon. An ache blossomed in my chest - one of longing, but also dread.

Because no matter where this path led, I knew our journey together would have to end. And when it did, it would shatter me in a way no weapon ever could.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:35 am

NICOLE

The skeletal lizard darted through the shimmering maze walls as if they weren't there, its whip-like tail disappearing through the solid-seeming surface. I hesitated, hand outstretched to touch the barrier, but Sargon's low voice spurred me forward.

"Go on, little one. I'm right behind you."

Bracing myself, I plunged through the rippling wall. The surface parted around me like disturbed water before solidifying at my back. I emerged into an abandoned bedroom, the walls wavering with a faint iridescent glow. Tattered curtains fluttered despite no breeze, and a rocking horse creaked back and forth in an unsettling rhythm.

The lizard scrambled under the dusty bed frame, and I quickly followed, desperate not to linger in that eerie space. Another shimmering wall parted before me, depositing me into what looked like an old study. Sargon's tall form stepped through behind me, the dim light casting sharp planes across his face.

Our guide skittered across the warped floor, leaving a trail of dust in its wake. It paused at a bookcase, then faded through the shelves into another flickering hallway beyond. I shuddered, the hairs on my nape prickling with unease as I passed through the disorienting portal.

We twisted and turned through a labyrinth of decaying rooms - a conservatory with dead plants, a sitting room choked with cobwebs, a library filled with scattered. Each space felt subtly wrong, off-kilter, like a twisted reflection of reality. I tried not to

look too closely at the disturbing details as we followed the lizard's relentless path.

And then we stepped into the cold light of the sleek laboratory. The skeletal lizard scurried under a counter, and I took a tentative step forward, my boots ringing against the metal floor. This was it – the key to our escape.

On the workbench sat the Temporal Reset whatever it was, looking like nothing so much as a glorified toaster oven.

Sargon moved beside me, his lean muscular form taut with tension.

Wordlessly, he retrieved the ancient release card from his pocket and slid it into the glowing slot.

For a breathless moment, nothing happened. Then a shimmering portal materialized before us, its edges rippling like disturbed water.

I stared at the swirling vortex, my heart in my throat. We had no idea what lay on the other side, what world or time awaited. But one thing was certain – if Sargon stepped through that portal, I would never see him again.

He seemed to sense my thoughts, his angular features softening as he turned to face me. “ “ His voice rumbled with a melancholy I'd never heard before. “You should stay behind.”

I recoiled as if he'd struck me, shock and hurt lancing through me. “What? You don't want me to come with you?” My voice cracked with vulnerability I couldn't hide.

In an instant, Sargon was on his knees before me, his powerful hands grasping my shoulders. “Stars, no. I want you more than anything, . More than I've ever wanted anything in all my long years.” His crimson gaze burned with an fervor that stole my

breath. “But I cannot rip you away from your world, from everything you know. I won’t do that to you.”

I searched his alien features, my mind whirling. What did I truly have waiting for me back in my reality? A dead-end job, a life of chasing the paranormal that had already cost me so much? Hadn’t I always dreamed of exploring the vast mysteries of the universe, of finding something more?

Lifting my chin, I met Sargon’s scorching stare. “There’s only one thing I need to know.” I struggled to keep my voice steady against the torrent of emotions surging through me. “Do you love me, Sargon? Truly?”

His eyes widened fractionally before softening with an achingly tender expression. Reaching up, he cupped my face in his calloused palms, his thumbs brushing across my flushed cheeks.

“With every fiber of my being, Carter. You are my destiny.”

Our lips crashed together in a searing kiss filled with unspoken promises and the bittersweet knowledge that our lives would be forever entwined, two souls hurtling into the unknown. When we finally parted, I felt deliriously giddy and terrified all at once.

Sargon rose fluidly to his feet, gaze shining with a fervent light. Grasping my hand tightly in his, he gave me one last searching look, silently asking if I was certain.

I squeezed his fingers and nodded, my heart overflowing. Together, we turned and stepped through the shimmering portal, surrendering to the cosmic forces that had brought us together.

The vortex closed behind us with a resonant hum, and I had only a fleeting

impression of blinding light before the world tilted violently...

SARGON

We emerged into a dimly lit room that reeked of stale smoke and spilled liquor. My senses went on high alert, scanning every corner for potential threats as I pulled Nicole closer to my side.

It was a cheap hotel room, the kind of place you'd never want to spend the night unless you had no other choice. Tattered curtains hung askew, the bedsheets were stained, and there were suspicious dark splatters on the walls I didn't inspect too closely.

I spotted a faded, threadbare cloak hanging on a rusted hook and swiftly grabbed it, wrapping it around Nicole's slender form. Her wide hazel eyes met mine, full of questions, but I just shook my head and motioned for her to stay close.

Keeping one hand on the knife sheathed at my hip, I led her out onto the balcony overlooking the street below. The reddish evening sunlight filtered through the smog, setting the chaotic scene on fire.

A cacophony of sounds and smells assaulted my enhanced senses - the blaring of vehicle alarms, the sizzle of exotic street foods cooking, the acrid stench of exhaust fumes mixed with the sweet aroma of spices. Vendors hawked their wares in a multitude of languages. I glanced down at her as a thought struck me. I could understand, but Nicole couldn't decipher a single word.

A translator patch needed to be high on my shopping list.

We made our way downstairs, Nicole sticking so close that I could feel the warmth of her body against mine. At the front desk, a hulking Krolian stood behind the counter, his four beady black eyes fixed on us with obvious suspicion.

“What business do you have here, Vinduthi?” the Krolian spat.

I moved to stand slightly in front of Nicole, shielding her from the Krolian’s leering gaze. She couldn’t understand the exchange, but the hostile undertone was clear even to her. I felt a surge of protectiveness, my instincts roaring to life at the mere thought of her being threatened.

“Just passing through,” I replied curtly, meeting the alien’s glare without flinching. “We’ll be out of your establishment soon enough.”

The Krolian snorted, his fleshy nostrils flaring as he took in Nicole’s scent. “The human female smells ripe. I could offer a fair price if you’re looking to trade.”

A low growl built in my chest as my fingers twitched, longing to close around the insolent creature’s throat. How dare he make such a crude insinuation about Nicole? She was no common commodity to be bought and sold.

Before I could unleash the torrent of blistering threats on my lips, Nicole tugged at my sleeve, her touch like a soothing balm against the fury burning through me. I forced myself to turn away, pulling her along as we exited out into the bustling street.

The midday sun blazed down with searing ferocity, as if focused through a magnifying lens. I blinked against the harsh glare, my eyes better adapted to low light, while Nicole squinted and shielded her face.

All around us, a swarm of beings milled about - seven-foot-tall, fur-covered Hirvath lumbering on reverse-jointed legs; slender, elegant Alauri with their iridescent

carapaces shimmering in the sunlight; hulking Gorathi covered in thick scales and bony protrusions. The sheer variety of colors, shapes and forms was dizzying.

Nicole's grip on my arm tightened as she pressed closer, no doubt feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable amidst this strange new world. I allowed myself a covert glance at her face, unable to resist drinking in her features - those delicate cheekbones, the pert nose lightly dusted with freckles, the full lips parted in awe.

"We need to find somewhere secure to lay low for a while," I murmured, mostly to myself. Too many potential threats out in the open like this.

"What about that last place?" she asked, tilting her head up to look at me with wide, trusting eyes. "Couldn't we just stay there?"

I shook my head grimly. "That hovel? If Doar has an alarm telling him that anyone has emerged from the time trap, that will be the first place he checks."

She considered for a moment, worrying her full lower lip with her teeth. "But if we stayed there, maybe you'd have a better chance of catching him? Taking him by surprise?"

Perspicacious little human. But her safety was my prime concern, eclipsing any desire for vengeance against Doar. I fixed her with an intense look, allowing some of the steel in my voice to slip through.

"Forget about Doar for now. Getting you someplace secure is my only priority."

She didn't argue, simply giving a small nod of acceptance. Good - she was wise enough not to question me on this.

I turned and began leading her down a side street, scanning for the telltale green-glass

dome I knew marked the Rulion embassy's attached inn. Surely they would have adequate security and discretion to keep Nicole sheltered until I could formulate a plan.

Soon enough, the gleaming structure came into view, the sun's rays refracting through the curved glass in dazzling patterns. I pressed my thumb against the DNA reader at the entrance and stated my identity code in a low rumble.

"Vinduthi bounty hunter Khor and human companion. Requesting private quarters."

The computer chimed in acknowledgment, and the front doors slid open with a soft hiss. I gestured for Nicole to precede me inside.

As we stepped through the lobby, her head swiveled this way and that, trying to take in every sight. I couldn't help but smile faintly at her wide-eyed wonder. To her, everything must seem so bizarre and strange, but to me it was utterly mundane.

I took her hand, savoring her soft skin against my calloused palm, and led her to the guest quarters. Our room was spacious yet spartan, with smooth white walls and minimalist furnishings. But what caught Nicole's attention were the various amenities.

She drifted over to the food dispensers, studying the controls with rapt fascination. "Is this a replicator? Like from Star Trek?"

"I don't know that reference," I admitted. "But yes, it can materialize any food or beverage you desire by rearranging the molecular structure of the base matter."

Nicole let out a soft laugh of delight, shaking her head in disbelief. Then her gaze landed on the transparent aluminum window offering a panoramic view of the cityscape beyond. Slowly, almost reverently, she reached out to trace her fingertips

along the seamless pane.

“It’s beautiful, “ she breathed. “Like something out of a dream.”

I said nothing, content just to watch the play of emotions flickering across her lovely features. She was like a child experiencing true wonder, her sense of awe and excitement utterly captivating.

After exploring every facet of the room, she made her way to the open doorway of the bathroom, peeking inside. A look of pure bliss crossed her face as she took in the gleaming, state-of-the-art facilities.

“Oh, a real shower...” Nicole’s shoulders slumped with relief. “I would kill for a chance to get cleaned up after tramping around in that dusty old house.”

She turned toward me then, catching my gaze through her thick fan of lashes as she wet her lips. “Would you care to join me?”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:35 am

NICOLE

The steam of the shower enveloped us, the water cascading over our bodies like a tropical downpour. Sargon's hands moved with unexpected deftness, soaping me up, tracing my curves with an artist's precision. I felt cherished, worshiped, even as my heart raced with the anticipation of what was to come.

As he washed my hair, he massaged my scalp, the sensation sending tingles down my body. I closed my eyes, indulging in the feeling, the intimacy of the moment. When I finally dared to look down, my breath hitched.

Long and thick, the skin was a deep rich grey, a few shades darker than that of his skin. Soft flanges ran down the length of the shaft, and the thick triangular head glistened with a bead of excitement that made my own body respond with a surge of wet heat.

"Do you want to touch it?" The hunger in Sargon's voice nearly knocked me off my feet.

My hand trembled as I reached out, wrapping my fingers around the girth of him. The soft flanges along his shaft pulsed under my touch, and I stroked him hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence as I watched his face contort with pleasure.

"Careful, ," he warned, his voice strained. "I'm not made of stone."

He captured my hand, stilling my movements, and for a moment, we stood there, our breaths mingling with the steam, desire almost visible in the air. Then he was

washing me again, igniting a fire within me that threatened to consume us both.

He turned me around, and I moaned as his soapy hands cupped my breasts, rolling my nipples into hard peaks. I arched into his touch, lost in the pleasure he was so skillfully coaxing from me. One hand slid between my thighs, teasing my entrance before plunging inside, stretching me, preparing me.

The world narrowed to the sensation of Sargon's fingers inside me, his other hand squeezing my breast, rough yet tender. His kisses trailed along my neck, his teeth grazing my skin, each nip sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core.

"You're mine, ," he demanded, lips against my throat, voice thick with desire. "Every part of you belongs to me."

I couldn't form words, could barely think as he claimed me with his hands, his mouth, his body. I was his – completely, utterly his, and the knowledge of that sent me spiraling towards release.

"Yes," I moaned, my voice echoing off the shower walls. "Yours, Sargon. Only yours."

His fingers curled inside me, hitting a spot that made my vision blur. "Come for me, ," he commanded, his breath hot against my ear. "Let me feel you come on my fingers."

And I did, the orgasm ripping through me with a force that left me trembling, my legs threatening to give out. But Sargon was there, his strong arms holding me up, his fingers still working their magic, drawing out my pleasure until I was a boneless, quivering mess in his arms.

"Again," he said, his voice a low rumble that resonated deep within me. "I want to

feel you come again.”

I barely had a moment before he was coaxing another orgasm from me, pumping in and out, his thumb circling my clit. His lips and teeth continued their assault on my neck, my shoulder, the sensitive spot behind my ear.

“Sargon,” I gasped, my hands clutching at his arms, my nails digging into his skin. “I can’t, it’s too much.”

“You can,” he insisted, his voice firm, dominant. “You will, for me.”

And I did, the pleasure building inside me until I couldn’t contain it any longer, wave after wave of ecstasy crashing over me, leaving me panting and spent.

“Please, Sargon, I need you inside me,” I pleaded, my voice hoarse with desire.

“You should rest,” he murmured, but I could hear the lie in his voice. He wanted this as much as I did.

I turned to face him, my eyes flashing with defiance. “You promised to break me, Sargon.”

With one swift motion, he spun me around and lifted me up, my back pressing against the cool tiles of the shower. This was no longer the tender lovemaking from before; this was raw, unrestrained lust, a primal claiming that left no room for gentleness.

“Say it, ,” he demanded as he positioned himself at my entrance. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Sargon,” I cried as he thrust into me, the sheer size of him stretching me to my limits. My legs wrapped around his waist, my fingers digging into his

shoulders as he pounded into me with a ferocity that should have frightened me, but instead only made me crave more.

“You’re my mate,” he insisted, a savage snarl that sent a thrill of desire straight to my core. “Say it.”

“I’m your mate,” I managed to say, the words barely more than a moan as another orgasm tore through me. I was lost in a haze of pleasure, every thrust of his hips driving me higher, every stroke of his cock sending me spiraling closer to the edge.

He came with a roar, shuddering as he filled me with his seed, the sensation triggering yet another climax from me. We clung to each other, our bodies slick with sweat and water, our breaths mingling as we rode out the aftershocks of our passion.

Finally, we sank to the shower floor, our limbs entwined, our hearts beating in tandem. The water continued to rain down on us, a gentle cascade that echoed the peace that had settled over us.

“I think I need to get clean again,” I joked, my cheeks flushing as I looked up at Sargon through my lashes. “Alone this time.”

He growled low in his throat, the rumbling sound a promise of future delights. “If that’s what you wish.” His red eyes glinted with amusement as he stepped out of the shower, water sluicing off his muscular gray form.

I couldn’t help but let my gaze linger on his body, the swirling orange markings that decorated his skin like living tattoos. The horns that swept back from his temples only added to his dangerous, alien allure.

Tearing my eyes away, I turned the water back on, letting the heat soothe my aching muscles. As I lathered up, I could feel Sargon’s gaze, intense and possessive. It made

me flush all over again, my skin tingling with awareness.

When I was finally rinsed clean, Sargon leaned over and flipped a switch on the wall. The water cut off abruptly, and warm air began to circulate, drying me with gentle currents. I closed my eyes, luxuriating in the sensation.

Strong arms encircled me from behind, and I leaned back against Sargon's solid chest. He nuzzled my neck, his sharp teeth grazing my skin.

"You smell divine," he rumbled, his voice vibrating against my back.

I twisted in his embrace to face him, my hands resting on the hard planes of his abdomen. "You don't seem to mind getting dirty again."

His mouth quirked in a wolfish grin, those pointed canines flashing. "For you? Never."

Then his mouth was on mine, hot and demanding, his tongue plundering my depths. I melted against him, my fingers sliding into the damp hair at the nape of his neck. This was no tender exploration – it was a claiming, Sargon staking his possession with every brush of his lips, every rasp of his calloused hands over my skin.

When he finally pulled away, we were both breathing hard. Sargon scooped me up in his arms as easily as if I weighed nothing, cradling me against his chest. I couldn't resist nuzzling into the crook of his neck, breathing in his earthy, masculine scent.

He carried me over to the bed and gently deposited me on the soft sheets. I shivered, suddenly aware of my nudity in the cooler air. But Sargon was there in an instant, wrapping me in the plushiest, deepest blue robe I had ever seen. The material was thick and soft, caressing my skin like a lover's touch.

As I burrowed into the luxurious warmth, Sargon settled onto the bed beside me, his expression uncharacteristically serious. A tendril of worry snaked through me. What did he want to talk about? Had I done something wrong?

“.” My name rolled off his tongue carefully, tenderly. “There is something you must understand about my people.”

I tensed, my heart giving a hard thump against my ribs. Was he going to tell me this – whatever it was between us – couldn’t continue? The thought made my chest ache fiercely.

Sargon must have sensed my sudden anxiety. He reached out, his large gray hand cupping my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lips in a soothing gesture. “Peace, little one. I mean you no distress.”

I leaned into his touch, trying to relax.”What is it?” I asked, carefully, afraid to hear the answer.

“The Vinduthi “ He paused to weigh his words carefully. “We are not like your kind. Our emotions, our instincts, run deeper. More primal.”

His gaze burned into me, intense and unblinking. “When we take a mate, it is for life. There is no going back from that bond once it is forged.”

The world came to a stop.

A lifetime commitment? To me, a human he barely knew? It should have terrified me, but instead, a peculiar sense of rightness stole over me.

“Are you saying...?” I couldn’t finish the question, hardly daring to hope.

Sargon leaned in until our foreheads were nearly touching. His proximity was dizzying, that heady, musky scent surrounding me.

“I’m saying that you are mine, Carter,” he growled, the words sending a shiver of anticipation through me. “And I am yours. If you’ll have me.”

There was no decision to make, not really. From the moment I’d laid eyes on this fierce alien man, I had been lost. Pulling him to me, I sealed my mouth over his in a passionate kiss.

“Yes,” I breathed against his lips when we finally parted. “Always yes.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:35 am

EPILOGUE: NICOLE

It had been a week since Sargon and I stepped through that portal, leaving my world behind to face an unknown destiny together. In that span of time, so much had changed, yet the bond tying us together only grew stronger with each passing day.

He spent time on his percomm, long conversations with the brother's-in arms-who thought he had disappeared for good.

I caught glimpses of their faces, as he explained the time trap, our meeting.

Despite them all looking like hardened Vinduthi warriors, I could tell how relieved they were that he had returned, and how curious they were about the little human they could see peeking over Sargon's shoulder.

One morning, I awoke to find Sargon already up, his intense red eyes studying me so tenderly that my heart fluttered. "Get dressed, little one," he rumbled. "I have a surprise for you."

Intrigued, I did as he asked, donning a lightweight sundress in shades of green that complimented my auburn hair. When I emerged from the bathroom, Sargon's gaze raked over me appreciatively, his sharp teeth flashing in a wolfish grin.

"Stunning, as always," he murmured, pulling me into his embrace.

"So, where are we going?" I asked as we made our way out of our quarters and into the bustling space station.

Sargon's only response was a mysterious smile. He led me to the hangar bay, where a sleek private craft awaited us. My brows rose in surprise – Sargon certainly knew how to travel in style these days.

As we settled into the plush seats and the engines fired up, I felt a slight tingle across my skin. Sargon must have noticed my reaction, because he reached over and tapped a spot just below my ear.

“I took the liberty of getting you a translator patch,” he explained. “It will allow you to understand any language we encounter.”

I marveled at the tiny device, giving it an experimental tap. Instantly, the whirring of the ship's systems and the chatter from the control tower became comprehensible. “Sargon, this is amazing! Thank you.”

He merely inclined his head, those red eyes glinting with approval at my delight. The ship lifted off smoothly, and before I knew it, we had broken through the station's atmosphere and entered the starry expanse of space.

Sargon's large hand found mine, his thumb caressing my knuckles.

“Where are we going?” I asked again, tearing my gaze from the viewport to look at him.

“Somewhere incredible,” was all he would say, that slight smile still playing about his lips.

The journey passed in a comfortable silence, my head resting on Sargon's shoulder as I watched the stars streak past in brilliant streaks of light. When at last we began our descent, I straightened, eager to catch my first glimpse of our destination.

What I saw stole the breath from my lungs.

A verdant world shimmered below us, swaths of vivid emerald and sapphire broken up by bursts of vibrant pinks, oranges, and violets. Towering crystalline structures glittered in the faint sunlight, and strange, delicate creatures with gossamer wings flitted amongst the flora.

“Sargon “ I whispered, pressing my face to the viewport. “It’s beautiful.”

“One of the most tranquil, unspoiled planets in this sector,” he rumbled with clear satisfaction at my awestruck reaction. “I thought you might enjoy a respite from the chaos.”

The shuttle set down with a gentle bump, and Sargon was at my side in an instant, offering his arm. I took it gladly, allowing him to lead me down the ramp and onto the soft, mossy ground.

Instantly, my senses were assaulted by the vibrant world around me. The air was thick with the heady perfume of alien blooms, their petals unfurling in a mesmerizing array of colors I could scarcely name. Strange, melodic trills drifted on the breeze, emanating from the delicate winged creatures dancing from flower to flower.

I bent to run my fingers over the plush vegetation beneath my feet, marveling at the velvety texture. “Sargon, this place is “

“A dream,” he finished for me, cupping my cheek so I met his smoldering gaze. “And one I intend for us to enjoy to the fullest.”

His thumb traced my jaw, sending an anticipatory quiver through me. Then, clearing his throat, he gestured toward a path winding through the alien flora. “Shall we?”

Hand-in-hand, we set off to explore this waking dream of a world. Sargon seemed to know where he was going, deftly leading us over mossy rises and around shimmering pools. At one point, I paused to examine a cluster of fuchsia fronds, their tips

glistening with dew drops that threw kaleidoscopic shards of light with every tremulous movement.

Then suddenly I snatched my hand away. I'd been so caught up in the sheer wonderment, I had momentarily forgotten my precarious situation – a human dropped into an alien world, naive to its potential dangers.

But Sargon was here. Fiercely intelligent and protective, he would keep me safe. That thought was a balm to my worried mind, and I gripped his hand a little tighter as we continued on our way.

At length, the path opened up onto a secluded cove, the likes of which I had never seen. A shimmering expanse of water stretched out before us, its surface rippling with a rainbow of soft hues – pinks, lavenders, periwinks, and pale cerulean. Jutting up from the shallows were twisted, gnarled trunks adorned with fronds of feathery lavender that swayed in the faint breeze.

“Oh, Sargon “ I breathed, unable to tear my eyes away from the ethereal sight.

He gave a low chuckle, wrapping his arms around me from behind. His chin came to rest on my shoulder, his lips brushing my ear. “I thought you might appreciate the view.”

“It’s incredible. Magical, even.” I turned my head to meet his intense red gaze. “How did you find this place?”

“Trade secret, I’m afraid,” he said with a wink. “But I’m pleased you like it.”

Like it? I was utterly entranced. With a contented sigh, I allowed myself to sink back against the solid wall of his chest, reveling in the simple pleasure of being here, with him, surrounded by such splendor.

We stood that way for endless moments, simply basking in the tranquil beauty. At length, Sargon stirred, his hands skimming down my arms.

“Hungry, little one?”

My stomach gave a rumble as if on cue, drawing a rich laugh from the Vinduthi beside me. He released me with one final nuzzle against my neck and strode back down the path we’d arrived by. When he returned, he was laden with a basket overflowing with alien delicacies – jewel-toned fruits glistening with sugary dewdrops, plates of some sort of airy bread riddled with herbs and spices, and a heavy ceramic jug that sloshed enticingly.

“You certainly came prepared,” I teased as he spread out a plush blanket and began unpacking our repast.

Sargon smiled at the compliment. “I do try to be a gracious host.”

He patted the space beside him, and I settled onto the soft blanket, cross-legged and eager to sample the tantalizing fare he had procured. As I bit into one of the strange, oblong fruits, a burst of tart sweetness flooded my mouth, the flavor at once familiar and entirely new.

“Mmm, that’s delicious!” I hummed in appreciation. “What is it?”

“A k’lavi,” Sargon replied around a mouthful of the airy bread. “A delicacy on this world, or so I’m told.”

My brows rose at that. “You’ve never been here before?”

He shook his head. “Not until today. But I did my research.” His gaze grew pointed. “I would never risk bringing you somewhere potentially hazardous without being fully prepared.”

I felt a flush creep up my neck at the intensity of his stare, the promise it held. Clearing my throat, I reached for the heavy jug, unstoppering it to find a rich, amber liquid within that smelled faintly of the perfumed alien flora around us.

“And what’s this?” I asked, allowing some of the fragrant liquid to slosh into a waiting cup.

“A fermented nectar wine,” Sargon said, his pointed teeth flashing in a grin as he noted my look of surprise. “Don’t worry, I’ve been assured it’s perfectly safe for human consumption. A local delicacy to accompany our meal.”

I gave the strange wine an experimental sip, rolling it over my tongue as the heady, floral notes burst across my palate. It was at once bracing and indulgent, its rich sweetness offset by an undertone of spice.

“Mmm, incredible,” I sighed, taking another sip. Already, I could feel a pleasant warmth spreading through my limbs, the tension I hadn’t even realized I was carrying bleeding away.

For long, languid moments, we simply enjoyed our picnic in contented silence, enjoying the flavors and allowing the peaceful ambiance of the cove to soak into our very souls. When at last the basket lay empty, I stretched out on the blanket with a replete sigh, idly running my fingers through the thick, mossy ground covering.

Sargon shifted to brace himself on one elbow beside me, his intense red gaze studying my face with that unblinking focus that never failed to set my pulse racing. I met that smoldering stare unabashed, allowing my eyes to roam over the lean, muscular lines of his form, the swirling tattoo-like markings that adorned his gray skin.

So different from me, yet I had never felt such a sense of rightness, of belonging, as I did at his side.

“What are you thinking, little one?” he murmured, reaching out to tuck an errant lock of hair behind my ear.

A small, wistful smile twisting my lips. “I was just thinking how lucky I am. To have found you.”

His throat worked, as though he were warring with some weighty emotion. At length, he exhaled a shuddering breath. “I am the fortunate one, Nicole. More than you could possibly know.”

I traced the contours of Sargon’s chiseled abdomen, marveling at the sleek power coiled within his frame. His muscles tensed beneath my touch, and I glanced up to find his crimson gaze burning into me with an hunger that called to me.

“Sargon?” I murmured, my fingers stilling. “What is it?”

He was silent for a long moment, that unblinking stare piercing straight through to my soul. When at last he spoke, the words were rough with some weighty emotion.

“Nicole, there is something I must explain to you.” He cupped my cheek, his thumb tracing along my cheekbone. “Among my kind, to take a mate is not a trivial thing.”

My brows knit together as I studied his grave expression. “Like to be married, right?”

He gave a slow nod. “It is far more than a human marriage vow, little one. When Vinduthi claim each other, it is a profound bonding – physical, mental, spiritual. Our very essences are intertwined.”

A tendril of unease unfurled in my gut. “You’re scaring me a little, Sargon. What are you trying to say?”

His throat worked as he swallowed hard. “I want you, Nicole. I want you to stay with

me. Be a part of me.”

The words hung heavy between us, reverberating through my very bones. I searched his intense features, looking for any hint of deception, but found only naked longing and a trace of fear?

“But you are human,” he continued roughly. “Becoming my mate, it would change you. Irrevocably.”

Change me? My mouth went dry. “H-how? What do you mean?”

Sargon’s piercing red gaze held mine as he explained in a low, even tone. “To claim you, I would need to bite you – inject you with trace elements of my DNA. It would catalyze mutations within your body. Augmenting your strength, senses, healing abilities.” His thumb brushed the line of my cheekbone. “You would gain markings like mine, a sign of our bond, our joining.”

I recoiled instinctively, my heart pounding as visions of my body twisting, changing, flickered through my mind. Sargon’s expression tightened, that fear I had glimpsed now clear in the taut lines of his face.

“I know it is much to ask,” he said, his deep voice tinged with regret. “Perhaps too much of a human raised in a society that still has not reached the stars-”

“Wait.” I held up a hand, my thoughts whirling. “Your friend, the one with the human mate... did he do this to her?”

Sargon’s jaw clenched, then relaxed with a slow nod. “Yes. She agreed to the bonding process, despite the risks.”

Despite the risks. The phrasing made my stomach churn. What kind of life-altering transformation had his friend’s wife undertaken? And why would anyone agree to

such a thing?

As though sensing my unease, Sargon leaned in close, the heat of his body enveloping me, beckoning me into the circle of his arms.

“I would never ask this of you lightly, Nicole,” he murmured. “The bonding would render you forever altered, forever bound to me. But it would also allow us to walk the same path, face whatever destiny awaits us as true partners, our souls as one.”

His words washed over me, igniting sparks of longing amidst the apprehension churning within. Slowly, hesitantly, I reached up to touch the swirls of orange filigree swirling across his chiseled features.

“These markings... they’re beautiful,” I murmured.

Sargon’s breath shuddered, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “You need not decide now, little one. I have already asked too much of you by -”

“I want it.”

The words slipped out in a breathless rush before I could reconsider. Sargon went utterly still, those smoldering red eyes searching my face as if seeking any hint of doubt or hesitation.

He found none. Only a steadfast yearning, a fierce need to bind myself to this enigmatic alien who had so thoroughly claimed my heart.

With a low, rumbling growl, Sargon crushed his lips to mine in a desperate kiss. I melted into his embrace, parting my lips to deepen the contact as his hands roamed hungrily over my body. When we at last broke apart, I was dizzy and breathless, desire thrumming through my veins.

Sargon nuzzled along my jaw, blazing a path down the column of my throat. I arched into him with a ragged cry, every nerve ending thrumming in exquisite anticipation.

“Are you sure?” he rasped against my skin, the words a desperate plea scored with undisguised longing.

“Yes,” I managed, threading my fingers through his thick locks. “Sargon, please I’m yours.”

A savage growl tore from his throat as he captured my lips once more in a ferocious kiss. I returned it with equal fervor, reveling in the taste, the scent, the sheer overwhelming presence of him surrounding me.

Then, without warning, I felt a sharp prick against the side of my neck, swiftly followed by a molten rush of liquid fire filling my veins. A strangled cry tore from my lips, my back arching as the most intense euphoria I had ever known blazed through me with each hammering beat of my heart.

The world splintered and fractured around me. I was dimly aware of Sargon’s arms tightening like steel bands, cradling me against the tremors wracking through me. Just as swiftly as the pleasure had come, an insidious lassitude began to seep through my limbs. My eyelids grew impossibly heavy, and the last thing I knew before the darkness claimed me was the reverent press of his lips against my brow.

“Rest now, my mate,” his beloved voice murmured. “When you awaken, your new life will begin “

Some indeterminate time later, my eyes fluttered open to blinding brilliance. I recoiled with a sharp gasp, squeezing them shut once more against the onslaught of light and color so vibrant, so overwhelming, it was almost painful.

What was happening? Where was I? Panic clawed at my throat as my thoughts raced,

struggling to remember

The picnic. The confession. Sargon's words, his passionate kisses, the searing euphoria of his bite

Trembling, I forced my lids to crack open once more, blinking rapidly as my vision slowly adjusted to the sheer vividness of my new sight. I was in what appeared to be a sleeping cabin aboard a ship, the gunmetal gray walls and softly blinking panels all too familiar.

Sargon's ship.

But everything was so crisp, so sharply defined, it was almost dizzying. I could see every subtle variation in the brushed metal texture, every shifting play of light and shadow with a vivid clarity I had never before experienced.

Sounds, too, were amplified to an almost uncomfortable degree. The low thrum of the engines reverberated through me, joined by the faint creak and groan of the bulkheads as we moved through wherever we were.

A slight shift of weight on the mattress beside me made me stiffen. There, in the periphery of my newly enhanced vision, sat a figure wreathed in shadow - tall, imposing, utterly motionless.

Sargon.

Slowly, I turned my head toward him, every subtle movement feeling oddly fluid and effortless in a way that should have been alarming, yet simply felt right. Natural.

He perched on the edge of the bunk, elbows braced on his knees as he studied me with those intense, blazing red eyes. His expression was utterly inscrutable, yet the weight of his stare bored straight through me, sending a sensual frisson cascading

down my body.

“Sargon,” I rasped, my voice sounding strange and resonant to my newly heightened senses.

In an instant, he was there before me, one hand cradling the back of my head as his thumb traced along my lower lip almost reverently. I shuddered at the contact, every point where his skin met mine crackling with a searing, electric heat.

“Look at you,” he murmured, his voice piercing the depths of my soul. “So fierce. So beautiful.”

I frowned, confused by the sheer awe in his tone, when the shifting of the mattress drew my attention downward. There, stark against the muted grays and blacks of the bedding, was the unmistakable blaze of vivid orange etched into the pale skin of my arm in intricate, swirling patterns.

The markings. The signs of our bonding.

I shot upright, my eyes wide as I took in the glowing, sinuous whorls adorning my flesh. They extended from my left shoulder, winding down in an intoxicating spiral before fading into a simple tracing of pigment along my fingers.

My other arm was bare, but as I raised a trembling hand to my face, I felt the unmistakable ridges of yet more markings etched into my cheek and temple.

“Oh...” The soft exhalation was the only sound I could force past my constricted throat as I stared, awestruck and disbelieving, at this irrevocable proof of the profound change I had undergone.

Of the choice I had made.

Sargon's hands found my waist, his thumbs stroking along my sides in a soothing, anchoring caress. "I am here, Nicole," he rumbled. "I am here."

I tore my gaze from my newly adorned flesh to meet his piercing stare. Somewhere in the depths of those crimson pools, I saw the naked reverence, the bone-deep devotion of one who had given everything, laid himself utterly bare.

Who had bound his very essence to mine.

And in that moment, I knew without a shadow of a doubt - this was no mere symbolic ritual, no empty gesture.

This was the shape of forever, of a bond transcending the physical to intertwine our souls for all eternity.

My mate.