



Fourth (Intergalactic Warriors #4)

Author: *Dare O'Dell*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Kidnapped by an alien. Marked as a galactic threat. Trapped in a mating bond neither of them chose.

Maya Mirabella was days away from finishing her masters degree when her life exploded. One moment she was walking home. The next, she was snatched up by a ruthless, devastatingly gorgeous assassin—and abducted onto an alien ship.

RivEn, Fourth Unit Assassin of the Intergalactic Warriors, was engineered to eliminate threats, not question them. But Maya is unlike anything he's ever encountered: a twin, an anomaly, a wildcard who defies every law he's sworn to enforce. She should be a prisoner. A danger. Instead, she's triggering instincts he's never felt—and emotions he was never supposed to have.

Trapped together in deep space, Maya and RivEn face enemies from both outside and within. The more he isolates her, the more she dismantles the cold programming he lives by. And the closer they grow, the more deadly their bond becomes.

Because falling for her could destroy them both.

Dark. Addictive. Irresistible.

Fourth is a fast-burn, enemies-to-soulmates sci-fi romance, packed with raw emotion, explosive tension, and a love story that dares to rewrite destiny.

Total Pages (Source): 38

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

THE NIGHT concealed him, just as it always had.

Riv'En stood in the shadows near the engineering wing of the nearly deserted Berkeley campus, body coiled, breath silent. He was motionless, a ghost etched in darkness, eyes locked onto the human female below.

Target: acquired.

She moved quickly, unaware—blonde hair spilling down her back, catching the faint amber glow of a flickering walkway light.

Her steps echoed softly against the pavement, one hand gripping the strap of her backpack.

Wide blue eyes flicked left, then right, scanning, but not seeing. Petite. Fragile-looking. Predictable.

But a flicker of something broke the pattern.

She hesitated—barely—glancing behind her with a crease between her brows. Not suspicion. Not certainty. Just a whisper of unease she couldn't place. A tension she clearly didn't understand. Her fingers tightened on the strap.

The odds of a clean extraction: 94.2 percent.

Riv'En's fingers twitched once, calibrating timing.

Five steps. She adjusted her grip on the backpack, aslight hitch in her pace—fatigue, maybe. He tracked the shift, recalculated.

Four. Abreeze stirred her hair. She turned her head slightly, but then kept walking. No awareness. No suspicion.

He inhaled slowly.

Three steps until her life was forever changed. The echo of her next footfall cracked the quiet, sharp and singular. Still steady. Still vulnerable.

Two.

His heart rate slowed as his muscles tightened in anticipation, every fiber of his body aligning with perfect lethal intent. She was inches from the edge of everything she'd ever known.

One.

Just one step until she never made it home again.

He moved.

Silent. Meticulous. Inevitable.

He was Alpha Unit, assassin-class—engineered for exactness, bred for elimination, trained to leave no witnesses. Which meant the girl would not see him coming, not with his ability to camouflage himself. If he had been ordered to kill her, she would not survive the moment he struck.

But he had not been sent to kill.

He stared down at her, breath tight in his chest, the power of unspoken orders from Alpha Unit's Third still echoing in his mind. One twitch of his wrist, one shift in intention, and she would be gone.

She sensed him a split-second too late.

Her body jerked, spine stiffening as her head whipped back—

He struck.

An arm locked around her waist with ruthless intent, the other snapping forward to pin her arms. She bucked, twisted, fought back like a wild thing. Elbows drove, feet lashed, nails raked. She snarled a half-formed scream, intense and guttural—

He clamped a hand over her mouth, but too late.

The sound sliced through the air, sharp and bright—aragged, panicked cry that shattered the stillness like glass dropped on stone.

It pierced straight through the darkness, lancing down his spine and igniting a primal urgency in his chest. Not a warning.

Not a call for help. A flare, fraught, unfiltered, and impossible to ignore.

It echoed off the surrounding buildings, far louder than it should have been.

Vexx .

Every projection shifted.

He'd misjudged, let familiarity dull his edge. He'd grown complacent because she

was human. He'd expected soft and compliant. Predictable. Defenseless. But she wasn't any of those things. That single scream had shattered the illusion, cracked the quiet veneer of the night wide open.

And reminded him that underestimating any target, especially one chosen by his unit, was a mistake. A mistake he wouldn't make twice.

Now it was no longer about a clean extraction. It was about speed. Containment. Escape. There was no margin. No time to assess. No room for delay.

Because of her scream, the hunt would begin.

He had to move. Now .

She fought with the ferocity of desperation, slamming her heel into his shin, trying to bite down through his glove.

Every part of her flared with violent resistance.

He adjusted his grip, a subtle shift of force and leverage—containing her, minimizing damage.

She was compact, but explosive. Her heart thundered against his chest, her breath frantic and fast.

She twisted her mouth free of his hold just enough to scream again, louder this time.

No time.

He slammed her up against the wall of the closest building, just long enough to inject the temporary stunner at the base of her neck. A sharp click. A soft hiss.

She collapsed.

Her body sagged in his arms, unconscious, dead weight, but still warm, her breath brushing faintly against his wrist. The pulse at her throat fluttered, rapid but strong.

Alive. For now.

He caught her easily, cradling her now instead of restraining her. No time to admire the fight. No time to consider the fire she carried in her blood.

He slipped into motion, fluid and quiet, his steps a blur through shadow.

Across the quad, where distant voices were already echoing in response to her scream. Through the access shadows, ducking low behind shrub cover as lights flickered on in upper dorm windows. Past the forgotten maintenance corridor, where he paused just long enough to scan for movement.

Two campus security personnel rounded the far edge of the commons. Not close enough to see him, but too close to risk transportation.

He adjusted her weight in his arms and bolted, feet whispering over pavement, shadows swallowing his form like water over stone.

Once clear of all potential risks, he transported to the ship—silent, sealed, unseen.

Extraction: complete.

But not clean.

She had screamed.

And someone would come looking.

But by the time security arrived, she would already be gone, cut off from everything she knew, carried into the stars by something she could not begin to understand.

And Riv'En, Alpha Unit assassin, would finally know why she had been chosen.

The possibilities unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

Not because she posed a threat, though she unexpectedly had, but because the look in her eyes, fierce and unyielding even through fear, mirrored something buried deep in his own past. Something he had been trained to erase.

It was not longing. Not intuition. Not yet. But it was the first edge of awareness, the whisper of a connection he could not afford, but might not be able to escape.

And if the order came to eliminate her?

He would obey. He always obeyed.

But for the first time in his long, programmed existence, the thought left a mark. Subtle, but deep, a pressure he could not quite shake, as if her fate had already threaded itself into his. Not a scar. Not yet. But the warning of one to come.

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Prologue

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MAYA'S brEATH hitched. She stared at him, and for a second, everything else fell away.

Anya .

The name struck with the force of a blow. It had been weeks since Maya had last seen her sister, since the morning she vanished without explanation, leaving nothing behind but a silenced phone and a hollow apartment.

Sometimes, even now, Maya heard the echo of Anya's laugh, bright, musical, a sound that used to fill the space between them like light through a window.

The last voicemail Anya left played in her memory without mercy: Hey, dork.

Forgot to tell you I stole your hoodie. Again.

Love you. That was it. No hint of finality.

No goodbye. Just an ordinary message, threaded with love, and then nothing.

The silence that followed had been louder than any scream.

After Anya had stopped communicating, Maya had searched. Filed reports. Called hospitals. Checked her home night after night until exhaustion claimed her. There were no clues. No goodbyes. Just a gaping hole where Anya had once been. A silence that never answered.

And now this stranger—this alien —spoke her sister’s name like it meant nothing.

“What did you just say?” she whispered.

“Your sister provided the information. Anya Anderson. Twin.”

He spoke with eerie stillness, hands at his sides, spine perfectly aligned, as if he’d delivered the sentence a hundred times before and never once questioned it. No flicker of emotion. No visible reaction.

“She described your location, your routine, your vulnerabilities,” he continued. “Class schedules. Preferred coffee shop. Walking paths. Time of day you’d be alone.”

His gaze remained locked on hers, unwavering, not cruel, just inflexible. “Her voice pattern passed all lie detection protocols. She gave us what we needed to complete the retrieval.”

Maya jolted against the restraints. “No. No. She’s missing. She vanished. She—”

Riv’En cut her off. “She is with Third. Voluntarily.”

The words didn’t make sense. Maya blinked, but the meaning didn’t change. Instead, it hit like a slap across her face, wrong, distorted, impossible. Her breath came too fast, too shallow, and the world tilted slightly, just enough to make her stomach twist.

Anya wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t betray her.

Not for anything. Not willingly. Maya tried to picture it.

Anya walking into a ship like this, giving up names, coordinates, pieces of Maya’s life.

And it cracked something open in her chest. A cold, echoing space where certainty used to live.

No. It wasn't real. Whatever this creature believed, whatever he'd been told, it wasn't Anya. It couldn't be.

Her eyes widened, then narrowed, fury rising to boil just beneath her skin. "You're lying."

"I do not lie."

"You're wrong. She would never help you. She wouldn't tell you a damn thing."

"She gave detailed information." His tone stayed flat, but a hint of tension edged each word now, as though saying it aloud required more effort than it should have. "Confirmed your habits. Your location. Your name."

His shoulders squared, and he shifted slightly, as if grounding himself in doctrine.

Still formal. Still rigid. But there was something in his stance now, a faint change that hadn't been there before.

"Her cooperation expedited the extraction," he added.

No hesitation. No apology. But his gaze narrowed, just slightly, like he was bracing for impact.

Maya's voice cracked. "That's not possible."

"It was relayed in her words. Directly." His gaze never shifted. "Computer, play Anya, voice recording two."

Her sister's voice bled through the speakers.

Maya froze.

A cold jolt shot through her chest, locking her breath mid-inhale.

Her pulse stuttered, then surged, her limbs gone buoyant, like she'd been dropped from a great height.

The voice wrapped around her ribs, familiar and brutal, and for a split second, she couldn't move—couldn't breathe —because it was Anya.

Alive. Speaking.

And giving her away.

“Berkeley, California. United States of America. She lives off-campus with three roommates. She usually walks to class—rain sends her to the bus stop on the corner near the café. She studies computer science and always has her headphones in, half-lost in whatever coding world she's building.

If anyone tries to stop her on the street, she probably wouldn't even hear them.

And... And she's my twin, so she'll look exactly like me. ”

“Is that your sister?”

Maya shook her head, violently now, wild. “No. You took her. You twisted her. You tricked her into giving you the information—”

“Genetic scan confirmed the match. She is your twin. An intergalactic anomaly. And

she voluntarily gave you to us. You are mine now.”

The words landed like a physical blow. Maya’s stomach twisted, bile rising as her body reacted before her mind caught up. Achill crept across her skin, crawling up her spine, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Mine .

The way he said it—calm, clinical, as though claiming ownership of her were as routine as checking a diagnostic—made her insides recoil.

She was not his. She would never be his.

But some primitive part of her heard the claim and shuddered all the same, her pulse stuttering beneath the surface as if her body didn’t know the difference between possession and danger.

Her breath caught in her throat. A single heartbeat missed. But she lifted her chin, forcing steel into her spine.

She drew a breath, sharp and uneven. “You want answers? You want data? Fine. Test me. Run your scans. Ask your questions. But don’t expect me to cower while you pretend you’re the one in charge here.”

He stepped closer.

She refused to flinch. Would not give him the satisfaction.

“I am in charge,” he said with finality, his voice low and unyielding, like the command of someone who had never been questioned and did not intend to start now.

Maya scoffed, sharp and bitter. “Sure. You’re doing a stellar job of proving it.”

“You mistake stillness for indecision. I am analyzing every possible outcome.”

“Right. And losing it is just a strategic option now?” She threw the words like a blade. Not just to wound, but to provoke. To strike something soft beneath all that armor and see if it bled.

The thought had her gaze flickering to his collarbone, to the blood she’d drawn and could still taste. Alien blood. Riv’En’s blood. She shuddered.

She should be horrified. Instead, her pulse kicked.

Her skin buzzed. The taste lingered like lightning—wrong and electric and dangerously intoxicating.

She didn’t want more of it, but she couldn’t forget it either.

It was burned into her memory, down the back of her throat, crawling through her nerves.

And the worst part?

It wasn’t fear curling through her stomach.

It was want—sharp, visceral, and terrifying in its clarity.

A want that refused to fade, even as logic screamed that it should.

Her breath hitched. She swallowed hard, forcing the sensation down, locking it away where it could not deceive her.

But her body betrayed her anyway, mouth tight, fists tight, eyes locked on the place

she'd bitten him, heart pounding like she was still in motion.

He hadn't retaliated.

He hadn't raged at her.

And that restraint unsettled her more than anger ever could.

"You are pushing boundaries you do not understand," he finally said.

"And you're clinging to rules you stopped following the moment you stepped into this room."

Their words snapped back and forth like sparks, bright, volatile, each one striking too close to something vital. It wasn't just banter anymore. It was a clash of identity, and something else neither of them wanted to name.

Then silence. Thick. Heavy.

Was it just defiance? Not entirely. Part of her needed to see what lay beneath all that composure, if there was anything beneath it.

Was he just programming and pride? She needed to know if there was a crack in the armor.

If anything in him could break. Because if it could, then maybe, just maybe, she wasn't entirely powerless in this room.

The tension bristled between them, pressing against her skin like static, laced with every unspoken word, every unanswered question. The balance of power shifted breath by breath, sharp and precarious. Command. That was what he worshipped.

What held him upright.

But mastery wasn't what she saw now.

"Why," she whispered, "do you look like your curiosity is about to override your orders?"

He froze.

Just for a second. But it was enough.

Maya leaned in as far as her restraints allowed, voice low, steady now.

"You're not supposed to experience anything, are you?"

That's what they made you for. Cold. Efficient.

No second guesses." A sudden thought slammed into her, sharp and impossible to ignore.

"Are you a machine? Is that what this is?"

She didn't mean it as an insult. It came out as something closer to awe. Because if he was, then he was broken. And if he wasn't... that was even harder to explain.

His expression didn't change right away, but something flickered in the darkness of his eyes. A pause. A hesitation. Then, finally, he answered.

"I am not machine. I was born, flesh, bone, memory. Another. A beginning. But I was altered. Genetically shaped to serve the Intergalactic Warrior caste. Trained to follow its codes. Conditioned to obey its rules. That is what they made of me. But I am not a

construct. Nor am I artificial.”

He said it like someone repeating a forgotten truth, one rarely visited, half-remembered. There was no offense in his voice. No pride either. Just fact, unflinching, emotionlessfact.

Maya studied him, something twisting deep in her gut. “You’re not just following orders anymore, are you?”

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He stayed silent for a breath, then said flatly, "I do not have an answer for that." His voice was quieter now, stripped of its usual substance. "There is no protocol for this kind of interaction. You are not behaving as expected."

Maya leaned in slightly, not missing the tension laced between each word. "So what does your programming tell you to do with unexpected variables? Dissect them? Eliminate them? Or do you just stare at them and hope they solve themselves?"

He blinked once, deliberate and composed, assessing her with the stillness of a man used to commanding outcomes.

Then again, slower, less detached, more deliberate.

The second blink lingered, his gaze sharpening.

No trace of uncertainty, only the press of judgment, focus, strategy.

He looked at her not like a subject or threat, but like an equation that refused to balance. "I observe. I adapt. I eliminate risk."

"And am I a risk now?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, and then after a pause, "but not for the reasons I expected."

"Then why haven't you moved? Why are you still standing here like I've said something you don't know how to process?" Her heart thudded. "What did they forget to program into you, Riven?"

He exhaled slowly. Not a sigh. Something more regulated. But she saw it, the fracture.

And he didn't leave.

She caught the struggle flickering in his eyes. Caught the thing he tried to suppress. Not anger. Not duty. Something taut and fierce, straining beneath the surface. Authority still lingered in his stance, but it was shaken, like he was fighting need with discipline and barely keeping it caged.

She should have been afraid. Should have shut her mouth, quieted her pulse, stopped baiting the unstable, armored weapon standing inches from her. But fear, real, paralyzing fear, was something she'd already lived through.

She remembered walking into Anya's empty apartment, heart pounding, knowing something was wrong the moment the silence answered her call. That was fear. This? This was different. This was a storm of fury and disbelief, twisted with a sliver of something else she didn't want to name.

Because in that crack, that moment where his certainty failed, she saw something she understood. Doubt.

"You think you are unpredictable," he said at last, voice low. "But you are not chaos. You are interference. Unmapped. Unreadable. My systems cannot make sense of you. And I do not like what that suggests."

Maya tilted her head slightly, eyes locked on his. "You really don't know what to make of me, do you?"

The words didn't come with heat or bite. They were quiet. Measured. And they landed with more weight than she intended. For the first time since waking in this

chamber, she wasn't the one being studied, but the one holding the scalpel. She let the silence stretch.

He still hadn't moved. Still hadn't spoken. But the charge built between them, the unspoken question ricocheting in the space he refused to close.

"You can't figure out what I am?" Her voice dropped. "Let me help you out. I'm the thing you weren't ready for."

The words hung there, fiercer than she'd expected.

She hadn't planned to say them, not exactly, but they sounded right.

Solid. For a moment, she felt taller, steadier.

Like the power in the room had shifted. Maybe she wasn't just reacting anymore.

Maybe she was becoming something he hadn't accounted for.

His fingers curled into fists, the motion sharp, silent, and tight with restraint.

She watched every muscle twitch. Noted every flicker of restraint.

"If you're going to dissect me," she said quietly, "do it now."

He didn't answer rightaway.

Instead, he shook his head, his long hair flowing across his chest and shoulders. "I do not wish to harm you."

Maya blinked. That wasn't what she'd expected.

“You already have,” she said, voice low.

He gave a fractional nod. “Not like that.”

“Then what is this?” she challenged. “Because it sure as hell doesn’t feel like mercy.”

He hesitated again. “I do not understand why you are affecting my systems. This is... anomalous.”

“Welcome to the human condition,” she muttered.

And still, he didn’t move. That, more than anything, unsettled her, which said more than any words.

She didn’t let up. “Whatever this is—experimentation, interrogation, elimination—just get it over with. Don’t drag it out like it’s merciful.” Her voice didn’t shake. “I’d rather die with my spine intact and my mind my own than end up another broken experiment on your slab.”

He didn’t speak.

But something changed. The air shifted, just slightly, like a breath held too long. A faint ripple passed through the space between them, and Maya caught the barest scent of ozone, sharp and wrong. Her skin prickled a half-second before the change in temperature.

It started subtle. A flicker in the air. Then the heat.

Wrong heat.

It hit her skin like a phantom flame, not burning, but distorting.

The air thickened, charged with a low, vibrating static that buzzed in her ears.

She could smell something sharp and metallic, and her eyes stung as the lighting in the chamber shifted, too bright around the edges, dim in the center, like the room couldn't decide how to hold shape.

Every sound became muffled, swallowed by the pressurized hum building all around them.

Her lungs struggled to draw air that no longer seemed like oxygen.

She sensed it before she saw it, the shift in the air, the change in his posture. Atightening across his shoulders. The way his hands curled into fists, not like a threat, but like he was barely holding himself together.

He stepped back, sharp and purposeful. His pupils flared. Something beneath his skin began to glow.

Maya's stomach clenched.

"What—what's happening to you?"

He didn't answer.

Couldn't, maybe. His body convulsed. His hands slammed against the chamber wall. Heat rolled off him in waves, shimmering the air, fracturing the illusion of stillness.

The diagnostic panel blazed red.

She jerked against the table, the restraints holding her down. Panic surged. Her pulse thundered. The room was too hot now. Too bright. Like the air itself had turned

volatile.

Her eyes flicked toward the seals along the wall, searching for any weakness, any exit.

Nothing. She catalogued what she knew about chambers, about heat stress, about overloading systems. She tried to slow her breath, tried to focus.

Five senses. She could still count. Still think.

That meant she wasn't out of options yet. Not completely.

"Tell me what this is!"

He was unraveling.

His knees buckled. He caught himself with a snarl. And then she saw it, his skin glowing under his ribs, mouth open in a silent scream, eyes wild.

An instant later, it wasn't silent.

The sound that ripped out of him was not human. Wasn't meant to be.

It shook the room. Rattled her bones. A guttural, fractured roar that clawed through the air like something being torn apart from the inside.

She stared, wide-eyed, frozen.

A flicker followed.

Not in him, but on her. Just above her heart, low on the inside of her left collarbone.

Ashimmer. Faint, like heat lightning beneath her skin. Not pain, not quite heat, but something else entirely. Aflash of light, silvery-blue, and then it was gone.

A low, fractured sound came from him, not pain, not rage. Something else entirely. His eyes locked onto the shimmer, and for a heartbeat, something ancient stirred in them, recognition, buried and ancient. Like a memory he didn't know he still carried had clawed its way to the surface.

Then his expression twisted, too quickly to read, and he wrenched away, as if the sight itself unmoored him further. He made no sound. But he had seen it. And he had known it.

Whatever it was, it had passed between them, acknowledged, mirrored. The shimmer might have appeared on her skin, but it had struck something in him. It belonged to both of them now, even if neither of them understood what it meant.

Her breath caught and her pulse faltered. Had she imagined it?

No, she was intensely aware of it. The shimmer, the charge in the air, the way his gaze had latched onto hers as though he saw something that shouldn't exist. Her skin still tingled where the light had flickered.

She closed her eyes briefly. Not to shut him out, but to steady herself.

Something was shifting inside her. A gravity pulling at her chest, realigning a part of herself she hadn't known was loose until now.

Not with heat. Not with rage. But with recognition.

A deep, trembling awareness that a visceral element in him had touched the same in her, sparked something elemental.

She couldn't name it. Didn't want to. But it was there, blooming in the silence between them.

And it wasn't fear. Not exactly.

It was connection.

Maya swallowed hard, heart still hammering as his breathing turned ragged, staggered, no longer even remotely under his command.

She didn't know what she'd just witnessed.

Didn't know if it was transformation, meltdown, or both.

But he was crashing. Visibly. Physically.

And whatever this was, it wasn't graceful. It was violent. Primal.

And it was killing him.

"You're burning up," she said, throat dry. "That can't be normal."

He didn't respond. His body trembled, the glow pulsing now, erratic, uninhibited. Sweat broke along his temples. His chest hitched with every breath.

Maya twisted against the restraints, anger and panic crashing into each other. "Damn it, say something. What is this? What's happening to you?"

At last, his head turned, barely. "Final Flight." The words scraped out raw.

"Final Flight? What does it mean?" She narrowed her eyes. "It sounds... bad."

“It is. Final Flight is the end,” he said.

“A warrior’s final cycle. It begins when we reach four hundred years of service.

Our bodies are designed to burn out, fast, brutal, final.

Systems collapse in sequence. Power unravels.

Thought and flesh tear away from each other until there is nothing left to hold them together. ”

Maya stared at him, stricken. “That’s... that’s what’s happening to you now?”

“The symptoms started weeks ago. Temperature fluctuations. Loss of color. My hair, my eyes turning black... are warnings. I thought I had more time.”

She swallowed, voice barely a whisper. “But you don’t?”

“Uncertain.” His gaze lifted to hers, steady and unflinching. “I believed there would be enough time to complete my final directive before the collapse began.”

She hesitated. “Am I the final directive?”

“Affirmative.”

She went still. “This final cycle... You’re not going to die, are you?”

He didn’t answer. And that, more than anything, terrified her.

“Riven.” Her voice cracked. “Look at me. Are you dying?”

“Yes.”

The air rushed out of her lungs. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am always serious.”

Something sharp twisted in her gut. She stared at him, chained down, helpless, and hated how much that mattered in this moment.

She didn’t want to care. But watching him come apart, seeing him, this perfectly meticulous, untouchable figure, fracture in front of her, sent something sharp and unexpected through her chest. Not pity.

Not even fear. Something else. A thread of protectiveness she didn’t want to name.

Seeing the control crack, the breath stagger, the agony behind his eyes, made it impossible not to.

Her voice came quieter this time. “Is there anything I can do?”

He regarded her with curiosity. Like the question confused him.

“I’m serious,” she added. “I don’t want to be trapped in here with a corpse, so if you need something—stabilization, water, whatever— say so .”

He stared at her for a beat too long, something unreadable flickering behind his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was low, rough-edged. “You stopped it.”

Maya blinked. Her heart stuttered, then slammed into a harder rhythm. What the hell does that mean? She opened her mouth, then closed it, throat tight with too many questions. The silence between them appeared thinner now, more fragile, like it might

shatter with the next breath.

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MAYA STARED at him like she might speak. Like she might scream. Like she might disappear entirely if she blinked too hard.

Riv'En did not move. His pulse dragged slow and uneven beneath his skin, each beat an echo of heat not fully extinguished.

The atmosphere around him became laced with the faint static charge of what had nearly consumed him.

His body should have shut down, should have collapsed inward like cooling metal.

Instead, he stood there, alive when logic said he should not be.

He should be dead.

His shoulders pulled taut, a ripple of resistance tightening through his arms before he forced it still.

He did not look at her chest. He would not.

But the memory of that shimmer, so faint and sudden, flickered behind his eyes like an echo from another life.

Blue. Soft. Radiating outward beneath her skin.

He turned away.

Not far. The scent of her lingered in the air—subtle, sharp, unmistakable.

Something about it caught at him harder now than it had before.

Maybe it was just the aftermath of her bite, maybe it was the shimmer still burned into his mind's eye, but it wound around him like a coiled thread.

He watched the rise and fall of her chest, the flush of color high on her cheekbones, the rapid flicker of her pulse in her throat.

She wasn't just reacting anymore. The air between them stretched taut like something just waiting to snap.

He did not need to touch her to know it.

Her scent, her heat, the smallest flex of her fingers against the restraint—it all worked against him, under his skin, pulling focus he could not afford.

Riv'En ignored it. Forced himself to. But ignoring did not make it less real.

The ship's systems whispered low in the background, steady and subdued. But his focus stayed on the uneven pulse of her breathing, sharper and more intrusive than the quiet tech surrounding them.

“What did you mean?” Her voice was harsh. Low. Still rough from her earlier cries. “When you said I stopped it.”

He said nothing. Not because he was considering his response, but because no response existed for this. Logic offered nothing useful here. Only consequence remained—cold, sharp-edged, and dangerously quiet inside him.

“What did I stop?” she persisted.

He glanced back. Her eyes, wide, wild, too human, tracked him with a force that scraped against his facility more than weapons ever had. She was still restrained. Still contained. And yet it was as though she were the one holding him .

There was something in her gaze now that had not been there before.

Aflicker of heat, sharp and unguarded. It was not fear.

It was not challenge. It was something quieter.

Deeper. As if some part of her already recognized what was building between them, even if she refused to name it.

And his body answered in kind, muscles drawn taut beneath skin, every breath heavier.

The scent of her clung to the air, impossible to ignore.

It was maddening. And it was only getting worse.

“Final Flight,” he said.

The words were sand in his mouth. Dry. Unwanted.

“That... death thing you mentioned before?” Her brow creased. “You said it was scheduled. Like some kind of biological suicide.”

“Affirmative.”

She looked down at herself, at the place where he had watched light pulse beneath her skin. Her muscles flexed subtly against the restraint, acareful motion, not a struggle, not panic. Testing limits with a sharp-edged focus.

Giving up, she returned her attention to him. “So what does that mean? That just being near you was enough to make it stop? That doesn’t make sense.”

“No. It does not.”

Her head jerked up, sharp and fast, eyes snapping back to his face as if those four words carried more strength than everything else he had said before. “Explain.”

He exhaled slowly. “No one has ever interrupted a Final Flight once the heat flash was in progress.”

“And yet here I am,” she said. “Alive. And apparently breaking all your rules just by breathing.”

Her voice carried something new now. Softer. Warmer. As if the defiance wasn’t just about rules anymore but about the charged silence stretching between them. Riv’En watched her mouth form the words, his focus sharpening on the way her lips shaped each syllable, slower than before.

His pulse slowed to match hers. His gaze slid lower, noting the subtle lift of her chest and the faint flush at her throat, but what held his focus was the quiet tension coiled in her posture.

Attention that mirrored his own, waiting, as if both of them were holding breath they refused to release first.

The air around her shifted subtly, carrying an edge of heat that threaded into the quiet

hum of the ship's systems. It was restraint woven tight around something ancient and rising. He let it settle in the air between them like a line sketched, waiting to be crossed.

He didn't speak. Couldn't for endless count-marks. "You are alive," he said at last, voice like iron dragged over stone. "That is what matters."

"You saw it, though, right? The light that appeared on me?"

He hesitated, eyes narrowing slightly. "I saw it," he admitted finally, each word drawn out, his voice dipping lower than before. "It should not exist."

The admission pulled tension through his frame like a slow pulse, heat stirring beneath his skin, sharp and unwelcome.

But it was not just the truth that cost him.

It was the strength of her eyes on him as he spoke, the way her breath caught like she sensed it too.

That low, inescapable pull between them, tightening degree by degree by endless degree.

"Riven. I saw your face. You looked at me like I'd grown a second head." Her voice dropped lower now, the edge of it rougher, throatier, as if she experienced the connection between them but refused to name it. "What the hell was that? You recognized it. I know you did."

Her gaze flicked down again, unbidden, as if attracted by some magnetic pull to the place where the shimmer had burned into her skin.

His eyes tracked the movement, catching the subtle flush creeping up her throat, the shift in her breathing.

It came like a low thrum under his own skin.

The bond pulsing before either of them admitted it aloud.

“There is no written record of this light that appeared on you.”

“There’s no written record, yet you know what it is. What does it mean?” she pressed.
“Why did it happen?”

His gaze dropped before he meant it to. Just once. To her chest. No light. No shimmer. Nothing.

He looked away, his stance cut from stone, every line of him yanked taut as if forged to withstand impact.

Not avoidance. Discipline. Every reflex pressed against his skin like an unspent command, but he forced it back, forced himself to focus on the wall instead of her.

And yet even that did not quiet the awareness.

The scent of her still edged sharp in his lungs.

The faint shift of her breath behind him pulled at him like a tether, impossible to sever.

Her presence was a constant pulse, heat lingering beneath his skin in a way that refused to fade.

It was maddening, primal, and utterly undeniable.

“There are... tales,” he admitted. “My mother spoke of them when I was very small. Before I was taken into the Intergalactic Warrior program. Elaroin stories not found in databanks. Private. Sacred. Rituals never spoken of beyond the Elaroin home world. Ancient and dismissed by those who had never seen them, because most who have, never live to explain. Among my mother’s people, it is called the Mating Flame. ”

She stilled. “What is the Mating Flame?”

“Irrelevant.”

“Try me.”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. Because the heat had pulled back, receding from the edge of death in a way that should have been impossible.

Something ancient and forbidden had been triggered between them, something he had no words for, no protocol to follow.

And that realization alone was enough to destroy themboth.

Her voice cut through the silence again, sharp and unrelenting.

“You do not get to decide what’s irrelevant, Riven.

Not if it means I’m stuck here with you.

” She pulled against the restraints, testing them with more force this time.

“If whatever that light was can stop your Final Flight, I deserve to know. Because if you burn up in one of those heat flashes, I burn up with you. Or did you forget I’m still locked down?”

His head turned just enough to meet her gaze. That cold, unwavering stare. “Noted.”

“So, what is it?”

“An Elaroin connection between mates. My parents shared it, though not every Elaroin mating does. That is all I know.”

He watched her closely, noting the shift in attitude.

Her expression had changed—no longer defiant, but sensing that flicker of recognition buried beneath logic and fear.

The shimmer, the bond. Her physiology would not understand it, not yet, but her impulses were reacting.

Responding. His did as well, despite every command hardwired into him to ignore such things.

The connection was forming, despite themboth.

“Release me. Now.” Her voice softened. “Please.”

Riv’En did not move for a long moment. He considered options, every computation dragging against something thicker and harder to ignore. Leaving her restrained was safer, but inefficient.

If his Final Flight returned, it would be both wasteful and tactically unsound to have

her secured where she could not escape.

But it was not just strategy that pressed against him.

It was the scent of her skin, the flush of her pulse visible beneath the curve of her throat, and the intense awareness simmering between them that no restraint could contain.

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He needed to release her, not because of logic, not because of tactical necessity, but because holding her down any longer pressed too hard against needs he refused to name.

Containment had its place. But now, every second she stayed bound was a second he fought something older, more dangerous than simple authority.

His gaze flicked to the restraint mechanisms, then back to her face, considering. Trust was not part of his design. But neither was leaving unnecessary variables inplay.

His voice came, flat and absolute. "If I release you, you will follow my rules."

She narrowed her eyes, watching him like she was trying to read not just his words but the reasoning behind them. "What rules?" Her voice lost some of its edge, turning cooler, more measured. Testing him now as much as defyinghim.

"First," he said, voice steady as carved stone, "you will remain within designated quarters unless otherwise ordered. You will not attempt to access restricted areas. Those areas are locked for a reason. Some would kill you on entry. That includes the weapons hold, engine core, and nav systems hub. The airlock bay is also sealed. Breaching any of these would trigger automatic defense measures."

Her mouth pressed into a line, then shifted into the barest trace of a smile, dry and thin, never touching her eyes. "Sounds fair. Wouldn't want to trip into an airlock by accident."

His gaze leveled on her, silent and unblinking, a pause stretching until her smile

faltered. He did not speak again until she looked away first. “Second. You will not tamper with ship systems or attempt communication with external networks.”

“I wouldn’t know how even if I wanted to,” she muttered, her tone edged with frustration. “Maybe on Earth, but not at this level. My master’s is in computer science, not... whatever class of ship this is.”

He ignored the unspoken question in her comment.

“Third. You will not make physical contact with me again.” His gaze flicked over her once, hard and unreadable.

His hand lifted just enough to brush two fingers against the upper curve of his shoulder near his collarbone, where her teeth had torn through skin and left a faint smear of dried blood.

The mark stood out against his dark skin, stark and inflamed. Her eyes followed, and he saw the moment she remembered—the subtle shift in her expression, tension drawing sharp across her frame like she wanted to flinch but forced herself still.

“I’m really sorry,” she began.

He cut her off. “That is non-negotiable.”

It was not the bite that demanded the rule, he privately conceded.

That mark was only the surface. It was the deeper pressure, the heat spiraling tighter inside him every moment she remained restrained and near.

Not tactical. Not logical. The craving was subtler than rage but twice as persistent, and holding her bound fed it like fuel to a fire he could not allow to burn.

Her chin lifted, steady and sharp. “Anything else?” Her voice carried an edge now, less fear, more challenge. As if she already knew he would have more to say and wanted him to know she would not break just from hearing it.

“Those are sufficient for now.” Riv’En said it without looking away from her, letting the burden of his stare fill the silence between them. He waited until she held it, until she gave him that last flicker of acknowledgment. Then, his hands moved to the restraints. “Agreement?”

She hesitated for a breath, then nodded. “Fine.”

The restraints disengaged with a quiet hiss. She sat up slowly, her movements wary, gaze flicking from the unlocked cuffs to Riv’En and back again. He didn’t step away. He didn’t offer help. He simply watched, arms folded across his chest, waiting to see if she would test him now that she was free.

But there was more to it than discipline.

His gaze tracked the slow stretch of her spine as she straightened, the subtle shift beneath the fabric as muscle and skin moved together.

The air around her carried more than just heat now, attention he could sense even without looking, a subtle shift in atmosphere that pressed against him like static waiting to spark.

Every urge in him wound tight, not just to counter a threat, but because that quiet, unspoken hunger had thickened between them again—substantial, undeniable. But she did not push. Not yet.

Instead, she stood carefully, brushing her palms down the thick, blue material encasing her thighs as if reclaiming her own skin. Her eyes flicked to him once, sharp

and assessing, before she turned her attention to the room, scanning her surroundings now as if seeing them for the firsttime.

Riv'En said nothing, content to observe. It was the same way he watched an unfamiliar weapon being tested, or a new opponent assessing the boundaries of a fight. Her movements were measured. No panic. No wasted energy. That, more than anything, held his focus.

But it was not just her management that caught him.

It was the way her hand lingered against the nearest wall panel, the smooth slide of her fingertips leaving a trail his gaze refused to ignore.

The subtle shift of her narrow waist as she turned slightly, the quiet hitch in her breath that warned she sensed him watching and could not help reacting to it.

The scent of her threaded sharper now, more distinct than before, curling through the recycled air and into him like a low, slowburn.

He did not trust it. Not yet. But he respectedit.

She was not panicked prey. She was something else entirely. Something that pressed harder against him with every step shetook.

Without a word, Riv'En gestured toward the door, waiting until she stepped into line beside him before he moved. He kept his pace measured, not rushing her but not slowing either, leading her through the main corridor.

“Green panels indicate areas you may access,” he said, voice low but absolute.

“Red panels are restricted.” As they walked, he pointed them out: sleeping quarters,

galley, basic hygiene stations.

Weapon storage and command access remained sealed under red lighting, the contrast unmistakable even to humaneyes.

She walked beside him in silence, but it was not passive. Her gaze flicked between the colored indicators, fingers brushing each green-panel door in brief, casual touches that seemed more habit than need. No lingering. No pauses. Just a silent test as she kept pace besidehim.

Riv'En tracked each movement, an exercise in restraint, because her touch lingered longer than necessary.

The way her palm hovered against the metal, fingers grazing the surface in brief, testing touches, it was not mere curiosity.

It was the same energy she carried in her gaze—focused, charged with something neither of them spoke aloud.

Not anymore. There was intent in it. Aquiet, simmering awareness neither of them voiced yet, but both reacted to. Testing. Memorizing.

“Green means safe,” she murmured under her breath, more to herself than tohim.

Riv'En caught the motion of her palm sliding along the cool metal, acaress that set his blood to a slower beat.

Her body moved with quiet assurance, her steps measured and silent, as if pacing through a challenge she had already accepted.

His gaze tracked the subtle command in her posture, not a sway or show, but a

presence—calm, engrossed, aware of him.

He followed that shift automatically, tracking the quiet power in her frame instead of the rhythm of her stride.

She paused at one of the green-lit doors, letting her hand rest against it a second longer than necessary.

“And red means dead, I guess.” Her tone was dry, but the way she looked over her shoulder at him was not.

It held awareness. Challenge wrapped in something subtler.

Something slower. Something intentional.

Her gaze swept down his frame once, just as his had done to her, and a flicker of heat twisted tighter in his blood.

It was not simply a look. It was testing, marking, cataloging in the same quiet way she touched the ship’s walls, like she could memorize him through observation alone.

And he let her. Not because it was tactical.

Because he wanted to see how long she would hold his eyes before looking away.

How long before she admitted there was no ignoring what now burned between them.

Thank the gods for Rule #3: No touching.

Riv’En forced himself not to reply to her.

He did not need to. His silence was measured, letting her pick up on the pressure of it as much as his presence beside her.

Her body language changed with every step, the initial tension bleeding into a more cautious intent.

A slower burn under her skin and his, winding tighter with every step she took.

Her eyes shifted to him again before she moved on, a glint of heat catching in her gaze for a single beat before she dropped it.

No flare, no challenge. Just a flash of something harder to define—wariness mixed with interest, sharp and constrained.

The pulse of it pressed against his skin, a heat that should not have been possible from mere proximity.

As if her body was learning the same rhythm as his, step for step, breath for breath.

Riv'En tracked her in silence, his focus narrowing with each step she took. Whether she tested the ship's boundaries or his mattered less than the fact that both were being pushed. And neither could afford to break first.

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There was a sharpness to her now, a heat under her skin that had not been there before.

Her breathing edged quicker in subtle bursts, her pulse beating in her neck just a fraction too fast for mere exertion.

It was not fear. It was something more primal.

His gaze narrowed, analyzing the minute shifts: the way her fingers paused on each green-panel door as though weighing her choices, the slow stretch of her stride as if subtly testing his patience, her movements tuned to the same measured rhythm as his.

And then there was the bite. The raw imprint of her teeth against his skin, his blood in her mouth.

That single moment had changed everything, etched its mark into both of them like a brand neither could erase.

He had not considered the consequences fully.

Not until now. But as he followed her through the corridor, the quiet magnetism drawing her closer step by step, it became impossible to ignore.

Whatever ancient protocol his people once buried—whatever mating process the Elaroin had hidden from outside worlds—it had begun. And it was not one-sided.

They reached the galley. Riv'En keyed open the door, gesturing her inside. "Eat. You

will require stability to function.”

She stepped past him into the stark room, eyes sweeping the space with quick, sharp attention. “And after that? Where are we going?”

Riv’En followed, letting the door seal behind them. He did not sit. “That depends.” A pause. “If you do not break the rules, we continue as planned.”

She frowned. “Which is what exactly?”

His gaze met hers across the room, steady as ever. “Continuing toward my rendezvous coordinates. Survival until then.”

The galley door sealed behind them with a quiet hiss. Riv’En stepped forward first, crossing to the central console, his movements smooth and capable despite the sharp pulse still dragging through his veins.

“This station will produce sustenance calibrated to your species,” he said, tapping a sequence into the panel.

His voice remained flat, but his focus never left her.

Maya stood near the entrance, her gaze sweeping the room, marking every detail.

It was impulse, he recognized that. And something else.

Awareness. The same quiet pull that had thickened between them since he released her restraints.

Her hands slid into her pockets. “And I do what, exactly?”

Riv'En stepped back, allowing her access. "Select your preference here. Protein, starch, flavor modifiers. The system will synthesize in under one Earth minute."

She approached slowly, tension held tight in every line of her frame, her focus shifting between him and the console.

Close enough now that he caught the low rise of her breath, the faint electric prickle in the air between them, heat sizzling like static before a storm.

It pressed against him, a subtle pull, steady and relentless.

"Flavor modifiers," she repeated with an edge of humor. "Right. Alien cafeteria style, I assume."

He did not correct her, mainly because he had no idea what she meant.

Her fingers hesitated over the panel. "You said it's safe?"

"Affirmative. This unit is programmed for human-compatible sustenance."

Her gaze flicked to him again, sharp, assessing. And then she made her selection. The machine hummed softly, the compartment sealing as her meal processed.

They stood in silence while it worked, the hum filling the space between them.

Not a single word spoken. Despite that, the tension stretched tighter.

The influence of her in the room. The way her presence pushed at the edges of his control.

The knowledge of what had passed between them, of what might still.

A low hum sounded and the compartment slid open.

Steam rose from the tray as Maya pulled it free, revealing a compartmentalized meal that resembled some kind of protein layered over grain, with a side that might have been a vegetable.

She stared at it with wary curiosity, lifting the tray with both hands.

“Looks... vaguely edible,” she muttered, carrying it to the nearest table. She sat first, setting the tray down with care.

Riv’En followed, silent as a shadow, and noted the faint crinkle in her brow as she examined each item. Her movements were cautious. Assessing not just the food, but the process, the taste, the surroundings. Everything.

“Try it,” he said, taking a seat across from her.

Maya gave him a suspicious look but picked up the utensil and scooped up a bite of the protein. She chewed slowly, expression unreadable.

“Not bad,” she admitted after a moment. “Little bland, but... not as weird as I expected.”

Riv’En allowed himself to have a fractional tilt of his head. “Flavor modifiers may be adjusted to your preference.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Her voice softened, slower now, carrying a quiet undercurrent of curiosity layered with something else—attention she seemed just barely aware of, like it had slipped past her defenses before she could catch it.

“So... you eat too, right? Or is this just a human accommodation thing?”

“I eat,” he confirmed. “Not at this interval.”

Her gaze lingered on him as she took another bite, her movements unhurried, lips parting just slightly.

The awareness between them built with every slow chew, tension coiling tighter until even the air around them appeared to wait for the next move.

Riv’En tracked the movement of her lips, the subtle parting as she chewed, every detail sharper than it should have been.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth, not just flicking down but holding for a single charged beat before glancing away again.

“Must be real entertaining, babysitting me.”

“It is necessary.”

“Right. Everything by the book.” Her voice lowered as she stirred her food. “Until it is not.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Going to just sit there and watch me eat, or is this where you tell me what comes next?”

“You still have not asked the question,” he said.

Her brow furrowed. “What question?”

“Why you.”

Her hand stilled mid-bite.

The silence returned, tension knotting the air between them.

No words. No movement. Only pressure and awareness building like a pulse neither of them could ignore.

Heat burned beneath Riv'En's skin, not just instinctive, but sharp-edged and dangerous.

The kind that lived between two bodies drawn too close, without a single word left to soften it.

Her voice came low. "You already said it. Something about my twin. About contamination."

"That is what I was told. That is not the same as knowing."

Her eyes narrowed. "So you don't know for sure."

Riv'En did not answer.

Her breathing slowed, each inhale deeper, steadier, as if she were consciously restraining herself.

But Riv'En caught the small betraying signs: the faint quiver just below her jaw, the subtle flush warming her throat, the tightness around her mouth.

It was not just awareness now. It was anticipation.

Attraction sharpened under pressure, pushing against both of them, harder with every beat.

“So what happens if you figure out I’m not contaminated?”

Riv’En let the pause hang there like a blade balanced on edge.

“Then my orders would no longer apply.”

Her grip tightened on the utensil. “And what happens to me then?”

He leaned forward slightly. Not enough to break posture. Just enough to let her deal with his focus pressing closer.

“That,” he said, “is what we must determine.”

Her eyes dropped to his mouth for a beat too long.

The heat in the room shifted again.

“Tell me,” she whispered. “How long are you planning to stick to Rule #3?”

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SILENCE. HEAVY and sharp-edged, stretched tight like the air might snap.

Maya didn't know why she'd said it. That last question—half a dare, half something darker she couldn't name. The second it left her mouth, her whole body reacted: a sharp jolt hit her throat, heat unfurling through her chest and tightening low in her stomach like a line pulled too tight.

Across the table, Riv'En didn't move. His gaze stayed locked on her, focused and unyielding, unreadable.

There was no shift in his posture, no flicker of expression, but the force behind that stare was palpable—like a gravitational pull that kept her pinned in place.

It wasn't just observation. It was pressure.

As if he were measuring every breath she took and weighing it against some internal threshold only he understood.

Her breath caught. Too late to take back her question. Time to deal with it.

Her fingers tightened around the utensil still in her hand, the cool metal grounding her for a second, sharp against the heat flooding her veins.

It wasn't much, but it was enough to hold onto when everything else went crazy.

One stupid comment, and now she couldn't breathe right.

Heat slid down her spine, curling low in her core, sharp and restless.

Something was wrong. Not fear. Not quite. Something else.

Riv'En spoke, finally. Low. Absolute.

“It is not safe.”

Her throat worked. “You mean touching you. Because of your Final Flight.”

“Affirmative.” His voice was iron. “When my heat flash begins, there is no preventing the reaction.”

“But you can tell when it’s coming on, right?” she asked, her voice lower and edged with something she could not quite name. “You’re not just going to explode out of nowhere? You could warn me.”

Another pause. Then, slowly, “That is correct.”

Her breath caught sharp in her chest. Not from relief, but from something denser somehow. Like it wasn’t entirely her own anymore, but an echo, syncing up to something she couldn’t see or name but experienced down to her bones.

It didn’t make sense. The heat in her blood, the low, constant pulsation beneath her skin like her own body was tuning itself to his. It had started the second he released her from those restraints. Or maybe before that. Her gaze flicked to the curve of his mouth, sharp and unforgiving.

“Then maybe it’s not as dangerous as you make it sound,” she said, her voice dipping lower, textured and quieter, silk threaded through with steel. She didn’t mean for it to sound like that—low and sultry, edged with a taunt she couldn’t stop.

A pulse of heat flickered in his eyes. Brief and sharp, as if for just a second, he had let something slip past all that control. Hunger. Want. Recognition. But then it was gone, buried as fast as it appeared.

Riv'En stood. Not rushed. Just enough to put space between them. Or so she thought.

Maya exhaled, shoving aside her plate. Her skin still tingled, like there was a low-voltage current running through her.

She glanced toward the viewscreen occupying one wall of the galley.

Earth filled the window. "Why haven't we left orbit?

" she asked suddenly, needing anything to cut through the anxiety pressing against her.

Riv'En's stance remained locked. "Awaiting orders. From Third. Anya as well."

"So we're just parked here? Floating?"

"Until further directive."

Her breath caught again. Too loud in the quiet.

Her heart still hadn't settled, each beat dragging heat through her veins like an echo of his touch.

She wasn't sure what was worse—the idea of him staying close, feeding this aching pull inside her, or the idea of him leaving her alone with it.

This hunger she didn't ask for. This craving she couldn't manage.

She pressed her palms flat to the table and stood.

Before she could take a single step, he crossed the space between them in a blur.

A hard grip closed around her wrist and he pulled her against him with a force that made her gasp.

Her body slammed against his, the air catching in her lungs as one hand locked around her, the other fisting in her hair.

And then his mouth was on hers. No hesitation, no warning.

The kiss was rough and frantic, all heat and hunger, as though he had waited too long to claim her and now couldn't hold back.

Her breath vanished beneath it, her hands clutching his arms, caught between compulsion and something darker, needier.

Her body arched into him, and she tasted him—hot and sharp and completely alien, and she didn't care. Not anymore.

“Is this what you wanted,” he asked, voice low against her ear, rough and dangerous. His scent wrapped around her, heat pouring off him like a living thing. A fierce jolt pounded through her, her hands sinking into his top, clinging.

“Yes,” she breathed. “No. I want more.”

In instant response, Riv'En's mouth crushed down on hers before the words even finished leaving her lips.

The kiss wasn't careful. It wasn't slow.

It was pure fire, all sharp edges and need barely held in check.

His lips moved over hers like he owned them, like he had been waiting for this moment longer than she could imagine.

Her body melted against his, helpless under the weight of it. One of his hands slid from her side downward, fingers flexing over the curve of her body like he was memorizing every line. Her knees buckled, and still he held her, relentless.

When he finally tore his mouth from hers, they were both breathing hard. “You are dangerous,” he said against her temple. “And I am losing control.”

His hand slid from her hip, trailing over her lower back in a slow, possessive stroke that left her skin burning through the thin fabric of her blouse.

His mouth found hers again, not as frantic this time, but deeper, more purposeful, each shift of his lips like he meant to leave a mark she would never forget.

Maya shuddered against him, caught between the urge to pull away and the overwhelming need to get closer.

Her fingers dug into his arms, nails scraping across the muscle, and still he held her firm, unyielding.

His other hand traced up her spine, the heat of his touch sparking against her skin in a way that came dangerously close to unbearable.

He broke the kiss long enough to drag in a breath, his voice a low growl against her mouth. “You do not know what you are doing.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” she whispered, her own voice wrecked and

shaking, but sure. “You’re the one who keeps telling me to stay away.”

His grip tightened, as if that single sentence pushed him to the edge of whatever line he had drawn.

And then his mouth was back on hers, rougher this time, asilent admission of every unspoken thing neither of them dared say.

His hand slipped beneath the edge of her blouse, fingers skating lightly across bare skin, tracing the curve of her breast. Her breath caught, asoft sound escaping her against his lips, equal parts shock andneed.

His hand glided over her, fingers splaying wide, the slow pressure of his touch sending another ripple of heat through her until she shuddered.

Her hands clenched in his shirt, nails scraping over muscle, and still he did not break away.

The heat wound endlessly tighter, breath and touch blurring together, his desire pulling taut like a thread stretched toofar.

Finally, with a growl low in his throat, Riv’En eased back half a step, his hand dropping away as if by force. His breathing was harsh, his expression locked down and unreadable again.

“Enough,” he said roughly. “For now.”

Maya’s breath stuttered, desire rolling through her. She backed up a single step, needing distance, her hands still trembling from where they’d been clutching him. Her skin was too hot, too tight, like every nerve had been strung out of place.

“What the hell was that?” she said finally, her voice husky and uneven, rasping more than she meant it to.

Riv’En didn’t answer right away. His stance had locked again, arms folded across his chest, but his eyes gave him away. Dark. Watching her like she was both threat and temptation. “That,” he said slowly, “was a mistake.”

Maya dragged in a breath, forcing herself to step farther back, giving herself a little space. “It wasn’t a mistake. It was...” She cut herself off, heat crawling up her neck.

God. What was wrong with her? Her entire body still buzzed with the imprint of his hands, his mouth, like every nerve had been rewired to respond to him and only him. It wasn’t just attraction. It was need. Sharp and bone-deep and wrong.

“I can’t...” she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself, barely holding herself together. “I don’t get it. I shouldn’t want this. Want you.”

Riv’En’s gaze dropped for a fraction of a second, then returned to hers, darker than before. “There are things my people do not discuss. Reactions tied to old urges. Bonds that were supposed to have been bred out generations ago.”

Maya stared at him, every nerve tingling. “You’re saying it’s some kind of... instinct?”

“Not instinct. Directive. Hidden so well it cannot be undone. You feel it. I feel it. That does not make it safe.”

Her throat closed for a second, hard and dry. She shook her head, fingers clenching tight against her ribs. “I can’t stay here. I have to get out.”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. She just turned, forcing her legs to move even

though they were shaky as hell, putting one foot in front of the other until she was out of the galley and out of his sight.

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Her pulse still hammered in her ears, too loud, too fast. Her mouth burned with the taste of him, her skin aching like every nerve had been pulled too tight and left humming.

What the hell was wrong with her? She wasn't like this.

She wasn't someone who craved things she didn't understand.

But when it came to Riv'En, she did. God, she did.

Every inch of her wanted to go back into that room and lose herself in him again.

Maya gritted her teeth, squeezing her arms tighter around herself as she stumbled down the corridor. No. She wasn't doing this. She wasn't letting this happen. Whatever directive or ancient alien bond was screwing with her head, she wasn't going to let it decide her future.

She had to get off this ship. Had to figure out how. Before she really did lose herself to him, to whatever this thing between them was already becoming.

Time to find out exactly what happened when you pushed one of those red-is-dead buttons.

MAYA MOVED through the corridor, footsteps light.

Her pulse still hadn't calmed. That heat under her skin, that restless energy coiled tight, hadn't eased.

And it wasn't just from what happened with Riv'En.

It wasn't just from his hands on her, his mouth claiming hers like he owned every breath she took.

It was from the wanting. From the aching, dizzy pull she couldn't shake no matter how hard she tried.

That scared her more than anything else. Wanting him. Craving him. The way her body remained wired for him, skin hot and sensitive to every remembered touch. She didn't want this. Didn't ask for it. And yet every step she took dragged her in deeper.

She couldn't stay here. Not trapped. Not this close to him. Because if she did, she knew—sooner or later—she wouldn't have the strength to pullback.

Her gaze tracked the colored panels along the walls. Green meant safe. Green meant permitted. She didn't want that. Red meant locked. Red meant dangerous. Red meant a way out. She definitely wanted a way out.

Her fingers hovered over the panel, heat pricking the back of her neck—the same sensation she always got when Riv'En was standing too close.

It wasn't fear exactly, more like some sixth sense lighting up along her skin.

That live-wire awareness she could never fully shake when he was near.

Her breath caught now, sharp and automatic.

She turned slowly, sure she'd find him standing right behind her.

But there wasn't anything, just an empty corridor.

Only her own ragged breathing and the low hum of the ship. Satisfied, she pressed the panel again.

Nothing happened.

Maya tried again, testing the edges of the panel.

Her fingertips traced along the seam, heat lingering on her skin from where it had touched the smooth metal.

It wasn't just frustration building in her chest—it was need.

The same restless, aching pull striking whenever Riv'En came too close.

Even now, with him gone, his presence was stitched under her skin, woven in like some invisible thread pulling tighter every second she stood there.

Her heart knocked hard in her chest, breath ragged in her throat.

She dragged her hand lower, pressing harder against the edges of the panel.

There had to be something. Anything. A weakness she could exploit.

Away out. But each pass of her hand only sharpened the frustration.

The heat. And beneath all of it, the craving she couldn't shake no matter how hard she tried.

“Do you believe trying again will end differently?” The voice cut through the silence, coming from directly behind her.

Maya froze, her heart crashing into her ribs.

For a split second, she swore she could sense the heat of his presence behind her, close enough that if she leaned back she'd collide with solid muscle.

Her breath caught sharp in her throat, body locked tight with the urge to run.

But she didn't move. Couldn't. Not until she turned— gradual, cautious—and found only empty air.

And then, with a single shift, Riv'En appeared as though he'd always been there.

He stepped out of the shadows like a living fracture in reality, unfolding with a grace that was less like movement and more like inevitability.

Dark eyes locked onto hers, unblinking. His entire body held a lethal calm, a stillness so absolute it made her breath stutter, as if even the air wasn't sure it was allowed to move.

Maya staggered back a step, mind racing, pulse skipping in jagged, uneven stutters.

For a breathless second, all she could think was: how long had he been standing there?

Watching her? How many times had she walked these halls, thinking she was alone, while he stood inches away, unseen?

Her pulse kicked harder, adrenaline surging hot and sharp in her veins.

Her voice scraped out, harsh with disbelief and the edge of something she didn't want to name. "What the—how did you do that?"

“Camouflage.” His voice stayed cool, unaffected by the shock radiating off her. “A designation inherited from my mother’s people. It is intuitive. As natural to me as breathing.”

She stared, heart still racing, mind stuttering to catch up.

Disappear. Just—gone. No sound. No warning.

The idea made her skin prickle all over again.

Her gaze traced over him like she could anchor him in place just by looking hard enough, memorizing the exact cut of his jaw, the way his hair hung loose and dark around his shoulders.

Trying to convince herself that if she saw him once, she could always find him again.

“You can just—disappear? Whenever you want?” Her voice cracked a little, breath short and tight.

“Affirmative.” His gaze didn’t flicker. “It is why I and others like me are assigned assassin status. We are not seen until we choose to be.”

Her mouth opened, closed. Assassin . That word clanged in her head, cold and final.

Aflush climbed her neck, an awareness that had nothing to do with the heat from before.

He’d said it like it was nothing. Like being able to disappear, to kill without warning, was just another detail.

Her gaze flicked down his frame, unwilling but unable to stop herself, remembering

too well the sensation of his hands.

His mouth. How close danger had already come.

He took another slow step forward. “You will never know when I am watching.”

Her breath caught, sharp and shallow. A distinctive drumbeat thudded in her chest, steady but relentless, like her body couldn’t decide if it was fear or adrenaline taking over.

And yet—that prickle, that impulsive warning she’d experienced before she even saw him.

It wasn’t random. She’d detected him. Somehow.

Maya swallowed against the dryness in her throat, eyes locked on his.

“You’re an assassin,” she said, voice low, pushing past the rasp in her chest. “And I sensed you. Before I saw you. That’s not normal.”

He ignored her comment. “If you continue,” he informed her, voice dropping lower, “I will lock you in a secured cabin.”

Maya swallowed. Her mind scrambled, but her body didn’t move. She should have been scared. Maybe she was. But that wasn’t all of it. What she felt now was sharper. Edgier. Hungry.

“Understood,” she said finally. But her voice didn’t sound as steady as she wanted it to.

Riv’En gave her one last long look, then turned and walked away.

The moment he was gone, Maya exhaled hard, her heart still hammering. Her skin was still hot. Alive. Her fingertips tingled where they'd touched the panel. Her mind caught and stuttered, running over what he'd said on a tight, repetitivelooop.

Assassin and camouflage. That he could vanish into the walls whenever he wanted. Her pulse refused to settle. Part of her knew she should be terrified, that she was standing in the middle of a ship with an alien who could watch her any time without her knowing.

But beneath the fear, deeper and more unsettling, was the memory of how her body had reacted. The heat in her neck. The shiver down her spine. She'd sensed him before she saw him. Like something inside her had already been tuned to his frequency.

That wasn't normal. That wasn't human. And it scared her even more than Riv'En did. Because if she could sense him, what else was happening to her? What else might she be capable of? Her breath came sharper, unsteady, but she didn't step away from the panel. She wasn't ready to stop.

She stared down the corridor in the direction he'd taken. She could only hope he'd considered the warning sufficient and hadn't doubled back.

Maya waited a long count before she moved again. Back to the red-lit door. Her hand hovered over the panel. Her breath stuttered once. Then she pressed again.

Nothing. Locked. Again.

She moved to another door. And another.

The corridor appeared too quiet, too still. Her skin prickled again, that same low thrum as before. But no footsteps. No voice. No warning.

And then, just as she touched the next panel, her vision blurred.

Her skin buzzed with that same electric pulse she now recognized as something more than nerves.

It wasn't just the cold fear she'd chalked it up to before.

No, this was something different. Sharper.

Like her body was tuned in to something it shouldn't be able to sense. Ashimmer. She looked down at her arm—

Her breath caught.

Her hand wasn't visible. It was there, but it blended perfectly with the wall.

“What the hell...” Maya whispered.

Panic fluttered up her throat. She yanked her hand back. Her skin reappeared. Her pulse pounded harder.

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The door hissed open, as if her camouflaged hand had somehow tripped the same hidden code Riv'En used. Not just mimicry—access. As though the ship itself had recognized her in that moment, allowing her passage like she belonged there, the same way hedid.

Maya jerked back, eyes wide. Too late. Footsteps. Riv'En's. Closer.

Without thinking, she slipped inside the room, pressing flat against the nearest wall.

Her heart was a steady hammer now, not frantic but measured, every beat a pulse from her fingertips down to her spine.

She flattened her palms against the cool surface behind her, trying to quiet her breathing, to disappear completely.

The air tasted sharp, like metal and something darker—fear maybe.

Her mind ran circles around the same thought: he couldn't see her.

She had to believe that. She had to hold still and let it work, whatever had just happened to herskin.

The door stayed open.

Riv'En stepped through. His gaze swept the room once. Twice.

He didn't see her. Maya's heart slammed, sharp and loud. And then came the shock.

Real, dizzying shock. He couldn't see her. Riv'En—an assassin, a man designed to sense and eliminate threats before they even moved—had looked straight through her.

Her pulse roared in her ears, but beneath the panic was a rising thrill.

She wasn't just invisible. She was undetectable.

That realization hit her like a second pulse of adrenaline.

Riv'En hadn't seen her. That meant she had a real advantage, a real chance.

Her mind spun with the possibilities. If she could slip past him undetected, if she could manipulate this—whatever it was—it might be the key to getting off this ship.

For the first time since she'd been taken, the odds weren't completely stacked against her. That awareness from before, sensing him in the hall? Maybe it wasn't one-sided. Maybe she wasn't entirely human anymore. But why wasn't she entirely human?

Her mind reeled, grasping for explanations.

Maybe it was the ship's systems. Maybe something Riv'En had done.

Or maybe—her breath caught—maybe it was her.

That single, reckless moment when she bit him.

When his blood hit her tongue. Could that have been it?

Could his blood have changed something inside her?

The memory left her stomach hollowing out, a faint nausea curling beneath her ribs.

Her hands flexed unconsciously, as if trying to shake off the lingering imprint of him.

If it was his blood, then the question was whether it was temporary.

Or permanent. If it faded, she needed to move now.

Make use of it while she could. Get off this ship.

Find her way back to Earth. And figure out what else had changed before it was too late.

Riv'En shifted to a control panel near the far side, his hand sliding across it, inputting some kind of command. His face stayed blank. Focused. Her lungs locked. She didn't breathe. It was like her entire body had gone weightless.

And still he didn't see her.

When he finished, Riv'En turned, walked back toward the door, and left.

The second the door sealed shut behind him, Maya staggered forward, looking down at herself again. Her hands. Her arms.

Normal.

But she'd seen it. Felt it. Her skin blending perfectly with the wall. Like his.

Her pulse still hadn't calmed.

Carefully, she stepped back to the panel by the exit, pressing her hand against it. Watching as, slowly, her skin shimmered again, color bleeding away, blending with the console beneath her palm.

She pulled back again, chest tight.

“Okay,” she whispered. “That’s... new.”

And she wasn’t done testing. Determination filled her. If she could access one door, there had to be more. Her mind latched onto the idea, frantic and clear all at once. Maybe she didn’t need to force her way out. Maybe she could ask.

She stepped back to the panel again, fingers hovering, then dropped them to the surface with slow intent. “Computer,” she said, voice steady despite the hammering in her chest. “How was I brought aboard this ship?”

A pause. Then a cool, female voice answered. “Subject was transported via long-range matter translocation from planetary designation: Earth.”

Maya blinked, heart pounding. Long-range matter translocation. Teleportation. She hadn’t been taken by shuttle or ship—she’d been ripped straight from her life, her world, by a pulse of light. Her voice cracked as she pressed her hand harder against the panel. “Where is the transport room?”

A small pulse of light traced along the panel in front of her, followed by the voice: “Follow the marked path.”

She didn’t hesitate. Step by step, Maya followed the illuminated path, her heart slamming harder with each turn of the corridor.

At the final door, she paused, then touched the panel to open it.

The room was simple—awide platform, panels glowing faintly along one wall.

Her gaze swept the space, recognizing it on some level.

This was it. Her chance.

Maya stepped onto the platform, cleared her throat, and ordered into the silence, “Beam me down to Earth!”

The panel lights flared. And before she could second-guess it, everything vanished in a sharp pulse of heat and light. Her stomach flipped. Her vision blurred.

She dropped straight into an icy cold ocean.

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SHE HIT the water hard, the shock like a physical blow, stealing her breath and locking her muscles for a terrifying second. The water closed over her head, asuffocating crush of cold and salt, burning against her skin and into her lungs when she gasped.

Brightness surrounded her, pressing in from all sides.

Her body flew into motion before her mind could catch up, arms flailing, legs kicking upward toward the shimmer of light above.

When she broke the surface, she sucked in a ragged breath that burned all the way down, tasting of brine and cold air in equal measure and immediately went under again.

Panic clawed up her throat. Her muscles locked, then jerked into motion.

She fought her way back up, chest screaming for air, arms slicing through the water in sharp, frantic strokes.

Her legs kicked, sneakers dragging her down, but she didn't stop.

Couldn't. Her head broke the surface once more, and she choked in another breath.

The air hit her lungs like broken glass. Cold. Wet.Real.

The sky overhead was bright, pale blue stretching wide and endless.

Sunlight cut sharp against the water, glinting in waves that shimmered like liquid glass.

The water around her stretched in every direction, a wide expanse broken only by the subtle swell of waves.

But there—ahead. A thin, jagged strip of something pale. Land.

Maya kicked harder, forcing her body toward it.

The cold wasn't freezing, but it sliced into her all the same, numbing her fingers, making each stroke more difficult.

Her pulse pounded in her ears, hammering faster than her thoughts.

But she pushed through, teeth clamped, gaze focused.

She wasn't going to drown now. Not after everything.

The closer she got, the more defined it became. A narrow beach. Sand scattered with rock. Behind it, a dark silhouette of trees. Jungle. Or something close. Her arms burned with effort. Her legs cramped. But the idea of stopping, of giving up now wasn't an option.

Her hands hit solid ground.

Maya dragged herself forward, half-crawling, half-staggering onto the sand.

The waves lapped at her heels like they meant to drag her back, but she didn't let them.

She collapsed onto her side, breath sawing in and out of her lungs in ragged bursts.

Every muscle in her body screamed. Her skin stung from salt and sand and the bitterness of cold air against wet clothes.

She rolled onto her back, eyes on the sky above—clear and bright, the sun hot on her face despite the cold water clinging to her skin.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. It was Earth.

She knew it from the slant of the sun, the pull of gravity, the taste of the salt air.

But where on Earth, she had no idea. That part didn't matter right now. She was alive.

Alive and alone.

A sound broke the quiet.

Her neck prickled. That familiar buzz—not nerves. Not fear. Awareness.

Maya pushed up onto her elbows, scanning the water.

And then she saw him—Riv'En—appear out of thin air.

One second the space above the waves was empty, the next his form materialized midair, sharp and sudden, dropping like dead weight.

He hit the surface with a splash that echoed across the quiet, then disappeared beneath the waves.

He reappeared, half-submerged, his head dipping below the surface and rising again

in jerky, uneven bursts. Arms flailing once, twice.

Her stomach flipped. For a second, she thought he was fine—just floundering a little, getting his bearings.

His head dipped under, came back up. One arm swung wide, too wide, like he was reaching for something that wasn't there.

Another second passed. Then another. And she saw it: no rhythm to his movements.

No purpose. Just blind, uncoordinated thrashing. He wasn't fine.

In fact, he couldn't swim.

"Damn it," she rasped, forcing her aching body into motion. Her feet slid in the wet sand as she scrambled back to the waterline and kicked off her shoes, stripped away her blouse and jeans. Then, without thinking, without hesitating, she dove.

The cold hit her again like a slap, but she ignored it, muscles burning as she powered through the waves.

Her arms cut through the water in long, sharp strokes, legs kicking hard, driving her toward where she had last seen him.

Her lungs burned already, but it didn't matter.

Her mind locked on a single focus: get to him.

She spotted him again, barely a flicker beneath the surface, a dark shape sinking, arms drifting out uselessly. Her heart hammered, but she didn't slow. Maya sucked in a deep breath and dove under, eyes stinging from salt as she kicked down, deeper,

forcing herself toward him.

The water closed around her like a fist. Her pulse roared in her ears, faster and louder than the churn of the waves. She reached out, fingers brushing empty water once, twice...

And then she caught hold of him.

Her hand closed around his arm. Solid muscle beneath her grip, cool to the touch, heavier than she expected.

She kicked hard, both arms wrapping around his torso now, dragging him up, fighting the weight of him and the drag of his armor.

Her chest ached, lungs screaming for air, but she didn't let go.

They broke the surface together in a sharp burst, Maya gasping for breath, blinking against the glare of the sun.

Riv'En's head lolled back against her shoulder, his skin pale, long, dark hair slicked against his face and in a flowing circle around his head.

His eyes were closed. No breath moved through his chest.

"No," she rasped. Her legs kicked hard, dragging them both toward shore. Each stroke came harder and slower. But the sand wasn't far. Just a little more.

Her feet hit bottom and she staggered, hauling him with her in a desperate, stumbling crawl until they collapsed onto the sand. Maya shoved herself up on her knees beside him, hands already moving.

“Come on. Don’t you dare,” she hissed, fingers pressing against his throat, searching for a pulse. It was there. Faint. But he wasn’t breathing.

She tipped his head back, swept his mouth with her fingers, then locked her mouth over his, forcing air into his lungs.

Her lip caught against something sharp—his gold-tipped canines.

Pain bloomed, a quick sting, but she didn’t stop.

Again. And again. Her blood mixed with the salt on his lips. It didn’t matter.

Her hands pressed down hard against his chest in sharp, measured bursts. One. Two. Three. Breath. Again. Again.

“Come on, Riven. Breathe, damn you.”

Her voice cracked on the last word, raw and furious. But she didn’t stop. She couldn’t.

Her arms trembled with the effort, chest pounding with each breath she forced into him.

The sun poured down hot against her back, sweat mixing with seawater and blood, the air vibrating with the pounding rhythm of her pulse.

Her eyes burned, blurring with salt and something sharper.

Panic edged closer, clawing at the back of her throat, but she shoved it down.

She wasn’t going to lose him. Not after everything else. Not after the ship. Not after

the bond flickering between them that she couldn't name, couldn't admit she'd experienced. Not after all of it. This wasn't how it ended.

"Come on," she whispered, voice breaking. "You don't get to die. Not after everything. Not after dragging me off Earth. Not after making me feel—"

Her breath caught, words tangling behind her teeth.

Feel what? Angry? Alive? That pull in her chest she hadn't been able to name?

The heat that stirred every time he got too close?

It didn't matter. She couldn't lose him.

Not now. Not with all the questions she still didn't have answers for.

Not with everything between them unfinished.

Her hands pressed down again, hard enough that her own ribs ached in sympathy. Riv'En's chest rose beneath her palms, but there was no answering movement. No cough. No breath. Just stillness.

"Please," she rasped, her forehead dropping against his, skin to skin, salt and sun and blood all tangled between them. "Come back. I swear to God, Riven..."

Her voice cracked. Atremor rolled through her, sharp and involuntary, her whole body shaking with it.

Tears stung her eyes now, hot and blinding.

Don't die . Not here. Not like this. Not when she finally understood what he meant to

her.

Not when it tore at her chest—the acrid, hollow ache she hadn’t let herself admit until now.

The thought pounded through her chest as hard as her pulse.

She pressed her forehead to his again, breath catching on a sob she refused to let loose.

It all seemed too wretched, too hopeless, but she didn’t care.

She couldn’t. If he died here, if she lost him now, she didn’t know what she’d do.

And she hated herself for feeling it but he mattered.

Her hands lifted again, fingers trembling, ready to start compressions all over, and then—

He jerked.

A single sharp movement. His body arched under her, chest heaving as water spluttered from his mouth in a violent, choking rush. His eyes snapped open, dark and wild, zeroed in on her with a clarity that hit like a punch.

Maya gasped, stumbling back a step, her hand flying to her mouth.

Riv’En coughed again, sucking in air like it hurt, like every breath was a fight, but he was breathing. He was alive.

Relief hit her so hard it made her knees buckle.

Her breath caught in her throat, half a sob, half a laugh she couldn't prevent.

But even as that wave broke over her, another slid in underneath it—hot and sharp and unrelenting.

A pulse that didn't belong to logic or relief. It lived deeper than that. Bone-deep.

Run .

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Before she even realized what she was doing, Maya's body shifted, swiveling in one unsteady motion. Her pulse hammered. Not with fear. Not exactly. More like a compulsion that wrapped around her ribs and squeezed.

Get away. Move. Run .

Her skin flickered. Camouflage. It activated without thinking, her form blending in and out with the sunlit trees behind her, light bending around her body like she was caught in a heat shimmer.

Riv'En pushed up onto his elbows, still coughing, eyes snapping to her in that sharp, unblinking way of his. But she didn't stop to look. Didn't wait for him to say a word.

Her breath caught, her pulse screaming in her ears. And she ran.

The jungle loomed ahead, dark and green and thick with heat.

She tore into it, feet pounding against damp earth, branches slapping her arms and legs.

Her skin flickered again, fading in and out as instinct took over completely.

Not just to flee. To hide. To pull away and make him chase. Make him find.

Every step sounded too loud, every breath too sharp. And yet it recognized the rightness of it, the necessity. Her heart ached with it, lungs burning not from the run but from something else. Something she didn't have words for.

Behind her, a faint rustle. A sound she shouldn't have been able to hear over her own breath and pounding feet. But she knew.

Riv'En was coming.

A wild, half-hysterical laugh slipped past her lips, unbidden. Her body moved faster. Her skin shimmered again, blending perfectly into the green shadows around her.

It wasn't fear anymore. It wasn't escape.

It was need.

Maya ran deeper into the jungle, breath sharp in her throat, skin shimmering in and out of visibility.

Energy coiled tight behind her ribs, as if her whole body had shifted into overdrive.

Every step became electric, each stride driven by something bigger than fear alone. Something she couldn't name.

Behind her, branches rustled. Leaves shifted. A whisper of motion so exact it wasn't even sound—just pressure. Presence. She didn't look back. She didn't need to.

Riv'En was there.

A delighted laugh escaped her, half-visceral, half-wild.

Her body came alive, sharp-edged with sensation.

Every breath tasted like sunlight and salt and something deeper, something she couldn't name but didn't want to question.

Her skin prickled with heat, each step sending a jolt through her veins like electricity.

It wasn't just adrenaline. It wasn't fear.

It was elation, pure and unfiltered, a rush so fierce it made her teeth ache from holding it in.

She didn't understand it, didn't care to.

She just reveled in it, in the wildness pounding through her blood as her camouflage flickered unrestrained, blending perfectly into the shadows one second, her pale skin flashing bright the next.

She dove low beneath a twisted vine, breath rasping as she ducked into thicker undergrowth. Branches clawed at her arms, dirt slick beneath her feet. Her pulse didn't slow. It thundered faster. Her mouth tasted of something sharp, like adrenaline mixed with the heat of a flavor she couldn't name.

Her heart raced so fast, like it wasn't her body anymore.

Anticipation mixed with a dizzy kind of joy that left her chest aching and her legs burning.

It wasn't just running. It was more. Bigger.

Wilder. And beneath that, euphoria so bright it bordered on delirious.

Every scrape against her skin, every drag of air into her lungs became amplified, like the whole world had narrowed to this single, wild moment.

She didn't know why it felt so good—to run, to be chased.

To know Riv'En was right behind her, relentless and inevitable.

But she did know she never wanted it to end.

Maya stopped only when she found a hollow between two massive tree roots, crouched low, body folded tight. Her skin shifted again, blurring into the bark. She went still. Completely still. Waiting.

Her breath slowed. Her ears strained.

Footsteps. Slow. Substantial.

Then she saw him.

Riv'En emerged from the trees like he owned them.

His skin shimmered faintly, light bending around him, but not fully until he released his camouflage.

The sun caught on his long black hair, loose and wild, flowing past his shoulders like dark, wet silk.

Every step he took made the strands shift and ripple, framing a face that was all sharp lines and dangerous beauty: high cheekbones, straight nose, mouth cut with brutal accuracy.

His mouth. The one she'd kissed. Hard and rough, and still a distinct memory on her lips.

His eyes were the most impossible thing—brilliant ebony, glowing faint and fierce. Unblinking. Focused entirely on her.

Her gaze drifted lower. Across the sweep of his broad chest, bare now, smooth and marked with faint lines of old battles, skin stretched over muscle so hard it looked sculpted.

His shoulders flexed as he moved, arms hanging loose at his sides but with an unmistakable threat in every line.

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And lower still.

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His cock hung thick between his meaty thighs, long and thick, a deeper bronze than the rest of his skin.

The shaft wasn't smooth. It was encircled with small golden-brown mounds, each one pulsing in a slow, convoluted rhythm that made her breath catch.

They weren't random. They moved like they followed some pattern only his body knew.

Her gaze flicked higher, to the top of his shaft where a knot formed, larger, darker.

It wasn't human. It wasn't even close. But it wasn't strange, either. It was mesmerizing.

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The shape of him wasn't just anatomy. It was purpose.

Function. Power carved into every line. And the way he carried himself—utterly without shame, totally under his command—told her that whatever those markings meant, whatever that knot was for, it wasn't just decoration.

It was inescapable.

Her pulse stuttered hard in her throat, heat crawling down her spine as she drank him in, unable to look away.

She could see him because he'd dropped his camouflage.

She was still hidden, but her own shimmer was faltering.

The harder her pulse kicked, the hotter her skin burned, the harder it became to hold her camouflage steady.

Every flicker became a frustrating betrayal.

Like her body wanted him to find her. Wanted him to see her.

Her chest ached with how badly she wanted him to find her.

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Every flicker of camouflage turned into a battle she wasn't sure she wanted to win,

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It wasn't just physical. It was deeper, clawing at the inside of her ribs, wild and frantic.

She ached with it. Ached with him. Not just from the need to run or the heat pulsing through her.

From the want so sharp it might rip her apart.

He turned his head slowly, scanning. His eyes were sharp, unblinking, the same as always, except now they burned. Not just with heat, but hunger.

Maya didn't breathe. Didn't dare.

Then his gaze swept past her hiding spot—and stopped.

Their eyes locked.

Her heart flipped. Her skin shivered. She didn't know if she made a sound or if it was just her body reacting, but the second stretched razor-thin.

Riv'En snarled. Low. Lethal.

And then he was moving.

Maya shot to her feet, adrenaline kicking hard. Her camouflage shimmered bright again as she bolted deeper into the trees. Leaves slapped her face, her arms. Her feet slid on damp earth.

But she didn't stop.

Behind her, she could hear him. No words. No taunts. Just the steady, relentless rhythm of his pursuit.

The chase wasn't escape anymore, but preordained.

Branches cracked. Shadows flickered. Her heart wanted to tear through her ribs. Her breath sawed in and out, wild and uneven.

And still she ran.

Until his hand caught her.

A sharp tug. She stumbled, her back brushing up against a tree trunk, breath catching in her throat. His body pressed close, not slamming her but bracketing her in, one hand flat against her chest, steady and firm, holding her in place without hurting her.

Her breath caught, sharp and shallow, her skin tightening as though it might splinter under the pressure.

Heat spread outward from where his hand pressed against her chest, alive current she couldn't escape.

Her camouflage flickered and failed, skin flashing into full visibility as her body gave up the fight.

It wasn't just the heat in her veins or the wild hammer of her heart.

It was him. The power of his presence pressing in from every direction, overwhelming her focus. Her breath caught, ragged and shallow, as if just the sight of him was enough to strip her bare—not just physically, but emotionally.

She was exposed in a way she couldn't explain, as though every barrier she'd built between herself and the world had been peeled back under his gaze.

Vulnerable. Claimed. Seen in a way that had nothing to do with her form and everything to do with whatever ancient, impossible bond now pulsed between them.

Her muscles tensed, caught between the urge to flee and the deeper, hungrier need to be caught, to let him find her. To let him have her.

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He was so close she could see every detail: the fine edge of his cheekbones, the faint shimmer along his jawline, the measured drag of his breath as if even that was carefully managed.

Her heart stuttered once, then settled into a low, pounding throb that had nothing to do with fear.

She wanted to touch him. Her hand twitched as if to lift, to close that last inch of space between them, but she held herself still, teeth sinking into her bottom lip.

His eyes dropped to her mouth like he'd sensed it.

Like he'd heard the thought inside her head.

His hand slid up, fingers closing around the center of her bra.

For a breathless second, Maya's mind couldn't catch up with what was happening.

Heat shot through her, tangled up with a rush of disbelief and gut-wrenching awareness.

She knew, the moment his fingers tightened, that she was about to be bare to him.

There would be nothing left between her skin and his eyes.

The idea sent her pulse skittering. Her body tensed, caught between the urge to pull away and the sharp, electric thrill that made her want to lean into it instead.

She was exposed already, the burden of his gaze stripping away the last of her barriers before he even moved.

His touch wasn't harsh, but the tension in his grip was unmistakable.

One fluid pull and the fabric parted, tearing with a low rip that sent heat cascading through her veins. The strap brushed her skin as it snapped free, not hard enough to sting, just enough to leave a whisper of sensation. Her breath caught, sharp and uneven, as cool air kissed bare skin.

Maya sucked in a breath, her mind splintering into too many pieces at once.

Part of her wanted to scream, to tell him how good, how right this was.

Demand to know why her skin burned for his touch, even as her mind warned her to pull away.

But the rest of her couldn't focus on anything except the heat of his body against hers, the steady influence of his gaze, the pressure of his hand where it had been.

Her thoughts scrambled, wild and fractured, caught between compulsion and reason, between running and staying. Between surrender and fight. And all of it, every pulse of sensation, belonged to something older than either of them. Something both ancient and primal. Something destined.

But before she could say a word, he let her go. His hand dropped away from her

chest, fingers trailing lightly over her skin as if committing her to memory.

For a beat, she couldn't move. Her body sagged forward with the loss of contact, skin flushed hot, nerves sizzling with the ghost of his touch.

Her mind reeled, wild and scattered. Part of her wanted to reach for him, to pull him back.

To beg for more. But impulse moved first, taking over before thought could catch up.

And then he stepped back.

His voice broke the silence, a snarl scraping from deep in his throat. "Run."

The sound hit her harder than his touch ever had. It wasn't a threat. It wasn't a taunt. It was a command laced with something deeper. Need. Insistence. A sharp, undeniable push that told her this wasn't just a chase, it was necessity. For both of them.

Her breath caught. Her skin flickered.

For a split second, she hesitated, every part of her screaming to stay, to close the distance between them instead of running again.

Why was all this affecting her so much? Why had her chest gone tight, her legs shaking not from exhaustion, but from something sharper?

She wasn't afraid. She wasn't angry. She was wild with need.

Alive with it. Like every cell in her body had been rewired around the impetus to obey that single word.

Because when Riv'En snarled "Run," it wasn't just a command.

It split her right down the middle. One part of her screamed to stay, to press into him, to have his hands on her again, his mouth.

The other part, the wilder part, knew she had to move.

Had to run. Reason and logic tore at each other, heat and clarity colliding, and in that collision, running was the only thing that made sense.

It was an order with teeth, sharp and insistent, something that crawled under her skin, into her blood, deeper than reason.

And so she ran.

The chase started all over, faster now. Wilder.

Each time he caught her, it was the same: a hard grip, fingers skimming down her sides, dragging lightly over her skin as if memorizing the shape of her, then releasing her again.

Her bra was gone, stripped away with one swift pull, leaving her in nothing but her panties.

And each time he touched her now, it wasn't to tear, but to feel.

To mark each breath, each shiver, until there was nothing left between them but skin.

Her pulse never slowed. Her thoughts never caught up.

And then his hand slid low again, not stopping this time. Rough fingertips trailing

over her hip, down her thigh, then curling around the thin edge of her panties. Her breath caught, body locked between flinch and ache, but she didn't pull away.

Riv'En's hand tightened and with one sharp tug, the last scrap of fabric tore away.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

SHE HIT the water hard, the shock like a physical blow, stealing her breath and locking her muscles for a terrifying second. The water closed over her head, asuffocating crush of cold and salt, burning against her skin and into her lungs when she gasped.

Brightness surrounded her, pressing in from all sides.

Her body flew into motion before her mind could catch up, arms flailing, legs kicking upward toward the shimmer of light above.

When she broke the surface, she sucked in a ragged breath that burned all the way down, tasting of brine and cold air in equal measure and immediately went under again.

Panic clawed up her throat. Her muscles locked, then jerked into motion.

She fought her way back up, chest screaming for air, arms slicing through the water in sharp, frantic strokes.

Her legs kicked, sneakers dragging her down, but she didn't stop.

Couldn't. Her head broke the surface once more, and she choked in another breath.

The air hit her lungs like broken glass. Cold. Wet.Real.

The sky overhead was bright, pale blue stretching wide and endless.

Sunlight cut sharp against the water, glinting in waves that shimmered like liquid glass.

The water around her stretched in every direction, a wide expanse broken only by the subtle swell of waves.

But there—ahead. A thin, jagged strip of something pale. Land.

Maya kicked harder, forcing her body toward it.

The cold wasn't freezing, but it sliced into her all the same, numbing her fingers, making each stroke more difficult.

Her pulse pounded in her ears, hammering faster than her thoughts.

But she pushed through, teeth clamped, gaze focused.

She wasn't going to drown now. Not after everything.

The closer she got, the more defined it became. A narrow beach. Sand scattered with rock. Behind it, a dark silhouette of trees. Jungle. Or something close. Her arms burned with effort. Her legs cramped. But the idea of stopping, of giving up now wasn't an option.

Her hands hit solid ground.

Maya dragged herself forward, half-crawling, half-staggering onto the sand.

The waves lapped at her heels like they meant to drag her back, but she didn't let them.

She collapsed onto her side, breath sawing in and out of her lungs in ragged bursts.

Every muscle in her body screamed. Her skin stung from salt and sand and the bitterness of cold air against wet clothes.

She rolled onto her back, eyes on the sky above—clear and bright, the sun hot on her face despite the cold water clinging to her skin.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. It was Earth.

She knew it from the slant of the sun, the pull of gravity, the taste of the salt air.

But where on Earth, she had no idea. That part didn't matter right now. She was alive.

Alive and alone.

A sound broke the quiet.

Her neck prickled. That familiar buzz—not nerves. Not fear. Awareness.

Maya pushed up onto her elbows, scanning the water.

And then she saw him—Riv'En—appear out of thin air.

One second the space above the waves was empty, the next his form materialized midair, sharp and sudden, dropping like dead weight.

He hit the surface with a splash that echoed across the quiet, then disappeared beneath the waves.

He reappeared, half-submerged, his head dipping below the surface and rising again

in jerky, uneven bursts. Arms flailing once, twice.

Her stomach flipped. For a second, she thought he was fine—just floundering a little, getting his bearings.

His head dipped under, came back up. One arm swung wide, too wide, like he was reaching for something that wasn't there.

Another second passed. Then another. And she saw it: no rhythm to his movements.

No purpose. Just blind, uncoordinated thrashing. He wasn't fine.

In fact, he couldn't swim.

"Damn it," she rasped, forcing her aching body into motion. Her feet slid in the wet sand as she scrambled back to the waterline and kicked off her shoes, stripped away her blouse and jeans. Then, without thinking, without hesitating, she dove.

The cold hit her again like a slap, but she ignored it, muscles burning as she powered through the waves.

Her arms cut through the water in long, sharp strokes, legs kicking hard, driving her toward where she had last seen him.

Her lungs burned already, but it didn't matter.

Her mind locked on a single focus: get to him.

She spotted him again, barely a flicker beneath the surface, a dark shape sinking, arms drifting out uselessly. Her heart hammered, but she didn't slow. Maya sucked in a deep breath and dove under, eyes stinging from salt as she kicked down, deeper,

forcing herself toward him.

The water closed around her like a fist. Her pulse roared in her ears, faster and louder than the churn of the waves. She reached out, fingers brushing empty water once, twice...

And then she caught hold of him.

Her hand closed around his arm. Solid muscle beneath her grip, cool to the touch, heavier than she expected.

She kicked hard, both arms wrapping around his torso now, dragging him up, fighting the weight of him and the drag of his armor.

Her chest ached, lungs screaming for air, but she didn't let go.

They broke the surface together in a sharp burst, Maya gasping for breath, blinking against the glare of the sun.

Riv'En's head lolled back against her shoulder, his skin pale, long, dark hair slicked against his face and in a flowing circle around his head.

His eyes were closed. No breath moved through his chest.

"No," she rasped. Her legs kicked hard, dragging them both toward shore. Each stroke came harder and slower. But the sand wasn't far. Just a little more.

Her feet hit bottom and she staggered, hauling him with her in a desperate, stumbling crawl until they collapsed onto the sand. Maya shoved herself up on her knees beside him, hands already moving.

“Come on. Don’t you dare,” she hissed, fingers pressing against his throat, searching for a pulse. It was there. Faint. But he wasn’t breathing.

She tipped his head back, swept his mouth with her fingers, then locked her mouth over his, forcing air into his lungs.

Her lip caught against something sharp—his gold-tipped canines.

Pain bloomed, a quick sting, but she didn’t stop.

Again. And again. Her blood mixed with the salt on his lips. It didn’t matter.

Her hands pressed down hard against his chest in sharp, measured bursts. One. Two. Three. Breath. Again. Again.

“Come on, Riven. Breathe, damn you.”

Her voice cracked on the last word, raw and furious. But she didn’t stop. She couldn’t.

Her arms trembled with the effort, chest pounding with each breath she forced into him.

The sun poured down hot against her back, sweat mixing with seawater and blood, the air vibrating with the pounding rhythm of her pulse.

Her eyes burned, blurring with salt and something sharper.

Panic edged closer, clawing at the back of her throat, but she shoved it down.

She wasn’t going to lose him. Not after everything else. Not after the ship. Not after

the bond flickering between them that she couldn't name, couldn't admit she'd experienced. Not after all of it. This wasn't how it ended.

"Come on," she whispered, voice breaking. "You don't get to die. Not after everything. Not after dragging me off Earth. Not after making me feel—"

Her breath caught, words tangling behind her teeth.

Feel what? Angry? Alive? That pull in her chest she hadn't been able to name?

The heat that stirred every time he got too close?

It didn't matter. She couldn't lose him.

Not now. Not with all the questions she still didn't have answers for.

Not with everything between them unfinished.

Her hands pressed down again, hard enough that her own ribs ached in sympathy. Riv'En's chest rose beneath her palms, but there was no answering movement. No cough. No breath. Just stillness.

"Please," she rasped, her forehead dropping against his, skin to skin, salt and sun and blood all tangled between them. "Come back. I swear to God, Riven..."

Her voice cracked. Atremor rolled through her, sharp and involuntary, her whole body shaking with it.

Tears stung her eyes now, hot and blinding.

Don't die . Not here. Not like this. Not when she finally understood what he meant to

her.

Not when it tore at her chest—the acrid, hollow ache she hadn’t let herself admit until now.

The thought pounded through her chest as hard as her pulse.

She pressed her forehead to his again, breath catching on a sob she refused to let loose.

It all seemed too wretched, too hopeless, but she didn’t care.

She couldn’t. If he died here, if she lost him now, she didn’t know what she’d do.

And she hated herself for feeling it but he mattered.

Her hands lifted again, fingers trembling, ready to start compressions all over, and then—

He jerked.

A single sharp movement. His body arched under her, chest heaving as water spluttered from his mouth in a violent, choking rush. His eyes snapped open, dark and wild, zeroed in on her with a clarity that hit like a punch.

Maya gasped, stumbling back a step, her hand flying to her mouth.

Riv’En coughed again, sucking in air like it hurt, like every breath was a fight, but he was breathing. He was alive.

Relief hit her so hard it made her knees buckle.

Her breath caught in her throat, half a sob, half a laugh she couldn't prevent.

But even as that wave broke over her, another slid in underneath it—hot and sharp and unrelenting.

A pulse that didn't belong to logic or relief. It lived deeper than that. Bone-deep.

Run .

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:22 pm

Before she even realized what she was doing, Maya's body shifted, swiveling in one unsteady motion. Her pulse hammered. Not with fear. Not exactly. More like a compulsion that wrapped around her ribs and squeezed.

Get away. Move. Run .

Her skin flickered. Camouflage. It activated without thinking, her form blending in and out with the sunlit trees behind her, light bending around her body like she was caught in a heat shimmer.

Riv'En pushed up onto his elbows, still coughing, eyes snapping to her in that sharp, unblinking way of his. But she didn't stop to look. Didn't wait for him to say a word.

Her breath caught, her pulse screaming in her ears. And she ran.

The jungle loomed ahead, dark and green and thick with heat.

She tore into it, feet pounding against damp earth, branches slapping her arms and legs.

Her skin flickered again, fading in and out as instinct took over completely.

Not just to flee. To hide. To pull away and make him chase. Make him find.

Every step sounded too loud, every breath too sharp. And yet it recognized the rightness of it, the necessity. Her heart ached with it, lungs burning not from the run but from something else. Something she didn't have words for.

Behind her, a faint rustle. A sound she shouldn't have been able to hear over her own breath and pounding feet. But she knew.

Riv'En was coming.

A wild, half-hysterical laugh slipped past her lips, unbidden. Her body moved faster. Her skin shimmered again, blending perfectly into the green shadows around her.

It wasn't fear anymore. It wasn't escape.

It was need.

Maya ran deeper into the jungle, breath sharp in her throat, skin shimmering in and out of visibility.

Energy coiled tight behind her ribs, as if her whole body had shifted into overdrive.

Every step became electric, each stride driven by something bigger than fear alone. Something she couldn't name.

Behind her, branches rustled. Leaves shifted. A whisper of motion so exact it wasn't even sound—just pressure. Presence. She didn't look back. She didn't need to.

Riv'En was there.

A delighted laugh escaped her, half-visceral, half-wild.

Her body came alive, sharp-edged with sensation.

Every breath tasted like sunlight and salt and something deeper, something she couldn't name but didn't want to question.

Her skin prickled with heat, each step sending a jolt through her veins like electricity.

It wasn't just adrenaline. It wasn't fear.

It was elation, pure and unfiltered, a rush so fierce it made her teeth ache from holding it in.

She didn't understand it, didn't care to.

She just reveled in it, in the wildness pounding through her blood as her camouflage flickered unrestrained, blending perfectly into the shadows one second, her pale skin flashing bright the next.

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She knew, the moment his fingers tightened, that she was about to be bare to him.

There would be nothing left between her skin and his eyes.

The idea sent her pulse skittering. Her body tensed, caught between the urge to pull away and the sharp, electric thrill that made her want to lean into it instead.

She was exposed already, the burden of his gaze stripping away the last of her barriers before he even moved.

His touch wasn't harsh, but the tension in his grip was unmistakable.

One fluid pull and the fabric parted, tearing with a low rip that sent heat cascading through her veins. The strap brushed her skin as it snapped free, not hard enough to sting, just enough to leave a whisper of sensation. Her breath caught, sharp and uneven, as cool air kissed bare skin.

Maya sucked in a breath, her mind splintering into too many pieces at once.

Part of her wanted to scream, to tell him how good, how right this was.

Demand to know why her skin burned for his touch, even as her mind warned her to pull away.

But the rest of her couldn't focus on anything except the heat of his body against hers, the steady influence of his gaze, the pressure of his hand where it had been.

Her thoughts scrambled, wild and fractured, caught between compulsion and reason, between running and staying. Between surrender and fight. And all of it, every pulse of sensation, belonged to something older than either of them. Something both ancient and primal. Something destined.

But before she could say a word, he let her go. His hand dropped away from her

chest, fingers trailing lightly over her skin as if committing her to memory.

For a beat, she couldn't move. Her body sagged forward with the loss of contact, skin flushed hot, nerves sizzling with the ghost of his touch.

Her mind reeled, wild and scattered. Part of her wanted to reach for him, to pull him back.

To beg for more. But impulse moved first, taking over before thought could catch up.

And then he stepped back.

His voice broke the silence, a snarl scraping from deep in his throat. "Run."

The sound hit her harder than his touch ever had. It wasn't a threat. It wasn't a taunt. It was a command laced with something deeper. Need. Insistence. A sharp, undeniable push that told her this wasn't just a chase, it was necessity. For both of them.

Her breath caught. Her skin flickered.

For a split second, she hesitated, every part of her screaming to stay, to close the distance between them instead of running again.

Why was all this affecting her so much? Why had her chest gone tight, her legs shaking not from exhaustion, but from something sharper?

She wasn't afraid. She wasn't angry. She was wild with need.

Alive with it. Like every cell in her body had been rewired around the impetus to obey that single word.

Because when Riv'En snarled "Run," it wasn't just a command.

It split her right down the middle. One part of her screamed to stay, to press into him, to have his hands on her again, his mouth.

The other part, the wilder part, knew she had to move.

Had to run. Reason and logic tore at each other, heat and clarity colliding, and in that collision, running was the only thing that made sense.

It was an order with teeth, sharp and insistent, something that crawled under her skin, into her blood, deeper than reason.

And so she ran.

The chase started all over, faster now. Wilder.

Each time he caught her, it was the same: a hard grip, fingers skimming down her sides, dragging lightly over her skin as if memorizing the shape of her, then releasing her again.

Her bra was gone, stripped away with one swift pull, leaving her in nothing but her panties.

And each time he touched her now, it wasn't to tear, but to feel.

To mark each breath, each shiver, until there was nothing left between them but skin.

Her pulse never slowed. Her thoughts never caught up.

And then his hand slid low again, not stopping this time. Rough fingertips trailing

over her hip, down her thigh, then curling around the thin edge of her panties. Her breath caught, body locked between flinch and ache, but she didn't pull away.

Riv'En's hand tightened and with one sharp tug, the last scrap of fabric tore away.

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RIV'EN MATERIALIZED on the ship's transport pad, Maya in his arms, the remnants of his armor and clothing he'd gathered before transport at his feet. Her weight was light against his chest, her skin still warm, still alive, kissed by the sun. That was all that mattered.

The transport lights cut off, leaving only the soft glow of the corridor ahead. The ship's systems hummed quietly around them, sealing off the world below as if it had never existed.

As the final shimmer of transport light dissolved, his grip on Maya tightened fractionally.

She didn't stir. Her head rested against his shoulder, her breathing slow and even, lost in a sleep so complete she might have been a feather in his arms. He didn't pause.

Didn't need to. His focus tunneled down to one thing, getting her to the medical wing.

Not because she was hurt. Because she was his.

Because every yearning in his body demanded it.

But as he moved through the silent corridors, a colder edge slid under his skin.

It wasn't just fatigue dragging at his muscles.

It was the certainty of a bond that could not be shrugged away.

Every step came slower, not just because of the effort it took to move, but because each one carried him closer to an end he could already see coming.

Dread settled low in his gut, coiled tight and quiet, as steady as his own pulse.

Aweight he couldn't shake. His joints were stiff, each step slower than the one before.

The hum of the ship around him pressed in too loud, too sharp, and there was a faint pulsing ache in his temples that hadn't been there before.

His breath came thicker, each inhale tasting metallic, like the air was turning against him.

And beneath it all was the unrelenting awareness that his body was changing in ways he couldn't control.

By the time he laid Maya gently onto the med-bed, his breath was coming harder.

Slower. His vision narrowed at the edges.

Heat surged beneath his skin in sharp, rolling waves—not like exertion, not like adrenaline.

Afull-body flash that lit every nerve with burning pressure before it faded to a slow, smoldering throb.

His muscles locked tight for a beat, ribs aching from the sudden rush of heat that left sweat beading along his spine.

Final Flight. Aheat flash. It wasn't just theory now. It was happening.

Riv'En didn't waste time. He activated the scan array above the bed, setting it to monitor her vitals and protect her from his heat flash.

The flash hit like a storm breaking through his veins.

Heat flooded every nerve ending, a deep, rolling burn that radiated from his spine outward, locking his muscles and blanking out everything but the relentless pulse of it.

His vision blurred to white at the edges, breath trapped in his throat, skin too tight for his body.

It wasn't just pain. It was finality. When it broke, his muscles trembled, every inch of restraint scraped clean.

For a breath, Riv'En didn't move. Didn't even breathe.

He expected darkness, expected collapse—but it didn't come.

He was still standing. Still alive. The realization hit as sharply as the heat had.

He had survived this flash. But for how much longer?

Riv'En exhaled hard and stepped back, leaning weakly against the console, his breath laborious as Maya's data scrolled past his eyes.

Her pulse was strong. Her oxygen steady. Blood pressure perfect. Her Mating Flame still glowed faintly against her collarbone, steady as a beacon.

She was stable.

It should have calmed him.

It didn't.

Riv'En pushed off the console, stepping out of the med-bay and into the corridor beyond. The doors sealed behind him, leaving Maya in quiet isolation.

Only then did he press his hand to the wall panel, his fingers unsteady, the lingering echo of the heat flash still pulsing through his system.

He didn't know if he would make it through another one.

Triggering a diagnostic scan on himself seemed almost pointless—but he needed to see.

Needed to know just how fast he was burning out.

The results appeared in a heartbeat.

Final Flight: Accelerated Progression. Bond Induced Complications Detected.

Riv'En's first impulse was to override the scan and try again.

Part of him couldn't believe it, couldn't accept that the bond he'd fought so hard to complete was now the thing accelerating his own end.

But the confirmation sat there in clean, unavoidable data.

He sensed it everywhere now: the pulsing in his blood, the heat lingering beneath his skin.

And beneath all of it, Maya's presence tethered through the bond, her pulse echoing in his head.

This wasn't just about his body burning out.

It was about how deeply she was tied into that burnnow.

His hair, what had once been pure silver, was near-black now. His skin held a duller sheen. His eyes were blacker than ever instead of the brilliant amethyst they'd oncebeen.

None of it surprised him. But seeing it confirmed sent a fresh burn through his chest, sharper than any heat flash.

Knowing something and facing it were two different things.

It wasn't just data scrolling across a screen anymore.

It was the shape of his end, laid out in clean, sterile lines.

And standing there, with the echo of Maya's Mating Flame still burning in the back of his mind, It hit like impact from a fall he couldn'tslow.

He was running out oftime.

He moved to the bridge and sat in the pilot's seat, every step an effort.

His body felt denser, the lingering aftermath of the heat flash making each breath a conscious act.

When he finally lowered himself into the chair, his muscles locked tight for a beat,

and his vision wavered at the edges.

But his fingers steadied on the navigation panel despite it, moving with ingrained care even as the erratic pulse hammering beneath his skin, out of sync with the ship's quiet hum around him.

Elaros.

He didn't type the coordinates right away. He stared at the blank screen, the planet's name silent in his mind. His mother's home world. A place he'd only visited once as a youngling. A place he'd longed to visit again. But then his time had run out.

The strength of it settled in his chest, more oppressive than the heat flash.

Elaros wasn't just some fallback point. He'd carried it quietly as part of his bloodline, but a place he'd never embraced.

His mother had lived on Vetta with his father, raising him there until the day Riv'En's hair turned white and his eyes went amethyst. The day he was taken by the Intergalactic Warriors.

It had been an honor. A duty. And she had let him go because there had been no choice.

Returning to Elaros now meant stepping back into a part of himself he'd locked away—not because it was shameful, but because it was distant.

Forgotten. Familiar in ways he hadn't thought about in years.

And if Elaros couldn't save Maya, then no place in the galaxy could. But now?

Now he had no choice.

Earth wasn't safe for Maya. Not after the bond.

Not with Final Flight accelerating faster than he'd anticipated.

And Maya... He'd seen the shift in her too, the flicker of the Mating Flame, the way her body pulsed in rhythm with his.

It wasn't just him burning out. It was both of them changing. And Earth wasn't built to handle that.

But what terrified him more than any of it was the one possibility he couldn't ignore.

If Final Flight took him out—if his body locked down for good—what would happen to her?

She was bonded to him now. Their connection wasn't just skin-deep.

It ran through every cell in her body. And if his heart stopped, if his systems shut down completely, could she survive that break?

Or would the bond pull her under as well?

Riv'En's hands tightened on the console until metal creaked beneath his fingers.

He should never have touched her. Never should have claimed her.

The clarity of it hit him now, sharp as a blade pressed against skin.

But in the moment, it hadn't been clarity at all.

It had been heat. Compulsion. That wild, unavoidable force that had overridden everything else: training, logic, command.

There had been no preventing it. No pulling back.

And now, standing here with the consequence of Final Flight pressing down on his chest, he saw it for exactly what it was.

He had bound them both to a path with no way off.

The bond had been inevitable, yes, but he had made it real.

Completed it. Vexxed her until it wasn't just impulse anymore.

Until it was permanent. He'd lost control because there was no controlling it, no stopping once it had started.

And now they both had to face the consequences of choices he'd made when he should have walked away.

Riv'En clenched his jaw hard enough his teeth ached.

That was the risk. The price. And he didn't know if there was a way around it.

The thought hollowed him out, colder than space outside the hull.

He pressed his fists against the console, head bowed, the reality of it settling in his chest like death.

Leaving her behind wasn't just about her safety.

It was about making sure she survived what he might not.

And that knowledge carved deeper than the heat flash ever could.

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Taking a breath that scraped raw through his chest, he keyed in the coordinates, locking in the route.

As navigation systems came online, vibrating under his feet, a steady thrum that sounded too loud against the silence in his head, he watched the path plot itself across the nav-screen, every light flickering into place.

There was no turning back now. Elaros was set.

And so was the clock counting down what little time he had left.

Without pausing, Riv'En keyed into the comms system, opening a secured channel to Third and Anya. His fingers hovered for a beat over the console before he pressed send. The message wasn't long.

"Riv'En. Heading to Elaros. Maya recovered, but my Final Flight is accelerating.

If I fall before arrival, she will need extraction.

Request meeting at Elaros to take her if necessary.

"If necessary? The words echoed back in his mind, sharper than any weapon he'd ever wielded. If. It wasn't if. It was when.

The words came thicker than the steady throb dragging beneath his skin.

He knew they would understand that if he did not survive the trip, it would fall to

them to protect her.

That if he died, she might die with him.

That this was not just a request. It was the last thing he could do to make sure she wasn't left alone in the void he would leave behind.

He sent the message and closed the channel. Now all that was left was waiting.

His reflection flickered in the navigation screen, dark eyes that no longer glowed violet, long black hair falling loose around a face clearly inhuman.

He studied the faded metallic sheen of his skin, as if the man he remembered had already disappeared.

Beneath the surface, the signs were unmistakable: a warrior in Final Flight.

One heartbeat from shutting down for good.

He stayed there in silence, watching the stars realign around them, every breath scraping a little harder through his chest. And through it all, one thought kept circling back, louder than the engines, sharper than the ache in his ribs: Maya.

Her name. Her scent. The quiet, steady reassurance of her presence connecting him through the bond.

He wasn't just holding on for himself. He was holding on for her.

Because he wasn't just flying to Elaros for himself.

He was flying there to leave Maya somewhere safe before he couldn't anymore.

Maya's voice broke through the silence, soft and uncertain. "Riv'En?"

His hands froze on the console.

He didn't turn immediately. He couldn't.

He sat there in the pilot's seat, eyes fixed on the navigation screen, using that single focus to hold himself steady.

The stars ahead of them stretched in pale, shifting lines.

Earth was no longer in view. Not just physically but as a choice, as a future.

If he looked at her now, he might waver. And there was no room for that.

A breath scraped through his lungs. Cautious. Steady. Or close enough.

He heard her footsteps come closer before he sensed her presence. Quiet. Careful. Like she already knew something wasn't right.

"Why isn't Earth in the window?"

Her voice was a breath away, laced with confusion and something sharper beneath it.

Worry, yes, but also something more layered.

He could hear it in her tone now that she was so near, the edge of panic restrained by stubborn containment, the first thread of understanding that whatever was happening wasn't temporary or small.

It wasn't about location. It was about them.

Riv'En closed his eyes for a brief second, locking down the storm in his chest before he spoke. It wasn't just emotion. It was physical, a tight knot under his ribs, heat building beneath his skin until his blood ran hotter than it should.

His hands ached with the effort to keep still, knuckles whitening against the console.

His breath came thicker, dragging at his lungs.

It wasn't just about finding the words. It was about tempering the urge to turn toward her too soon.

To take her hands. To pull her in and hold her there because it would be easier than saying it out loud. But he couldn't afford easy. Not now.

"We left," he said finally. His voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. Rougher. Harder.

Silence stretched, oppressive and tight.

She stopped just behind him, the heat of her presence brushing up against the back of his neck like a live wire.

Every part of his body registered her now—the subtle hitch in her breath, the faint, restless shift as she stood there, not quite touching coming close.

The bond pulsed faintly between them, quiet and steady, a reminder that she wasn't just standing there confused.

She was waiting for an answer he wasn't ready to give.

"We left?" Maya said when he didn't speak, disbelief threading through the words.

“Why?”

His fingers tightened on the console, the surface warming beneath his palms as internal heat flared beneath his skin.

The explanation came flat. Absolute. “We are going to Elaros,” Riv’En said, voice steady but iron-edged.

He didn’t just mean it as a location. It was a destination carved into his bones now, as unavoidable as Final Flight itself.

Acourse locked not just in the ship’s navigation but in his own blood, because there was nowhere else left for them.

“Elaros,” she repeated slowly, like she was tasting it for the first time. “That’s your mother’s planet, isn’t it? You said before you were half Elaroin.”

Riv’En finally turned.

She stood just inside the bridge, hair mussed from sleep, wearing nothing but one of his shirts, hanging off her frame like a flag surrendered to the wind. Her eyes met his and locked there, sharp and too-blue.

“It is my mother’s planet,” he said. “Or was, since I do not believe she still lives. We will be safer there.”

Her brows pulled together. “Why? What’s wrong with Earth?”

He said nothing. Didn’t move. The import of what he had to tell her sat like lead in his chest, heavier than any weapon he’d ever carried.

Not just because of what it meant for him, but because of what it meant for her.

That her life was now entwined with his in a way that neither of them could undo, no matter how much he might want to protect her from it. And there was no easy way to say it.

Maya's gaze dropped to his hands. The skin there was darker now, not just from shadow, but from Final Flight claiming him cell by cell. Her breath caught, her eyes widening as she realized what she was seeing. Her gaze flicked back up to his face, silent, not panicked yet—but aware.

She started to reach for him, then froze, caught between reflex and denial.

His fingers hovered over the console, twitching once, twice, as if fighting an invisible mass pressing down on them.

That tremor wasn't just exhaustion. It was the storm under his skin breaking through his management, and for the first time, he knew she saw it.

Her voice softened. "Riv'En. What's happening?"

He stood then, every inch of him rigid, but restrained. Steady. He crossed to her in two measured steps, stopping just close enough that the heat of her skin scored him.

"I am in Final Flight." The words escaped in a blunt statement, like a blade dulled by too many cuts.

Maya went still. Her lips parted on a quiet exhale. "I know," she whispered, voice tight. "You've explained that to me. But—"

He cut her off before she could say more. "It is accelerating. Faster than I expected."

Her breath hitched. Her hands curled into fists again, knuckles white. “Riv’En...” Her voice cracked, not just with fear but from knowing something irreversible had shifted between them. Her eyes searched his, wild and desperate. “This is real? It’s already happening?”

He stepped in closer, forcing himself to meet her eyes. Forcing himself to say it. “And you... you are bonded to me.”

Her lips parted on a sharp inhale. Maya didn’t speak right away. Her eyes searched his face as if trying to make sense of what he’d just said, of what it meant. Her pulse fluttered in her throat, visible in a quick, uneven rhythm.

“Bonded,” she repeated, voice cracking on the word. “You mean... it’s real. It’s permanent.”

Riv’En gave a single nod. “Yes. It cannot be undone.”

Her breath left her in a rough exhale. One hand lifted to her collarbone, fingers brushing over her Mating Flame, tracing the faint pulse there.

“And if you...” she started, voice faltering. “If you fall—”

“If I fall,” he said quietly, cutting in before she could finish, “you may fall with me.”

Maya froze. Her breath caught mid-inhale, the movement visible in the tense line of her throat.

Her eyes widened, sharp with panic that wasn’t spoken yet, but clear in the rigid set of her shoulders.

Riv’En watched her, the weight of that reaction settle in his chest. It wasn’t new.

It wasn't a surprise. But seeing her process it now, so direct and unshielded, made it sharper than before.

Her face went pale. "What does that mean?"

He didn't sugarcoat it.

"It means if I die, you may die with me. Because of the bond."

Maya's breath caught and she shook her head, her pale hair tumbling about her shoulders in disarray. "Then we fix it," she said, voice already climbing. "We go back to Earth, we find someone, we—"

"No." His voice cut through the air, quiet and absolute. "There is no Earth anymore. There is only Elaros. We go to Elaros so they can protect you if I'm unable to."

She stepped closer, eyes shining, her pulse hammering through the bond, a hot, sharp throb that gripped him tighter than her hands ever could. "You can't just decide that for both of us. I don't care about planets or protocols or Final Flight—I care about you. I'm not leaving you."

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The words cut sharper than he wanted them to. Her determination pressed against him like heat, but it didn't change the truth.

"You do not have a choice," he said, voice flat. "If I fall, someone must take you."

Maya shook her head again. Her voice dropped low, tight with the strain of holding herself together. "You really think I'm just going to stand there and watch you die? That I'll let you leave me like that? I know I can't stop it. But I can be there. Until the very end."

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The only sound was the low hum of the ship's systems and the faint hiss of air cycling through the vents.

Then Riv'En reached for her. His hands settled on her hips, pulling her against him in silence. Her breath shuddered out between them, and for once, she didn't push. She leaned into him.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her there as the stars realigned and the ship jumped to hyperspeed.

The oversized shirt she wore—his—was thin, soft against his hands, her warmth bleeding through it.

No other layers. No other barriers. Her scent, the faint pulse of her Mating Flame beneath her skin, surrounded him.

And he realized, as she leaned into him fully, her breath catching against his

shoulder, that she wasn't wearing anything beneath it.

Riv'En's hands slid up her sides, fingers finding the hem of the shirt and dragging it higher. From his perspective, Maya's breath caught again, not from fear, but from awareness. It came as a ripple through the bond between them, sharper and brighter than before.

She was aware of his desire, yes, but also of how fully her body responded to him, every shift of his hands and rhythm of his breath feeding that awareness.

It wasn't just physical. It was the Mating Flame drawing her deeper, binding her to every move he made.

It wasn't just about touch. It was about everything building between them in completeness.

When the fabric bunched beneath her arms, Riv'En tugged it up and over her head in one smooth motion, letting it fall to the floor.

Her skin was warm against his palms, bare and soft and already flushed. Her Mating Flame glowed faintly just above her heart, its pulse slow and steady in time with her breath.

He guided her onto his lap, positioning her carefully, hands firm.

She settled astride him, her legs straddling his thighs, body close enough that her heat bled through every layer of him.

But his uniform was still in the way. In a purposeful motion, Riv'En pulled his shirt over his head, discarding it onto the floor beside hers.

His hot skin brushed against hers now, bare chest to bare chest, no fabric left between them.

His fingers tightened slightly, soaking himself in her warmth.

Then, one hand moved down, fingers finding the fastening of his pants.

Without looking away from her, he opened them, the quiet rasp of fabric and fastenings the only sound besides their harsh breathing.

His cock pressed up against her now, bare and hard, the final barrier between them gone.

Riv'En leaned in, his mouth finding the hollow of her throat, teeth grazing over her skin before his tongue followed.

He worked lower, tasting the salt on her skin, the soft curve of her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts.

His hands never stopped moving—one tracing up her spine, the other cupping her hip, guiding her upward and onto his cock.

Her hands slid into his hair, fingers tangling as her head fell back, offering him more.

Her nails scraped lightly against his scalp, causing a desire that sent heat rolling lower in his spine .

Her touch reached beyond the senses, heightening the pleasure of their bond.

The flex of her thighs around him, the pulse in her throat, the faint scent of her skin.

All of it sharpened as she gave herself over, and with it, his own restraint stretched thin.

Her body moved with his now, friction building between them in pulses as steady as the ship's engines.

Riv'En's control thinned with every breath. His pulse roared in his ears, but he didn't rush it. This wasn't like before. This wasn't about impetus alone. It was claiming her all over again, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. And because she wanted him.

He caught her mouth with his, swallowing the sound as he lifted her just slightly, before pulling her down, slow, filling her, taking her, bottoming out deep inside.

Her heat wrapped around him, slick and tight, pulling him in deeper with each slow roll of her hips.

Her thighs quivered against his sides, muscles flexing as she adjusted to the full length of him, every inch, every pulse a fresh wave of unbearable tension.

Maya's breath broke against his mouth, her hands braced against his shoulders now, nails biting into the muscle there as her body moved in impetuous rolls.

Riv'En held her steady at first, guiding her rhythm until it was perfect—until it seemed as though the stars outside weren't moving nearly as fast as they were.

His mouth found her Mating Flame again, tongue tracing the glowing mark as he rocked up to meet her every motion.

And with every slow, grinding thrust, he thought the same thing:

Only her.

The thought didn't quiet him. It sharpened everything.

His grip tightened on her, holding her closer, moving deeper.

The bond pulsed steady between them, undeniable, and every slow drag and shift made it stronger.

Not just the need, but the absolute certainty that there was nothing beyond this moment.

Nothing except her.

Whatever happened next—Final Flight, death, all of it—she was already part of him. And there was no separating them now. No breaking what had already been sealed between them.

She belonged to him. And the gods knew, he belonged to her.

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But the confirmation sat there in clean, unavoidable data.

He sensed it everywhere now: the pulsing in his blood, the heat lingering beneath his skin.

And beneath all of it, Maya's presence tethered through the bond, her pulse echoing in his head.

This wasn't just about his body burning out.

It was about how deeply she was tied into that burnnow.

His hair, what had once been pure silver, was near-black now. His skin held a duller sheen. His eyes were blacker than ever instead of the brilliant amethyst they'd oncebeen.

None of it surprised him. But seeing it confirmed sent a fresh burn through his chest, sharper than any heat flash.

Knowing something and facing it were two different things.

It wasn't just data scrolling across a screen anymore.

It was the shape of his end, laid out in clean, sterile lines.

And standing there, with the echo of Maya's Mating Flame still burning in the back of his mind, It hit like impact from a fall he couldn'tslow.

He was running out oftime.

He moved to the bridge and sat in the pilot's seat, every step an effort.

His body felt denser, the lingering aftermath of the heat flash making each breath a conscious act.

When he finally lowered himself into the chair, his muscles locked tight for a beat,

and his vision wavered at the edges.

But his fingers steadied on the navigation panel despite it, moving with ingrained care even as the erratic pulse hammering beneath his skin, out of sync with the ship's quiet hum around him.

Elaros.

He didn't type the coordinates right away. He stared at the blank screen, the planet's name silent in his mind. His mother's home world. A place he'd only visited once as a youngling. A place he'd longed to visit again. But then his time had run out.

The strength of it settled in his chest, more oppressive than the heat flash.

Elaros wasn't just some fallback point. He'd carried it quietly as part of his bloodline, but a place he'd never embraced.

His mother had lived on Vetta with his father, raising him there until the day Riv'En's hair turned white and his eyes went amethyst. The day he was taken by the Intergalactic Warriors.

It had been an honor. A duty. And she had let him go because there had been no choice.

Returning to Elaros now meant stepping back into a part of himself he'd locked away—not because it was shameful, but because it was distant.

Forgotten. Familiar in ways he hadn't thought about in years.

And if Elaros couldn't save Maya, then no place in the galaxy could. But now?

Now he had no choice.

Earth wasn't safe for Maya. Not after the bond.

Not with Final Flight accelerating faster than he'd anticipated.

And Maya... He'd seen the shift in her too, the flicker of the Mating Flame, the way her body pulsed in rhythm with his.

It wasn't just him burning out. It was both of them changing. And Earth wasn't built to handle that.

But what terrified him more than any of it was the one possibility he couldn't ignore.

If Final Flight took him out—if his body locked down for good—what would happen to her?

She was bonded to him now. Their connection wasn't just skin-deep.

It ran through every cell in her body. And if his heart stopped, if his systems shut down completely, could she survive that break?

Or would the bond pull her under as well?

Riv'En's hands tightened on the console until metal creaked beneath his fingers.

He should never have touched her. Never should have claimed her.

The clarity of it hit him now, sharp as a blade pressed against skin.

But in the moment, it hadn't been clarity at all.

It had been heat. Compulsion. That wild, unavoidable force that had overridden everything else: training, logic, command.

There had been no preventing it. No pulling back.

And now, standing here with the consequence of Final Flight pressing down on his chest, he saw it for exactly what it was.

He had bound them both to a path with no way off.

The bond had been inevitable, yes, but he had made it real.

Completed it. Vexxed her until it wasn't just impulse anymore.

Until it was permanent. He'd lost control because there was no controlling it, no stopping once it had started.

And now they both had to face the consequences of choices he'd made when he should have walked away.

Riv'En clenched his jaw hard enough his teeth ached.

That was the risk. The price. And he didn't know if there was a way around it.

The thought hollowed him out, colder than space outside the hull.

He pressed his fists against the console, head bowed, the reality of it settling in his chest like death.

Leaving her behind wasn't just about her safety.

It was about making sure she survived what he might not.

And that knowledge carved deeper than the heat flash ever could.

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Taking a breath that scraped raw through his chest, he keyed in the coordinates, locking in the route.

As navigation systems came online, vibrating under his feet, a steady thrum that sounded too loud against the silence in his head, he watched the path plot itself across the nav-screen, every light flickering into place.

There was no turning back now. Elaros was set.

And so was the clock counting down what little time he had left.

Without pausing, Riv'En keyed into the comms system, opening a secured channel to Third and Anya. His fingers hovered for a beat over the console before he pressed send. The message wasn't long.

"Riv'En. Heading to Elaros. Maya recovered, but my Final Flight is accelerating.

If I fall before arrival, she will need extraction.

Request meeting at Elaros to take her if necessary.

"If necessary? The words echoed back in his mind, sharper than any weapon he'd ever wielded. If. It wasn't if. It was when.

The words came thicker than the steady throb dragging beneath his skin.

He knew they would understand that if he did not survive the trip, it would fall to

them to protect her.

That if he died, she might die with him.

That this was not just a request. It was the last thing he could do to make sure she wasn't left alone in the void he would leave behind.

He sent the message and closed the channel. Now all that was left was waiting.

His reflection flickered in the navigation screen, dark eyes that no longer glowed violet, long black hair falling loose around a face clearly inhuman.

He studied the faded metallic sheen of his skin, as if the man he remembered had already disappeared.

Beneath the surface, the signs were unmistakable: a warrior in Final Flight.

One heartbeat from shutting down for good.

He stayed there in silence, watching the stars realign around them, every breath scraping a little harder through his chest. And through it all, one thought kept circling back, louder than the engines, sharper than the ache in his ribs: Maya.

Her name. Her scent. The quiet, steady reassurance of her presence connecting him through the bond.

He wasn't just holding on for himself. He was holding on for her.

Because he wasn't just flying to Elaros for himself.

He was flying there to leave Maya somewhere safe before he couldn't anymore.

Maya's voice broke through the silence, soft and uncertain. "Riv'En?"

His hands froze on the console.

He didn't turn immediately. He couldn't.

He sat there in the pilot's seat, eyes fixed on the navigation screen, using that single focus to hold himself steady.

The stars ahead of them stretched in pale, shifting lines.

Earth was no longer in view. Not just physically but as a choice, as a future.

If he looked at her now, he might waver. And there was no room for that.

A breath scraped through his lungs. Cautious. Steady. Or close enough.

He heard her footsteps come closer before he sensed her presence. Quiet. Careful. Like she already knew something wasn't right.

"Why isn't Earth in the window?"

Her voice was a breath away, laced with confusion and something sharper beneath it.

Worry, yes, but also something more layered.

He could hear it in her tone now that she was so near, the edge of panic restrained by stubborn containment, the first thread of understanding that whatever was happening wasn't temporary or small.

It wasn't about location. It was about them.

Riv'En closed his eyes for a brief second, locking down the storm in his chest before he spoke. It wasn't just emotion. It was physical, a tight knot under his ribs, heat building beneath his skin until his blood ran hotter than it should.

His hands ached with the effort to keep still, knuckles whitening against the console.

His breath came thicker, dragging at his lungs.

It wasn't just about finding the words. It was about tempering the urge to turn toward her too soon.

To take her hands. To pull her in and hold her there because it would be easier than saying it out loud. But he couldn't afford easy. Not now.

"We left," he said finally. His voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. Rougher. Harder.

Silence stretched, oppressive and tight.

She stopped just behind him, the heat of her presence brushing up against the back of his neck like a live wire.

Every part of his body registered her now—the subtle hitch in her breath, the faint, restless shift as she stood there, not quite touching coming close.

The bond pulsed faintly between them, quiet and steady, a reminder that she wasn't just standing there confused.

She was waiting for an answer he wasn't ready to give.

"We left?" Maya said when he didn't speak, disbelief threading through the words.

“Why?”

His fingers tightened on the console, the surface warming beneath his palms as internal heat flared beneath his skin.

The explanation came flat. Absolute. “We are going to Elaros,” Riv’En said, voice steady but iron-edged.

He didn’t just mean it as a location. It was a destination carved into his bones now, as unavoidable as Final Flight itself.

Acourse locked not just in the ship’s navigation but in his own blood, because there was nowhere else left for them.

“Elaros,” she repeated slowly, like she was tasting it for the first time. “That’s your mother’s planet, isn’t it? You said before you were half Elaroin.”

Riv’En finally turned.

She stood just inside the bridge, hair mussed from sleep, wearing nothing but one of his shirts, hanging off her frame like a flag surrendered to the wind. Her eyes met his and locked there, sharp and too-blue.

“It is my mother’s planet,” he said. “Or was, since I do not believe she still lives. We will be safer there.”

Her brows pulled together. “Why? What’s wrong with Earth?”

He said nothing. Didn’t move. The import of what he had to tell her sat like lead in his chest, heavier than any weapon he’d ever carried.

Not just because of what it meant for him, but because of what it meant for her.

That her life was now entwined with his in a way that neither of them could undo, no matter how much he might want to protect her from it. And there was no easy way to say it.

Maya's gaze dropped to his hands. The skin there was darker now, not just from shadow, but from Final Flight claiming him cell by cell. Her breath caught, her eyes widening as she realized what she was seeing. Her gaze flicked back up to his face, silent, not panicked yet—but aware.

She started to reach for him, then froze, caught between reflex and denial.

His fingers hovered over the console, twitching once, twice, as if fighting an invisible mass pressing down on them.

That tremor wasn't just exhaustion. It was the storm under his skin breaking through his management, and for the first time, he knew she saw it.

Her voice softened. "Riv'En. What's happening?"

He stood then, every inch of him rigid, but restrained. Steady. He crossed to her in two measured steps, stopping just close enough that the heat of her skin scored him.

"I am in Final Flight." The words escaped in a blunt statement, like a blade dulled by too many cuts.

Maya went still. Her lips parted on a quiet exhale. "I know," she whispered, voice tight. "You've explained that to me. But—"

He cut her off before she could say more. "It is accelerating. Faster than I expected."

Her breath hitched. Her hands curled into fists again, knuckles white. “Riv’En...” Her voice cracked, not just with fear but from knowing something irreversible had shifted between them. Her eyes searched his, wild and desperate. “This is real? It’s already happening?”

He stepped in closer, forcing himself to meet her eyes. Forcing himself to say it. “And you... you are bonded to me.”

Her lips parted on a sharp inhale. Maya didn’t speak right away. Her eyes searched his face as if trying to make sense of what he’d just said, of what it meant. Her pulse fluttered in her throat, visible in a quick, uneven rhythm.

“Bonded,” she repeated, voice cracking on the word. “You mean... it’s real. It’s permanent.”

Riv’En gave a single nod. “Yes. It cannot be undone.”

Her breath left her in a rough exhale. One hand lifted to her collarbone, fingers brushing over her Mating Flame, tracing the faint pulse there.

“And if you...” she started, voice faltering. “If you fall—”

“If I fall,” he said quietly, cutting in before she could finish, “you may fall with me.”

Maya froze. Her breath caught mid-inhale, the movement visible in the tense line of her throat.

Her eyes widened, sharp with panic that wasn’t spoken yet, but clear in the rigid set of her shoulders.

Riv’En watched her, the weight of that reaction settle in his chest. It wasn’t new.

It wasn't a surprise. But seeing her process it now, so direct and unshielded, made it sharper than before.

Her face went pale. "What does that mean?"

He didn't sugarcoat it.

"It means if I die, you may die with me. Because of the bond."

Maya's breath caught and she shook her head, her pale hair tumbling about her shoulders in disarray. "Then we fix it," she said, voice already climbing. "We go back to Earth, we find someone, we—"

"No." His voice cut through the air, quiet and absolute. "There is no Earth anymore. There is only Elaros. We go to Elaros so they can protect you if I'm unable to."

She stepped closer, eyes shining, her pulse hammering through the bond, a hot, sharp throb that gripped him tighter than her hands ever could. "You can't just decide that for both of us. I don't care about planets or protocols or Final Flight—I care about you. I'm not leaving you."

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The words cut sharper than he wanted them to. Her determination pressed against him like heat, but it didn't change the truth.

"You do not have a choice," he said, voice flat. "If I fall, someone must take you."

Maya shook her head again. Her voice dropped low, tight with the strain of holding herself together. "You really think I'm just going to stand there and watch you die? That I'll let you leave me like that? I know I can't stop it. But I can be there. Until the very end."

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The only sound was the low hum of the ship's systems and the faint hiss of air cycling through the vents.

Then Riv'En reached for her. His hands settled on her hips, pulling her against him in silence. Her breath shuddered out between them, and for once, she didn't push. She leaned into him.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her there as the stars realigned and the ship jumped to hyperspeed.

The oversized shirt she wore—his—was thin, soft against his hands, her warmth bleeding through it.

No other layers. No other barriers. Her scent, the faint pulse of her Mating Flame beneath her skin, surrounded him.

And he realized, as she leaned into him fully, her breath catching against his

shoulder, that she wasn't wearing anything beneath it.

Riv'En's hands slid up her sides, fingers finding the hem of the shirt and dragging it higher. From his perspective, Maya's breath caught again, not from fear, but from awareness. It came as a ripple through the bond between them, sharper and brighter than before.

She was aware of his desire, yes, but also of how fully her body responded to him, every shift of his hands and rhythm of his breath feeding that awareness.

It wasn't just physical. It was the Mating Flame drawing her deeper, binding her to every move he made.

It wasn't just about touch. It was about everything building between them in completeness.

When the fabric bunched beneath her arms, Riv'En tugged it up and over her head in one smooth motion, letting it fall to the floor.

Her skin was warm against his palms, bare and soft and already flushed. Her Mating Flame glowed faintly just above her heart, its pulse slow and steady in time with her breath.

He guided her onto his lap, positioning her carefully, hands firm.

She settled astride him, her legs straddling his thighs, body close enough that her heat bled through every layer of him.

But his uniform was still in the way. In a purposeful motion, Riv'En pulled his shirt over his head, discarding it onto the floor beside hers.

His hot skin brushed against hers now, bare chest to bare chest, no fabric left between them.

His fingers tightened slightly, soaking himself in her warmth.

Then, one hand moved down, fingers finding the fastening of his pants.

Without looking away from her, he opened them, the quiet rasp of fabric and fastenings the only sound besides their harsh breathing.

His cock pressed up against her now, bare and hard, the final barrier between them gone.

Riv'En leaned in, his mouth finding the hollow of her throat, teeth grazing over her skin before his tongue followed.

He worked lower, tasting the salt on her skin, the soft curve of her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts.

His hands never stopped moving—one tracing up her spine, the other cupping her hip, guiding her upward and onto his cock.

Her hands slid into his hair, fingers tangling as her head fell back, offering him more.

Her nails scraped lightly against his scalp, causing a desire that sent heat rolling lower in his spine .

Her touch reached beyond the senses, heightening the pleasure of their bond.

The flex of her thighs around him, the pulse in her throat, the faint scent of her skin.

All of it sharpened as she gave herself over, and with it, his own restraint stretched thin.

Her body moved with his now, friction building between them in pulses as steady as the ship's engines.

Riv'En's control thinned with every breath. His pulse roared in his ears, but he didn't rush it. This wasn't like before. This wasn't about impetus alone. It was claiming her all over again, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. And because she wanted him.

He caught her mouth with his, swallowing the sound as he lifted her just slightly, before pulling her down, slow, filling her, taking her, bottoming out deep inside.

Her heat wrapped around him, slick and tight, pulling him in deeper with each slow roll of her hips.

Her thighs quivered against his sides, muscles flexing as she adjusted to the full length of him, every inch, every pulse a fresh wave of unbearable tension.

Maya's breath broke against his mouth, her hands braced against his shoulders now, nails biting into the muscle there as her body moved in impetuous rolls.

Riv'En held her steady at first, guiding her rhythm until it was perfect—until it seemed as though the stars outside weren't moving nearly as fast as they were.

His mouth found her Mating Flame again, tongue tracing the glowing mark as he rocked up to meet her every motion.

And with every slow, grinding thrust, he thought the same thing:

Only her.

The thought didn't quiet him. It sharpened everything.

His grip tightened on her, holding her closer, moving deeper.

The bond pulsed steady between them, undeniable, and every slow drag and shift made it stronger.

Not just the need, but the absolute certainty that there was nothing beyond this moment.

Nothing except her.

Whatever happened next—Final Flight, death, all of it—she was already part of him. And there was no separating them now. No breaking what had already been sealed between them.

She belonged to him. And the gods knew, he belonged to her.

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THE VOICE echoed through the ship, sharp and unrelenting: “You have ten count-marks to leave orbit, or you will be annihilated.”

Maya could not breathe. It wasn’t just fear.

It was as if the words themselves had stolen the air from her lungs, leaving her locked in place, every nerve stretched too tight.

The ship appeared smaller somehow, the walls closer, the lights dimmer.

Apulsing tension spread through her, like the ship itself had pressed its hand against her skin, steady and impossible to shake.

It wasn’t until Riv’En’s robe shifted to a denser shade of gold in the low light that she remembered she wasn’t alone.

He stood at the console, tall and commanding, as if that voice had been nothing but static. His hands moved with ease, keying in a sequence she did not understand. His profile was sharp in the low light, steely.

His voice, when it came, was calm. Absolute. “You are safe.”

Maya swallowed against the sharp edge of terror in her throat.

Her gaze darted to the viewport where the shimmer of an approaching vessel grew clearer, larger, until it filled the upper edge of space.

Every pulse of color along its surface sent another shiver down her spine.

It wasn't just its size or the way it moved.

It was the sense that the ship wasn't observing them passively.

It was alive, aware, watching her specifically.

A cold ripple chased up her arms, the kind that tightened muscle before thought could catch up.

Her throat tightened even more, the air in the room turned thin, as if the vessel outside was already drawing it away.

The ship wasn't metal, wasn't synthetic, wasn't anything built by human hands. It shifted like liquid, like skin stretched over muscle, alive and breathing in a manner more organic than mechanical.

Just like the planet, the ship's surface shifted in real time, fluid patterns rippling across its hull like living camouflage. Colors—violet and silver, deep green edged with pale yellow—moved as if they were alive, as if the ship breathed.

Her voice broke before she could prevent it. "Is this the ship that was following us?"

"No," Riv'En said, his voice flat and certain. "That ship evaded our scans. This one did not. This is an Elaroin high command vessel. It follows no one. It watches. It judges."

"They can see us?"

Riv'En did not look away from the controls.

His hands moved with the same unhurried skill as before, but there was a power to his posture now— set, purposeful.

“They do not require sight.” His voice dropped a fraction lower, almost like he was speaking more to himself than to her. “They sense presence. Energy. Intent.”

A hint of pressure built behind her eyes, sharp and tight, like her entire mind had narrowed to a single, blinding point of tension.

Her thoughts fuzzed at the edges, unable to escape the weight pressing in from all sides.

“So what do we do?” Her voice came sharper this time, the edge of panic creeping in despite herself.

“Are we leaving? Are we getting out of here?”

“No.”

The word dropped between them like a solid force. Hard as iron. Hard as Riv’En himself. He didn’t glance at her, didn’t hesitate. It wasn’t just a decision. It was a fact.

The quiet between them stretched until she found it unbearable. Her skin prickled. Her entire body tensed.

And still he moved with that infuriating, terrifying precision. Every action measured. No hesitation, no excess. As if the threat outside didn’t register at all. It wasn’t bravado. It was just who he was, a fixed point when everything else was in motion.

“Then what?” Her voice cracked. “We just sit here and wait for them to blow us up?”

Riv'En keyed in a final sequence. The console pulsed beneath his hand. He didn't even glance at her when he spoke.

“This is Riv'En, Fourth of Alpha Legion, assassin-class Intergalactic Warrior. Identification marker Delta-Echo-Four. Irequest formal parlay under Elaroin code.”

The transmission pulsed out into the void. And then there was nothing.

Silence.

Except for the rapid beat of her pulse and the absolute quiet inside the ship as the command hung there, unanswered.

Maya stepped closer, drawn by necessity more than courage. Her shoulder brushed Riv'En's arm, the heat of him escaping through therobe.

“What if they don't answer?” she whispered.

“They will.”

His voice stayed quiet, unhurried. Not angry. Not afraid. Just... absolute.

But Maya was not reassured. The steady calm in Riv'En's voice and posture should have been enough to settle her, but a cold knot twisted tighter in her stomach. Her robe's muted orange hue—reflecting her own fear—made that fact impossible to ignore.

Her gaze flicked back to the viewport, watching that impossible ship hang in orbit. It shimmered so intensely now that parts of it flickered in and out of view, as if it didn't exist in just one place. It made her stomach twist.

“How do you know they’ll answer?”

Riv’En did not look at her. “Because they know who I am. And what I am.” A pause. “They will not risk destroying one of their own.”

Her pulse stumbled. “Meaning... they won’t destroy you because you’re part Elaroin.”

“Affirmative.” His muscles tightened slightly, but his posture never wavered. “By blood. Which makes all the difference.”

“And me?”

He spared her a reassuring smile. “You are my mate,” he said, as though that explained everything.

“And that keeps me safe?”

“As safe as me,” he temporized.

Maya swallowed again, her mouth dry. Questions tangled behind her teeth, sharp and urgent, but she couldn’t force them out. Not with her pulse hammering in her ears. Not with the ship hanging outside like a living threat. The words stayed lodged in her throat, unspoken. Not yet.

Seconds—count-marks—ticked past, slow and relentless.

Maya found herself counting them in her head, one after the other, as if keeping track, even after all this time, might somehow prevent a terrifying outcome.

One. Two. Three. Her throat tightened with each silent number, her eyes never

leaving the viewport.

Her ribs were caged, each inhale stretched thin and slow, like her lungs could not quite catch up to the air around her.

Four. Five. Six. The count ran like a silent mantra in her head, steady as the pulse beneath her skin.

Seven. Eight. Nine. Every mark tightening her ribs, straining her nerves until they stretched thin as wires.

Ten. She could not stop. Could not let it go.

Her mind clung to the numbers like they were the only thing holding her together.

Then—

The Elaroin ship pulsed.

Light flickered from its surface, bright enough to momentarily white out the viewport. Maya staggered back a step, blinking hard. A quick surge of awareness slammed through her, sharp and disorienting.

Riv'En lifted his chin slightly. His robe shifted color from gold to a darker green.

Maya's gaze dropped to her own robe, and she caught the flicker of muted orange still clinging to the fabric.

Riv'En followed her glance, his voice low and steady.

"Fear," he said simply. "That color reflects fear. It is not weakness. It is truth."

“And yours?”

Riv’En’s gaze flicked briefly to the shifting color along his own robe. “Dark green symbolizes vigilance. Readiness.” His words remained calm. “I am prepared for what comes.”

A new voice filled the bridge: low and resonant, smooth and unbroken.

It wasn’t filtered through the ship’s comms or layered with mechanical static.

The sound pulsed directly into the air around them, almost as if the ship itself spoke.

It reverberated low in her chest, steady as a heartbeat, impossible to ignore.

“Identification confirmed. Stand by. Emissary en route.”

Maya’s stomach dropped. “Emissary? What does that mean?”

Riv’En turned toward her now, his expression as unreadable as ever. “They will board.”

A chill ran through her limbs, sharp and grounding, holding her perfectly still. “Board here? Now?”

“Affirmative.”

He stepped toward her then, not fast, not rough, but direct. His hand closed around her wrist, fingers firm but not painful. His grip steadied her like a silent order, grounding her where everything else seemed like it might fall apart.

“You are safe,” he repeated. His voice dropped low, just for her. “You will remain by

my side. No matter what happens.”

A new chime echoed softly through the panel, followed by a final transmission: “Docking in progress.”

Riv’En released her wrist and turned smoothly toward the bridge exit. “Come. We will greet them.”

He led her down the central corridor, steps measured and unhurried despite what was coming. The ship’s ambient lighting adjusted automatically, softening into a pale blue tone Maya hadn’t seen before. She walked close behind him, her robe still faintly orange against his steady green.

At the primary docking bay, the exterior hatch shimmered, disengaging with a low, mechanical hiss. Through the widening seam, Maya saw the edge of another vessel’s entrance platform extending toward them—sleek, shifting in color like the ship outside.

A woman stepped through first: tall and commanding, draped in deeper shades of violet and gold that shifted like living color across her robes.

Her features were sharp and striking, her skin holding a faint iridescent sheen similar to Riv’En’s, though more pronounced.

Two more figures followed behind her in slightly more muted robes.

The lead woman paused just inside, her head tilting in quiet assessment, gaze flicking across Riv’En and then settling briefly on Maya.

Riv’En inclined his head once in formal acknowledgment. “You have entered under parlay code. Conference deck is prepared.”

The Emissary's voice was calm and resonant, similar to the broadcast tone. "We will speak there."

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The corridor beyond the docking bay opened into a larger chamber—a formal conference room, but nothing like what Maya would have expected from human designs.

The walls curved inward slightly, creating a space almost organic, shaped rather than built.

Light filtered from translucent panels embedded in the walls, shifting subtly in color: dark blue to green to silver, never holding steady for long. In honor of the Elaroins?

A central table dominated the room, smooth and pale, as if carved from living crystal.

No chairs. Only standing positions marked by subtle floor patterns.

Maya experienced a flicker of unease at the absence of chairs, as if there was no intention for visitors to rest or linger too long. Alien, but not hostile—just different.

Maya's pulse slowed as she took it in. The otherworldly beauty of the room, the quiet importance of protocol, calmed something in her chest. Or maybe it was the Emissary herself.

Or the steady, silent presence of Riv'En at her side, close enough that his quiet presence protected her in the strangeness of the room.

When the woman stepped fully into the room, her presence was even sharper up close. Tall. Composed. And utterly unapologetic in how she moved. There was no grand announcement, no drawn-out formality. Just a sharp tilt of her head and a voice

that cut straight to the point.

“I am Vaeyra, Second of Elaros Council, Matriarch Ascendant. Designation: Elaroin Blooded, High Protocol.” Her voice lowered slightly, almost dismissive of her own introduction as she flicked her gaze to Riv’En.

Riv’En inclined his head, his voice steady and absolute. “I am Riv’En, Fourth of Alpha Legion. Assassin-class Intergalactic Warrior. Elaroin blooded by my mother, Vettian by my father.” His words carried the clout of both tradition and power, filling the room with quiet authority.

Vaeyra’s gaze settled finally on Maya, her eyes sharpening.

Her attention fell more demanding now. “And what is your designation, little one? Speak it yourself.” Her tone was not unkind, but there was an undeniable pressure beneath the words, as if Maya’s answer mattered in ways she didn’t yet understand.

Maya opened her mouth, pulse stumbling again. The Emissary’s eyes were pale silver, without pupils. Not empty, but full of authority and something almost too intimate, too aware. Like she was being dissected without a scalpel.

She steadied her breath, her voice low but clear. “Maya Anderson. Human. Twin born.” Her own words were louder than she expected in the quiet space, and as they settled, she caught the faintest flicker of something in Riv’En’s stance beside her—not correction, but approval.

Unfortunately, the last part of her designation landed in the room like a dropped weapon.

A quiet ripple moved through Vaeyra’s attendants. Even the ambient lighting shifted, pale blue flickering toward violet for a moment. Astatic charge filled the air, raising

the hairs on her skin as if the room itself reacted to Vaeyra's words.

"A twin," Vaeyra said, the words slow. Not quite disbelief. Not quite condemnation. But close.

Maya swallowed, her skin tightening all over again.

Her robe shifted slightly in color—pale orange darkening to a deeper rust, the visible signal of nerves she could not entirely suppress.

The awareness of it made her stomach hollow, as if every eye in the room could see every reaction.

There was no hiding behind practiced words or steady posture here.

The robe broadcasted her emotions in real time, stripping her bare in a way that left her stomach hollow.

Vaeyra's head tilted just a little. "That changes things."

Riv'En shifted beside her, not a full movement, just the faintest adjustment of stance.

Her pulse kicked a little harder, not from fear this time, but from that steady, silent awareness of him.

Even here, surrounded by strangers, surrounded by rules she didn't know, he was still hers. And she was his.

His presence gave her the confidence to speak. "Why does my being a twin change things?"

Vaeyra glanced toward her attendants, then back to Maya. “The twin element complicates matters. We do not bond to split souls.”

Maya inhaled slowly. She didn’t entirely understand what that meant, but her voice came out steady. “I’m not split.”

Vaeyra tilted her head again, studying her as though measuring truth in the air.

“We shall see.” Her voice softened, just slightly.

“Among our people, bonds are singular. Whole. Atwin complicates that purity. One soul, one reflection. When there are two, it becomes difficult to know which part of you answers the bond.” Her gaze held Maya’s steady.

“But that does not mean it is impossible.”

For a moment, silence filled the space again.

It stretched endlessly, and her pulse settled into the rhythm of it.

Then Vaeyra’s voice came again, lighter but no less steady.

“You must understand, it is not prejudice. It is preservation. Elaroin balance depends on clarity.” Her pale gaze flicked once more between Maya and Riv’En, weighing them together. “Now. Your purpose.”

“By blood, I request sanctuary,” Riv’En said, his voice calm but absolute. “I invoke the protection owed to those of Elaroin descent.” His gaze did not waver as he added, “My bonded mate, Maya, must be protected as part of me.”

Vaeyra’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You remained absent beyond allowed cycle count.

Why return now?"

"Final Flight," Riv'En answered, his tone holding an undercurrent Maya hadn't heard before—something heavier. "She altered it."

The words settled between them like something sharp and unmovable. Vaeyra studied her again, more intently now. Then she stepped closer, observing both Maya's robe and Riv'En's.

"You wear the colors of fear mixed with the gold of your mating bond. He wears vigilance," Vaeyra said, voice quieter now. Her gaze pinned Maya in place. "Do you understand what that signifies, human?"

Maya's mouth went dry, but she forced herself to answer. "I understand enough."

Riv'En's voice rumbled low beside her. "She knows what she is to me."

One of Vaeyra's attendants stepped forward, touching lightly at Maya's wrist, a brush of fingers against the robe fabric, tracing the weave as if confirming its truth. It wasn't painful, but came across as invasive all the same, too intimate. Then he turned and gave the Emissary a brief nod.

Vaeyra inclined her head. "That changes things. Your bond's validity must be established because it alters both political standing and bloodline rights within Elaroin governance.

If confirmed, Riv'En's claim to sanctuary becomes unassailable under Council law.

And you, human, would hold status not merely as an outsider but as bonded kin.

There are protocols we must follow before we can offer the choices available to you

both.

” Her voice cooled slightly, becoming sharper.

“Before any of that, however, there is another matter. Your vessel was shadowed prior to entering orbit. We detected an unknown signature before your arrival.”

Riv’En’s expression did not change. “We detected it as well.”

Vaeyra’s gaze narrowed. “Why did you not report it immediately?”

“I wished to confirm its origin first.” His voice remained calm. “But it followed us across multiple systems. I have full scan records.”

Vaeyra’s mouth tightened by a fraction. “You will submit them for review. If this ship breaches Elaroin orbit, it will not be granted parlay. It will be eliminated.”

The words hung there, final and quiet. A faint ripple of tension eased in the room as Vaeyra’s gaze shifted back to Riv’En. “You have invoked blood right. That grants you provisional status. But it does not exempt you from examination.”

Maya caught the faint shift in Riv’En’s posture again, along with the slightest narrowing of his eyes.

“We will comply,” he said, voice cool.

Vaeyra inclined her head once in acknowledgment. “Medical evaluation is mandatory. For both of you. To confirm bond integrity and ensure no external contaminants jeopardize Elaroin systems.”

Maya’s stomach tightened, but she forced her chin up, matching Vaeyra’s pale gaze

as evenly as she could.

“Fine,” she said quietly.

Vaeyra’s mouth curved in what might have been a smile. Or something colder.

“There will be additional terms,” she added, her gaze flicking back to Riv’En. “Restricted access to all central sectors. Weapons limited to defense class. And observation protocols will remain in place for the duration of your stay.”

Riv’En gave a single nod. “Understood.” Beside him, Maya experienced a flicker of something steady settle inside her.

His calm wasn’t just for show. It was measured.

She couldn’t tell if it settled her nerves or only reminded her how far out of her depth she was, but she found herself mirroring his stillness all the same.

The pulse of formality settled into something quieter then, like a held breath easing just slightly after tension.

Her own shoulders loosened in response, picking up on Riv’En’s stillness beside her and Vaeyra’s stance.

The power of protocol had not lifted completely, but it shifted enough for Maya to catch her balance.

Vaeyra stepped back half a pace, the motion purposeful and unhurried, as though giving them space now that the formalities had settled. “We will reconvene at dusk cycle. The Council will determine your access to the genetic archives.”

Maya glanced sideways at Riv'En, but his expression remained utterly still.

The Emissary turned, her robes shifting in shades of violet and gold. Her attendants followed silently as she moved toward the exit.

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Maya let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, the tension easing from her.

Relief flickered through her, quiet but undeniable, followed almost immediately by a new uncertainty pressing in its place.

She forced herself to remember that dusk cycle wasn't an ending. It was just a new beginning.

Whatever decision the Council made next, it would change everything—for her, for Riv'En, and for whatever waited in the shadows outside their orbit.

QUIET FILLED the conference deck when they returned for dusk cycle. Maya stood beside Riv'En, her robe a steady, unmistakable gold now. There was no flicker of fear anymore, only that steady awareness of him at her side.

The ambient lighting had shifted again, deep silver layered with pale gold, reflective of Elaroin formal gatherings, according to Riv'En.

They were alone for the moment. The Council had not yet arrived.

Riv'En's hand settled at her waist, fingers spreading lightly against her robe. His touch wasn't rushed, but grounding.

"Is this really happening?" Maya asked quietly, her voice just above a whisper.

"It is," he said. "And you are not leaving my side."

Her breath caught, not from nerves this time, but from the quiet pull of him. The heat of his body against hers. The unspoken tension between them.

Her hands rose to his chest, his quiet strength clear beneath the fabric. For a long moment, neither of them moved.

“We should not,” he murmured.

“I know,” she said.

But she didn’t pull back either.

Instead, her fingers slid along the edge of his collar, finding the seam of his robe where fabric met skin. Her pulse had steadied into something deeper now. Like gravity had shifted toward him.

Riv’En’s hands tightened slightly, pulling her a fraction closer. His voice dropped, raw silk and heat in her ear. “However, we are alone.”

“We are,” Maya agreed. Her voice sounded steadier than it should have, like her body had already made the decision her mind was still catching up to.

Riv’En shifted first. His mouth brushed against hers, not a full kiss, just the barest drag of contact—testing, waiting for her to pull away. She didn’t. When she leaned in, it broke whatever restraint was left between them.

His hands cupped her face, angling her head as his mouth claimed hers completely now. No rush, no hesitation. The kiss deepened until it swept down her spine, to her toes, until there was nothing but the press of him, the low growl in his throat, and the way his robe shifted against her.

Her fingers slid beneath the fabric, finding bare skin, the smooth line of muscle.

His temperature ran hotter than hers, steady and constant, like something elemental.

His hands traced down her back, one palm splaying flat between her shoulder blades as he guided her back a step, pressing her lightly against the cool, curved wall.

Maya's robe shimmered faintly, gold deepening toward amber, like heat against her skin, a reflection of everything between them.

Riv'En broke the kiss for a breath, eyes sharp and black as they searched hers. "Say if you want me to stop," he murmured.

"No," she said immediately. Her voice was hoarse, stripped bare. "Do not stop."

He did not. His mouth found her neck, the line of her jaw, while his hands moved with expert patience—unfastening just enough of her robe to slide his hand beneath the fabric, his palms warm and steady against bare skin.

He did not rush. Every motion was intentional, the fabric still in place but parted enough to let him touch her.

Her hands mirrored his, working the fastenings free, fingers tangling briefly before the fabric gave way and she swept her palms across his bare skin.

Their bodies pressed together, the heat of it sharp and blinding. Maya's breath hitched as Riv'En's hands slid over her, lifting her slightly so her legs framed his. There was no urgency in it. Only quiet, aching certainty.

Her head fell back against the wall, eyes closing as his mouth followed the curve of her collarbone, down to the center of her chest. A shudder rolled through him just as it

didher.

A sharp chime sounded, cutting through the stillness like a thread pulled taut. Riv'En froze first, his hands steadying her as his head turned toward the sound.

“Council arrival,” he said quietly, already pulling her robe closed. His hands moved calmly, straightening the fabric before adjusting his own. Maya matched his movements in quiet reflex, running her hands down the front of his robe, grounding herself in the simple act.

By the time the soft hiss of the door opening followed, they were standing side by side again—close, but composed. The only evidence of what had passed between them lived in the faint heat still pulsing beneath her skin and the shimmering gold of their robes.

Vaeyra and her attendants entered the room. The formality returned instantly, like a curtain dropping back into place.

Vaeyra's silver gaze swept over them, noting their closeness with no outward reaction. She moved to her marked position at the central table.

“The Council has reached its preliminary decision,” Vaeyra announced.

“Riv'En, you are granted access to family lineage archives for the sole purpose of verifying your maternal line and formal sanctuary rights.

Maya Anderson is required to submit to full compatibility and integrity scans as a bonded mate.”

Riv'En tensed subtly beside her, his whole body tightening, though his voice remained level. It wasn't a visible shift, not something anyone else would notice. But

the faint brush of his arm against hers suggested a contained reaction as exacting as everything else he did.

“The scans must include survivability markers,” he said. “You will test her in relation to Final Flight risk.”

Vaeyra inclined her head. “That has been noted and approved.”

Maya exhaled slowly, steadying herself. The terms had been laid out clearly now.

Formal archive access for Riv’En, full scans for her, observation protocols.

It wasn’t just a formality. It was a test. And not one she could afford to fail.

For all the quiet steadiness of her robe’s color now, gold and warm against her skin, there was no ignoring what had been agreed to.

Her pulse steadied because it had to. Because showing fear here would only make it worse.

The Emissary continued. “You will submit any personal weapons beyond defense class. And for the duration of your stay, both of you will be subject to observation protocols.”

Riv’En nodded once. “Understood.” He turned his gaze fully toward Vaeyra now, his expression as unreadable as ever. “Regarding the vessel that shadowed us before orbit entry. What action does the Council require?”

Vaeyra’s pale gaze flicked between them. “We detected its signature as well. It has not yet breached Elaroin orbit, but it lingers within outer perimeter range. You will provide all scan data and identification markers.”

“And if it attempts entry?” Riv’En asked, his voice quieter, sharper.

“Then it will be eliminated,” Vaeyra said without hesitation. “You will assist our patrol units in identifying it if necessary. If there are allies aboard that you wish protected, state them now.”

“There are none,” Riv’En replied.

A subtle chill ran through Maya. His absolute certainty settled like a stone in her chest. Part of her wanted to be reassured by it.

Another part wondered what it truly meant to be so cut off from everyone else, to have no one else but each other.

That reality pressed against her ribs, undeniable and sharp.

The tension in the room rose and eased into something quieter, like a tide pulling back after a wave.

The silence wasn’t critical anymore. It was expectant.

Her fingers brushed lightly against the seam of her robe, fortifying herself in the steady warmth of the fabric.

The simple motion helped her breathe. Around them, everything held perfectly still, waiting not with pressure, but with patience.

Her pulse slowed into something steady and calm, as if her body finally caught up to what her mind already knew: they belonged here, now.

Vaeyra’s gaze shifted once more between them. “We will reconvene once scans are

complete and Council review is finalized.”

The words carried finality, but to Maya they raised more questions.

How long would that take? Hours? Days? And until then, what exactly did observation protocols mean?

Quiet guards outside their door, or silent watchers hidden in every surface?

And what about Riv’En’s heat flashes? Would they be able to protect him from Final Flight?

Just the thought alone had her bursting into speech. “Wait,” Maya said, her voice sharper than she intended. “The scans—do they include testing for Final Flight? Can it be stopped? Cured?” Her words hung in the air, frantic and urgent.

Vaeyra turned back toward her, pale eyes narrowing slightly as if considering not just the question, but Maya herself. “We will determine what is possible,” she said at last, her voice steady, but offering no easy promises.

Maya hesitated, her mind still circling the question of Final Flight, what had just been agreed to pressing hard against her ribs. Her thoughts tangled between fear and the steady gold of her robe. As Vaeyra turned to leave, Maya’s pulse spiked one last time, words caught behind her teeth.

But she held them back. There were no more questions to ask, not here. Only things to prove.

As the door closed behind the Council, Maya turned to Riv’En, her voice quiet but steady now. “Will they ever really accept me?”

Riv'En inclined his head slightly, the faintest curve of something dark and certain in his mouth. "That is not what matters," he said quietly. "I have accepted you."

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HEAT RIPPLED under Riv'En's skin like a living thing.

It crawled along his spine, prickled at the base of his skull.

But instead of giving in to it, he stood silent beside the ship's viewing panel, eyes locked not on the readouts but on the planet swelling large in the window before him. Elaros.Home.

And beside him, Maya.

Her profile tilted toward the light, eyes wide and unblinking as the colors of the atmosphere caught across her face.

Silver-blue glare shifting over her cheekbone, soft purple across her jaw and neck.

There was no fear there. Only wonder. Only quiet focus that made something deep in his chest pull tight.

If this is the last thing I see... there are worse ways to go.

A quiet breath escaped him, and for the first time in days, he allowed his gaze to leave the planet and focus entirely on her.

Maya. The human who wasn't supposed to matter.

The anomaly. The threat. And yet, she stood there as if she belonged.

Her hair caught the filtered light, glowing like spun gold, a thousand shades weaving through the strands.

Her hand hovered just above the glass, fingertips almost touching the surface, as if she could reach through it.

Riv'En's voice came out rougher than he intended. "We will land shortly."

She didn't look at him. "It's beautiful. I didn't expect it to be beautiful."

He swallowed hard against the heat filling his chest. "Elaros is not known beyond our people. It is... private. Sacred."

Her eyes flicked toward him then, pale blue bright against the shadows in the cabin. "You grew up here?"

He shook his head once. "No. My mother's people did."

Her expression softened, her features shifting in a way that made something sharp twist in his chest. The edges of her mouth lifted—not quite a smile, but close, as if understanding had settled there, quiet and certain.

Her eyes searched his face with unspoken intent, like she saw something he hadn't meant for her to notice—something hollow beneath all that restraint. A flicker of something unguarded.

Her voice dropped lower, gentler, threaded with influence that made it less like a casual observation and more like a quiet truth. "But you still call it home."

A pause. "It is where I should have belonged."

Her eyes searched his face, studying the sharp set of his facial muscles, the faint tension in his brow. “More than Vetta?” she asked softly, voice barely above a whisper.

The question slid beneath Riv’En’s guard like a blade slipping past armor. Vetta was his station. His rank. The core of command, structure. It was where he had been forged into what he was—aweapon, honed and cold. But it had never beenhome.

He stiffened, clearly tense. Elaros was not legacy. It was not rank. It was the place where bloodlines ran older than duty, where intuition outweighed command, where silence held meaning without words.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low, steady. “Yes. More than Vetta.”

The ship coasted down, engines throttling back as atmospheric systems adjusted in quiet, measured increments.

Riv’En watched as the planet unfolded beneath them.

Lush green valleys edged by cliffs, wide silver rivers that cut through lavender forests.

The sky itself wasn’t blue, not exactly.

More like molten amber fading to violet at the edges.

The closer they dropped, the clearer it became. Trees hundreds of meters tall, their leaves shimmering in layered colors—not static, but shifting. Silver-green one moment. Deep midnight purple the next. They caught the sunlight and reflected it in fluid waves.

Maya leaned closer to the glass. Her breath fogged it faintly. “Those trees—do they really change color like that all the time?”

“Affirmative.” His voice dropped lower. “That is called the Hythara Veil. Elaroin foliage shifts based on light frequency. It is... adaptive.”

She looked back at him with that small furrow between her brows that always meant she was thinking hard. “It feels... alive. The whole place.”

Riv’En’s gaze lingered on her mouth, the shape of her lips as she spoke. “It is.”

The homes weren’t like Vettian structures.

No metal. No stark lines. Everything was blended into the environment.

Carved directly into cliffsides, half-hidden by waterfalls that tumbled down crystalline rock.

Structures layered with woven vines and flowering canopies, buildings shaped from living wood and smooth stone.

The ship settled onto a flat ledge above a valley.

As the doors hissed open, Riv’En stood rigid a moment, muscles locked against the urge clawing at him.

Heat. Hunger. But Maya stepped close, brushing her hand against his.

Silent reassurance. Her fingers curled lightly around his wrist, just a whisper of contact, and it calmed the roaring in his head more than anything had in days.

The world outside hit them with living scent.

Crisp, green, layered with something floral so potent it wrapped around Riv'En's senses like silk and smoke.

He inhaled slowly, and each breath tasted like rain-damp leaves and blossoms warmed by the sun.

A faint rhythm throbbed beneath the air.

Not sound, exactly. More like vibration, steady and rhythmic, as though the entire planet breathed alongside them.

It wasn't just quiet. It was intentional, alive in a way no constructed environment could mimic.

Beneath his feet, he could sense it too, a subtle shift in pressure, a living pulse radiating through the ground.

The quiet hum of a planet alive and aware, ancient, as if Elaros recognized his return and marked Maya's presence beside him.

A delegation waited just beyond the ship.

Elders. Tall, pale-haired, storm-gray eyed, their skin marked with elaborate shimmers like living silver threads woven beneath the surface.

The shimmers caught the light in faint pulses, never static, shifting with their breath as though the patterns were alive.

One wore a long robe patterned in muted gold and ash gray, the fabric draping his

lean frame with quiet authority.

Another carried a thin staff woven from living vine, pale green shoots still curling fresh tendrils at the top, a constant sign of growth and renewal.

They stood in a half-circle, silent, motionless, but their gaze pressed against Riv'En's skin like heat.

Old power. Old judgment. And yet, not once did Maya step away from his side.

Her hand never left his wrist, fingers curling lightly around the inside of it like she was tethering herself to him.

Her touch was steady, as if she understood that he needed it as much as she did.

Her gaze flicked across the delegation ahead of them, taking in every detail, but her body stayed close to his, her shoulder brushing lightly against his arm in silent solidarity.

Riv'En inclined his head in formal greeting. "Elders."

The eldest, a male marked with dark silver shimmers braided in meticulous patterns across his brow and temples, stepped forward with measured grace. His voice carried the authority of centuries, low and steady, reverberating through space like the quiet chime of tempered steel.

"You have returned, Riv'En. And you bring the human." His gaze flicked briefly to Maya, cool and assessing, before settling back on him with the faintest narrowing of his eyes, as though cataloging not just what stood before him, but every consequence hidden beneath it.

“Affirmative.”

There was no judgement in their tone. Just calm evaluation.

The Elder gestured toward the path winding down from the ledge.

“You will have a residence near the central ridge. Private. Equipped. We have prepared a containment chamber.” His gaze flicked toward Riv’En’s hair, noting the black instead of white. “For your Final Flight.”

Riv’En tensed, every muscle locking down hard against the rush that slammed into him like a pulse from the planet itself.

His eyes narrowing faintly, and for a moment he stood on the edge of something bitter and dangerous.

But then, Maya’s hand tightened on his. Quick.

Steady. Her fingers curled lightly, an intentional pressure against the inside of his wrist, not clinging, not pleading, just there. Present.Real.

The heat of her skin bled through his own, grounding him in a way no command protocol or warrior training ever had.

That single touch settled something wild beneath his skin, cooling the roar in his blood to a steady beat, like she had reached inside him and flicked a switch he did not know existed.

They moved in silence, following the path that curved gently down from the ledge and into a labyrinth of living structures folded seamlessly into the cliffs.

The homes looked as though they had grown from the stone itself, with smooth arches and walls veined in vines and bioluminescent growths.

Pathways glowed faintly beneath their feet, the light shifting under each step in soft pulses that echoed the rhythm of their movement.

Along the edges, flowers unfurled as they passed, delicate and translucent, casting soft glimmers of silver and lavender onto the stone.

Overhead, towering trees rose like living pillars, their trunks wide enough to house entire rooms within them, their tops lost somewhere in the clouds.

The air tasted green and ancient, full of memory, and every breath forced them to step deeper into a world that had never once forgotten it was alive.

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Their home was carved into a hillside. Arched doorways.

Window spaces were covered in transparent vine sheets instead of glass.

Inside smooth stone floors stretched throughout, while walls veined with living growths pulsed faintly with light.

They found a separate room with insulated doors and layered containment shielding—for heat flashes.

Riv'En said nothing. His mind cataloged everything, the subtle pulse of light through the walls, the exact number of steps from one room to the next, the faint scent of living vines threaded through the air.

And yet, beneath all of that, something knotted tight in his chest. Not hesitation exactly, but a heaviness that grew with each step deeper into the residence, as if the walls themselves whispered reminders of what he had left unfinished here. Memories he had tried to bury.

His hand flexed once, unconsciously, fighting the slow burn that scorched through his blood. But beneath that calculation, his body resisted every forward step like a system running against corrupted code.

Muscles locked against compulsion, breath dragging slower than it should have, each movement cautious when it should have been automatic. This was not just a homecoming. It was a reckoning, one his body remembered even when his mind tried not to.

Maya drifted from room to room, her fingers trailing along the curved walls, fingertips grazing the living textures like she was memorizing them.

Her touch lingered at the edges of archways, tracing the pulse of light veining through the stone.

Every now and then, she paused in a doorway or by a window space, her gaze flicking toward Riv'En, catching him watching her, silent and tense in the center of it all.

Her voice broke the quiet, soft but sure, threading into the charged silence between them. "You really don't like people seeing through to the real you, do you?"

"No." Short. Abrupt. Definite.

Her gaze flicked around the open layout again, at the living walls and transparent vine sheets in place of solid doors.

Then back to Riv'En. Her brow furrowed slightly, thoughtful rather than accusing.

"Is it because of Final Flight? Or just... everything? The way this place breathes, the way everything here is exposed, yet some parts concealed... like you built your entire world to keep things both open and hidden."

Riv'En hesitated, as if weighing each word before he spoke.

"It is both," he said at last, voice low and rough-edged.

"When Final Flight begins, there is no hiding. Strength, restraint—all of it burns away. And before that, there was always distance. Not fear. Function. Self-discipline. Letting anyone too close weakens that." His gaze shifted to her, steady and

unreadable.

“This place holds both: what I allow others to see... and what I keep only for myself.”

Her voice dropped lower, more certain. “You don’t want anyone to see more than what you allow, is that it?”

” Her gaze flicked around the open layout again, at the living walls and transparent vine sheets in place of solid doors.

Then back to Riv’En. “Because of Final Flight? Or because it is just easier not to let anyone in?” Her tone wasn’t sharp, just quietly curious, like she was trying to fit the last piece of a puzzle she had already half-solved.

He stilled, as though steadying himself against the moment rather than reacting.

“It is unnecessary.” His voice stayed low, but there was a force behind it now.

“Elaroin homes are designed to breathe with their inhabitants. Privacy here is not about walls or locked doors. It is about presence. When my Final Flight begins, there will be no hiding it. No shutting it away. I prefer not to allow others to witness that.” His gaze flicked toward her, steady and unreadable. “It is not shame. It is discretion.”

Her lips tilted. Almost a smile. “That is not weakness,” she said quietly.

Her gaze lingered on him, steady now. “Letting someone see. It is not losing dominion.” She turned then, full into his space, voice quieter still.

“I want to see all of it. Your home. Your world. And whatever part of you, you think does not exist anymore.”

Riv'En's breath locked in his throat. Her words should not have carried the intensity they did, but they wrapped around him, settled like a living thing under his skin.

The light from the windows caught her hair again, bathing her in warm silver.

He lifted one hand without thinking, fingers brushing a stray strand back from her cheek.

Her skin was warm. Too warm. Or maybe that washim.

Her gaze didn't flicker. Her voice dropped even lower. "You always get so still when I say things like that."

"Because I do not know how to respond," he admitted quietly. "You unsettle me."

"I am not trying to." Her smile softened, but her gaze did not waver.

It held steady on him, tracing every flicker of tension in his face, every subtle shift in his eyes.

"I just... I want to know the parts of you no one else gets to see. Not because I want to push past your wants and needs. Not to make things harder for you. I want to understand the things you do not say out loud. The things you hide so carefully. Because those are the parts that matter most."

He cupped her chin then, thumb brushing the corner of her mouth. "Maya..."

"Yes?" Her voice caught on that single word, barely above a whisper.

"I do not know if I have any parts left to share."

Her hand covered his, fingers curling tight. “That’s not true. You do. And I’ll see them all.”

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The silence between them stretched, threaded through with heat and something deeper. His pulse pounded like a war drum beneath his skin, and her touch—light, certain—was the only thing holding him steady to the ground.

Her breath hitched. Not in fear. Never in fear.

But a tension filled her, underscored by the subtle way her fingers curled tighter against his.

And in that moment, something shifted in him.

It was not consideration. Not reason honed for war.

It was her choice. He could sense it as keenly as his own pulse. Maya was choosing this. Choosing him.

Her certainty pressed against him through every contact point—the press of her hand, the shallow catch of her breath.

It filled his chest, hot and sharp, far more than battle or command.

Her stillness was not hesitation. It was resolve settling into place.

Her presence did not unbalance him. It steadied him.

When he spoke again, his voice was so quiet it was nearly lost in the ambient pulse of the living walls. “I want you here. Always.”

She didn't pull away. Her voice shook, just a little. "Then show me. Show me everything."

Riv'En didn't move for a long breath after her words. The pulse in his veins thundered so loud it drowned out everything else—the quiet hum of the walls, the living pulse of Elaros beneath his feet, even the measured cadence of Maya's breath. Only her words remained. Show me everything.

His hand dropped from her cheek, sliding instead to the back of her neck, fingers threading into the silk of her hair.

He didn't drag her closer—didn't need to.

She was already there, body angled into his like they were two halves of a precious whole.

His thumb brushed slowly along the curve where her neck met her shoulder, memorizing the warmth of her skin, the exact point where her pulse quickened beneath his touch.

"This is not what I planned," he said, voice rough, unused. "Not what I intended."

"I don't care," she answered, just as rough, just as quiet. Her fingers slid up his arm, mapping the hard lines of muscle there, slow and sure. "I want this. I want you."

His self-discipline should have been stronger. It always had been. But there was nothing premeditated in the way he lowered his mouth to hers. Nothing careful. The kiss wasn't a question. It was a claim. A surrender. One that didn't leave room for hesitation.

Her mouth opened under his on a sharp breath, her body arching against his.

He caught her in both hands, lifting her as though she weighed nothing, pinning her back gently against the nearest wall.

The living vines shifted with them, molding around her form without resistance, cradling her instead of pressing hard.

The heat rising in him was no longer the consuming fire of Final Flight—it was different.

Sharper. Steady. Channeled into her. The press of her thighs around him.

The whisper of her breath caught between their mouths.

His hands slid down, mapping the curve of her breasts, her waist, the shape of her body beneath his palms. It wasn't enough. Would never be enough.

And still he kissed her like it could be.

Her hands weren't passive either. She gripped the edge of his robe, dragging it apart, fingers skimming the bare skin beneath. The tremble in her hands betrayed how steady she was trying to be, while her nails scraped lightly across his ribs leaving behind a sharp sting.

He finally broke the kiss, breath coming fast. "Say it again."

Her voice was rough, lips still parted. "I want you."

Riv'En's hands tightened around her. And then he carried her back toward the center of the room, the living walls pulsing faintly around them, the space shifting as though recognizing what was about to happen.

When he laid her down, it wasn't as a captive or a threat. It wasn't even as a warrior.

It was as a male. And it was all for her.

His hands slid over the curve of her thighs. She shivered under his touch, her breath catching in her throat. Her skin grew flushed, glowing in the low ambient light of the living walls. He knelt beside her, letting his fingers skim up her bare legs, opening and stripping away her robe.

His voice was low, unsteady. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

Her answer was immediate. "I won't."

Riv'En's control frayed at the edges. His hands slid slowly over the soft line of her stomach, to trace the underside of her breast, savoring the softness of her skin, the way her breath caught at his touch.

His thumb brushed lightly over the peak, her nipple tightening beneath his fingers. Then he lowered his mouth, lips replacing his hand. He kissed her breast, his tongue flicking against her skin, tasting her, marking her with each movement, careful of his canines.

Maya arched into him, her fingers clutching at his shoulders, and he could hear her breath catch, hear the quiet sound she made as his mouth closed gently over her nipple, pulling it into the heat of his mouth.

He did not rush. He took his time, lavishing each kiss, each caress, until her body trembled beneath him.

Her fingers found his, light but sure, guiding him lower. Her pulse thudded beneath his skin—relentless, pounding.

When his mouth replaced his hands, brushing against the hollow of her hip, her breath stuttered. His teeth grazed lightly over sensitive skin, followed by the slow sweep of his tongue. She arched toward him, compulsive, helpless.

“Maya,” he breathed against her skin. The name tasted likefire.

Her fingers slid into his hair, clutching tight. “Please.”

That one word undidhim.

He didn’t rush. He didn’t force. His hands gripped her thighs, holding her steady as he kissed lower, until her body trembled under him, until her fingers clenched so hard in his hair it sent sharp pleasure down his spine.

When he finally moved up over her again, she was gasping, her eyes bright and dazed, her skin slick with heat. His robe was gone. His skin pressed against hers, heat to heat, no barriersleft.

Their eyes met. There were no words.

He entered her in a single, measured thrust, every muscle in his body tight with restraint. Her breath broke on a soft cry, her hands clutching his arms, nails digging in as he filledher.

Riv’En’s entire focus narrowed to her—every sound, every breath, every shift of her body beneath his. The connection was deeper than anything physical. The bond between them pulsed in time with each slow thrust, syncing heart to heart, breath to breath.

Her legs wrapped around him, pulling him deeper, her body arching up to meet his. Her head tipped back, eyes closed, mouth open in a silentgasp.

He couldn't look away. Couldn't stop.

At first, his movements were slow, measured, adjusting to the pace her body set against his. But as her hands gripped his shoulders, as her hips met his with more force, he let the control fray further, let pure need drive him.

The pace quickened. The air filled with the sounds of their bodies moving together, with her moans, with the harsh rasp of his breath against her skin. His name broke from her lips once, rough and breathless, and it nearly shattered him.

When her release overtook her, it wasn't silent.

Her cry echoed off the living walls, her body tightening around him, pulling him deeper, locked by his knot.

He followed with a shudder, burying his face against her neck as release tore through him, leaving him stripped bare in a way no battle ever had.

They didn't separate. His arms tightened around her, holding her close as their breathing slowed together.

Minutes passed. Or maybe hours. Time seemed irrelevant.

Her hand traced idle patterns along his back, slow and soothing, her breath warm against his shoulder.

Each touch sent a quiet pulse through Riv'En's spine, not as heat or urgency, but as something more crucial.

Permanence. The kind of steady contact he had never let himself imagine.

And instead of tightening his hold, he let his hand settle low against her body, memorizing the rise and fall of her breath, the quiet certainty that she was still there.

Her voice, when it finally came, was a whisper so soft it barely reached him.

“I love you.”

Riv’En went still.

Her fingers kept moving, light and easy, as though she hadn’t just fractured the entire foundation of his world.

By the time he found the strength to look down at her, her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and even.

She’d already drifted to sleep.

But the words lingered.

I love you.

And Riv’En knew then, without question, that he would never let her go.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

HEAT RIPPLED under Riv'En's skin like a living thing.

It crawled along his spine, prickled at the base of his skull.

But instead of giving in to it, he stood silent beside the ship's viewing panel, eyes locked not on the readouts but on the planet swelling large in the window before him. Elaros.Home.

And beside him, Maya.

Her profile tilted toward the light, eyes wide and unblinking as the colors of the atmosphere caught across her face.

Silver-blue glare shifting over her cheekbone, soft purple across her jaw and neck.

There was no fear there. Only wonder. Only quiet focus that made something deep in his chest pull tight.

If this is the last thing I see... there are worse ways to go.

A quiet breath escaped him, and for the first time in days, he allowed his gaze to leave the planet and focus entirely on her.

Maya. The human who wasn't supposed to matter.

The anomaly. The threat. And yet, she stood there as if she belonged.

Her hair caught the filtered light, glowing like spun gold, a thousand shades weaving through the strands.

Her hand hovered just above the glass, fingertips almost touching the surface, as if she could reach through it.

Riv'En's voice came out rougher than he intended. "We will land shortly."

She didn't look at him. "It's beautiful. I didn't expect it to be beautiful."

He swallowed hard against the heat filling his chest. "Elaros is not known beyond our people. It is... private. Sacred."

Her eyes flicked toward him then, pale blue bright against the shadows in the cabin. "You grew up here?"

He shook his head once. "No. My mother's people did."

Her expression softened, her features shifting in a way that made something sharp twist in his chest. The edges of her mouth lifted—not quite a smile, but close, as if understanding had settled there, quiet and certain.

Her eyes searched his face with unspoken intent, like she saw something he hadn't meant for her to notice—something hollow beneath all that restraint. A flicker of something unguarded.

Her voice dropped lower, gentler, threaded with influence that made it less like a casual observation and more like a quiet truth. "But you still call it home."

A pause. "It is where I should have belonged."

Her eyes searched his face, studying the sharp set of his facial muscles, the faint tension in his brow. “More than Vetta?” she asked softly, voice barely above a whisper.

The question slid beneath Riv’En’s guard like a blade slipping past armor. Vetta was his station. His rank. The core of command, structure. It was where he had been forged into what he was—aweapon, honed and cold. But it had never beenhome.

He stiffened, clearly tense. Elaros was not legacy. It was not rank. It was the place where bloodlines ran older than duty, where intuition outweighed command, where silence held meaning without words.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low, steady. “Yes. More than Vetta.”

The ship coasted down, engines throttling back as atmospheric systems adjusted in quiet, measured increments.

Riv’En watched as the planet unfolded beneath them.

Lush green valleys edged by cliffs, wide silver rivers that cut through lavender forests.

The sky itself wasn’t blue, not exactly.

More like molten amber fading to violet at the edges.

The closer they dropped, the clearer it became. Trees hundreds of meters tall, their leaves shimmering in layered colors—not static, but shifting. Silver-green one moment. Deep midnight purple the next. They caught the sunlight and reflected it in fluid waves.

Maya leaned closer to the glass. Her breath fogged it faintly. “Those trees—do they really change color like that all the time?”

“Affirmative.” His voice dropped lower. “That is called the Hythara Veil. Elaroin foliage shifts based on light frequency. It is... adaptive.”

She looked back at him with that small furrow between her brows that always meant she was thinking hard. “It feels... alive. The whole place.”

Riv’En’s gaze lingered on her mouth, the shape of her lips as she spoke. “It is.”

The homes weren’t like Vettian structures.

No metal. No stark lines. Everything was blended into the environment.

Carved directly into cliffsides, half-hidden by waterfalls that tumbled down crystalline rock.

Structures layered with woven vines and flowering canopies, buildings shaped from living wood and smooth stone.

The ship settled onto a flat ledge above a valley.

As the doors hissed open, Riv’En stood rigid a moment, muscles locked against the urge clawing at him.

Heat. Hunger. But Maya stepped close, brushing her hand against his.

Silent reassurance. Her fingers curled lightly around his wrist, just a whisper of contact, and it calmed the roaring in his head more than anything had in days.

The world outside hit them with living scent.

Crisp, green, layered with something floral so potent it wrapped around Riv'En's senses like silk and smoke.

He inhaled slowly, and each breath tasted like rain-damp leaves and blossoms warmed by the sun.

A faint rhythm throbbed beneath the air.

Not sound, exactly. More like vibration, steady and rhythmic, as though the entire planet breathed alongside them.

It wasn't just quiet. It was intentional, alive in a way no constructed environment could mimic.

Beneath his feet, he could sense it too, a subtle shift in pressure, a living pulse radiating through the ground.

The quiet hum of a planet alive and aware, ancient, as if Elaros recognized his return and marked Maya's presence beside him.

A delegation waited just beyond the ship.

Elders. Tall, pale-haired, storm-gray eyed, their skin marked with elaborate shimmers like living silver threads woven beneath the surface.

The shimmers caught the light in faint pulses, never static, shifting with their breath as though the patterns were alive.

One wore a long robe patterned in muted gold and ash gray, the fabric draping his

lean frame with quiet authority.

Another carried a thin staff woven from living vine, pale green shoots still curling fresh tendrils at the top, a constant sign of growth and renewal.

They stood in a half-circle, silent, motionless, but their gaze pressed against Riv'En's skin like heat.

Old power. Old judgment. And yet, not once did Maya step away from his side.

Her hand never left his wrist, fingers curling lightly around the inside of it like she was tethering herself to him.

Her touch was steady, as if she understood that he needed it as much as she did.

Her gaze flicked across the delegation ahead of them, taking in every detail, but her body stayed close to his, her shoulder brushing lightly against his arm in silent solidarity.

Riv'En inclined his head in formal greeting. "Elders."

The eldest, a male marked with dark silver shimmers braided in meticulous patterns across his brow and temples, stepped forward with measured grace. His voice carried the authority of centuries, low and steady, reverberating through space like the quiet chime of tempered steel.

"You have returned, Riv'En. And you bring the human." His gaze flicked briefly to Maya, cool and assessing, before settling back on him with the faintest narrowing of his eyes, as though cataloging not just what stood before him, but every consequence hidden beneath it.

“Affirmative.”

There was no judgement in their tone. Just calm evaluation.

The Elder gestured toward the path winding down from the ledge.

“You will have a residence near the central ridge. Private. Equipped. We have prepared a containment chamber.” His gaze flicked toward Riv’En’s hair, noting the black instead of white. “For your Final Flight.”

Riv’En tensed, every muscle locking down hard against the rush that slammed into him like a pulse from the planet itself.

His eyes narrowing faintly, and for a moment he stood on the edge of something bitter and dangerous.

But then, Maya’s hand tightened on his. Quick.

Steady. Her fingers curled lightly, an intentional pressure against the inside of his wrist, not clinging, not pleading, just there. Present.Real.

The heat of her skin bled through his own, grounding him in a way no command protocol or warrior training ever had.

That single touch settled something wild beneath his skin, cooling the roar in his blood to a steady beat, like she had reached inside him and flicked a switch he did not know existed.

They moved in silence, following the path that curved gently down from the ledge and into a labyrinth of living structures folded seamlessly into the cliffs.

The homes looked as though they had grown from the stone itself, with smooth arches and walls veined in vines and bioluminescent growths.

Pathways glowed faintly beneath their feet, the light shifting under each step in soft pulses that echoed the rhythm of their movement.

Along the edges, flowers unfurled as they passed, delicate and translucent, casting soft glimmers of silver and lavender onto the stone.

Overhead, towering trees rose like living pillars, their trunks wide enough to house entire rooms within them, their tops lost somewhere in the clouds.

The air tasted green and ancient, full of memory, and every breath forced them to step deeper into a world that had never once forgotten it was alive.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Their home was carved into a hillside. Arched doorways.

Window spaces were covered in transparent vine sheets instead of glass.

Inside smooth stone floors stretched throughout, while walls veined with living growths pulsed faintly with light.

They found a separate room with insulated doors and layered containment shielding—for heat flashes.

Riv'En said nothing. His mind cataloged everything, the subtle pulse of light through the walls, the exact number of steps from one room to the next, the faint scent of living vines threaded through the air.

And yet, beneath all of that, something knotted tight in his chest. Not hesitation exactly, but a heaviness that grew with each step deeper into the residence, as if the walls themselves whispered reminders of what he had left unfinished here. Memories he had tried to bury.

His hand flexed once, unconsciously, fighting the slow burn that scorched through his blood. But beneath that calculation, his body resisted every forward step like a system running against corrupted code.

Muscles locked against compulsion, breath dragging slower than it should have, each movement cautious when it should have been automatic. This was not just a homecoming. It was a reckoning, one his body remembered even when his mind tried not to.

Maya drifted from room to room, her fingers trailing along the curved walls, fingertips grazing the living textures like she was memorizing them.

Her touch lingered at the edges of archways, tracing the pulse of light veining through the stone.

Every now and then, she paused in a doorway or by a window space, her gaze flicking toward Riv'En, catching him watching her, silent and tense in the center of it all.

Her voice broke the quiet, soft but sure, threading into the charged silence between them. "You really don't like people seeing through to the real you, do you?"

"No." Short. Abrupt. Definite.

Her gaze flicked around the open layout again, at the living walls and transparent vine sheets in place of solid doors.

Then back to Riv'En. Her brow furrowed slightly, thoughtful rather than accusing.

"Is it because of Final Flight? Or just... everything? The way this place breathes, the way everything here is exposed, yet some parts concealed... like you built your entire world to keep things both open and hidden."

Riv'En hesitated, as if weighing each word before he spoke.

"It is both," he said at last, voice low and rough-edged.

"When Final Flight begins, there is no hiding. Strength, restraint—all of it burns away. And before that, there was always distance. Not fear. Function. Self-discipline. Letting anyone too close weakens that." His gaze shifted to her, steady and

unreadable.

“This place holds both: what I allow others to see... and what I keep only for myself.”

Her voice dropped lower, more certain. “You don’t want anyone to see more than what you allow, is that it?”

” Her gaze flicked around the open layout again, at the living walls and transparent vine sheets in place of solid doors.

Then back to Riv’En. “Because of Final Flight? Or because it is just easier not to let anyone in?” Her tone wasn’t sharp, just quietly curious, like she was trying to fit the last piece of a puzzle she had already half-solved.

He stilled, as though steadying himself against the moment rather than reacting.

“It is unnecessary.” His voice stayed low, but there was a force behind it now.

“Elaroin homes are designed to breathe with their inhabitants. Privacy here is not about walls or locked doors. It is about presence. When my Final Flight begins, there will be no hiding it. No shutting it away. I prefer not to allow others to witness that.” His gaze flicked toward her, steady and unreadable. “It is not shame. It is discretion.”

Her lips tilted. Almost a smile. “That is not weakness,” she said quietly.

Her gaze lingered on him, steady now. “Letting someone see. It is not losing dominion.” She turned then, full into his space, voice quieter still.

“I want to see all of it. Your home. Your world. And whatever part of you, you think does not exist anymore.”

Riv'En's breath locked in his throat. Her words should not have carried the intensity they did, but they wrapped around him, settled like a living thing under his skin.

The light from the windows caught her hair again, bathing her in warm silver.

He lifted one hand without thinking, fingers brushing a stray strand back from her cheek.

Her skin was warm. Too warm. Or maybe that washim.

Her gaze didn't flicker. Her voice dropped even lower. "You always get so still when I say things like that."

"Because I do not know how to respond," he admitted quietly. "You unsettle me."

"I am not trying to." Her smile softened, but her gaze did not waver.

It held steady on him, tracing every flicker of tension in his face, every subtle shift in his eyes.

"I just... I want to know the parts of you no one else gets to see. Not because I want to push past your wants and needs. Not to make things harder for you. I want to understand the things you do not say out loud. The things you hide so carefully. Because those are the parts that matter most."

He cupped her chin then, thumb brushing the corner of her mouth. "Maya..."

"Yes?" Her voice caught on that single word, barely above a whisper.

"I do not know if I have any parts left to share."

Her hand covered his, fingers curling tight. “That’s not true. You do. And I’ll see them all.”

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The silence between them stretched, threaded through with heat and something deeper. His pulse pounded like a war drum beneath his skin, and her touch—light, certain—was the only thing holding him steady to the ground.

Her breath hitched. Not in fear. Never in fear.

But a tension filled her, underscored by the subtle way her fingers curled tighter against his.

And in that moment, something shifted in him.

It was not consideration. Not reason honed for war.

It was her choice. He could sense it as keenly as his own pulse. Maya was choosing this. Choosing him.

Her certainty pressed against him through every contact point—the press of her hand, the shallow catch of her breath.

It filled his chest, hot and sharp, far more than battle or command.

Her stillness was not hesitation. It was resolve settling into place.

Her presence did not unbalance him. It steadied him.

When he spoke again, his voice was so quiet it was nearly lost in the ambient pulse of the living walls. “I want you here. Always.”

She didn't pull away. Her voice shook, just a little. "Then show me. Show me everything."

Riv'En didn't move for a long breath after her words. The pulse in his veins thundered so loud it drowned out everything else—the quiet hum of the walls, the living pulse of Elaros beneath his feet, even the measured cadence of Maya's breath. Only her words remained. Show me everything.

His hand dropped from her cheek, sliding instead to the back of her neck, fingers threading into the silk of her hair.

He didn't drag her closer—didn't need to.

She was already there, body angled into his like they were two halves of a precious whole.

His thumb brushed slowly along the curve where her neck met her shoulder, memorizing the warmth of her skin, the exact point where her pulse quickened beneath his touch.

"This is not what I planned," he said, voice rough, unused. "Not what I intended."

"I don't care," she answered, just as rough, just as quiet. Her fingers slid up his arm, mapping the hard lines of muscle there, slow and sure. "I want this. I want you."

His self-discipline should have been stronger. It always had been. But there was nothing premeditated in the way he lowered his mouth to hers. Nothing careful. The kiss wasn't a question. It was a claim. A surrender. One that didn't leave room for hesitation.

Her mouth opened under his on a sharp breath, her body arching against his.

He caught her in both hands, lifting her as though she weighed nothing, pinning her back gently against the nearest wall.

The living vines shifted with them, molding around her form without resistance, cradling her instead of pressing hard.

The heat rising in him was no longer the consuming fire of Final Flight—it was different.

Sharper. Steady. Channeled into her. The press of her thighs around him.

The whisper of her breath caught between their mouths.

His hands slid down, mapping the curve of her breasts, her waist, the shape of her body beneath his palms. It wasn't enough. Would never be enough.

And still he kissed her like it could be.

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His voice was low, unsteady. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

Her answer was immediate. "I won't."

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Riv’En went still.

Her fingers kept moving, light and easy, as though she hadn’t just fractured the entire foundation of his world.

By the time he found the strength to look down at her, her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and even.

She’d already drifted to sleep.

But the words lingered.

I love you.

And Riv’En knew then, without question, that he would never let her go.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

THE FIRST thing Maya felt was warmth.

The solid, quiet heat of Riv'En's skin against hers, the faint rise and fall of his chest brushing her back. His scent wrapped around her, clean and sharp like cool metal laced with something older, wilder—soil and living stone.

His arm rested across her like gravity itself, steady and unyielding. Not just from the sheets tangled around her legs, or the sunlight filtering pale and gold through the living vine windows. It came from the quiet power of Riv'En's body stretched out beside her.

His fingers rested just above her hip like he couldn't bear to lose contact even in sleep.

For a moment, she didn't move. She breathed him in, clean and sharp, the faint metallic tang of Vettian skin tempered by something deeper, warmer. Elaroin. The scent of the world outside folded into him. Her heart ached with it, with how quiet he looked here, how utterly still.

Her fingers brushed lightly against his hand, tracing the line of his knuckles. He shifted, a slow inhale brushing her skin as his arm tightened around her. That single motion broke the quiet spell. She turned toward him fully, meeting the open black of his eyes.

"You are awake," he said, voice deep and gravelly in a way that pulled at her chest.

"I could say the same," she answered, smiling a little.

His gaze traced over her face, settling as if memorizing each detail. One hand lifted, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek.

Neither of them said anything else.

She leaned in first, closing the small space between them until her mouth brushed against his.

His response was immediate but unhurried, his grip tightening as he drew her closer, the kiss deepening with a slow, consuming intensity.

When she pulled back just slightly, her voice came soft and uneven.

“What happens now?” she whispered. “Now that we’re here. Now that... it’s real.”

Riv’En’s thumb brushed along her cheekbone in answer. “It is quite simple. You will remain. I will remain until Final Flight. There is no further path.”

Her heart twisted at the quiet certainty in his voice. Until Final Flight. The words echoed in her mind, more painful than she was ready for. A hollowness settled in her chest, grief sharp and unwelcome. But threaded through it was something fiercer: determination.

She wasn’t ready to lose him, wasn’t willing to simply accept the inevitability he spoke of.

A sharp ache bloomed low in her stomach, but she pressed her hand against his chest anyway, needing the contact, needing him under her palm to ground her before the ache could pull her under.

Her hand slid over his shoulder, down his chest, tracing the heat beneath his skin.

How could she touch him like this, knowing what was coming? A sharp breath caught in her throat, but she did not pull away. Instead, she pressed closer.

“None of this is simple,” she said, her lips brushing his as she spoke.

“It is not,” he admitted, voice low. “But it is certain.”

She kissed him again, slower this time, and his hand secured her against him.

Each kiss unfolded between them like breath.

Her fingertips explored the curve of his ribs, the line of muscle beneath smooth skin.

His mouth traced along the edge of her cheek, down to the hollow of her throat, teeth grazing lightly against her pulse.

Their hands moved as if memorizing each other all over again, and for that brief moment, everything else fell away.

Her fingers slid up his bare chest, feeling the heat beneath his skin. Too hot.

Riv’En shuddered suddenly, his body jerking beneath her touch.

“Riv’En?” she whispered, pulling back.

His eyes were closed now. Heat shimmered off his skin, not gentle warmth now—dangerous. The color of his hair deepened right before her eyes, streaks of black overtaking the remaining silver.

“Heat flash,” he ground out. “You must not—”

But he was already moving. Pushing off the bed with brutal force, crossing the room in three rapid strides. His movements weren't human—weren't calm. They were innate, all purpose and power, heading straight for the containment room built into the residence.

Maya scrambled after him. "Riv'En—wait!"

The door sealed shut before she could get there.

Her fists hit the surface. "Riv'En! Open it!"

She pounded harder, panic clawing through her chest. The metal was cold beneath her palms, but already the heat pulsed through it from the other side, hot enough to make her skin ache. Her breath came in ragged bursts, and she pressed her forehead against the sealed door.

The memory of his body wrapped around hers was still fresh in her skin, and now he was on the other side of that wall, fighting something she couldn't reach.

Her heart hammered until she feared her ribs might crack under the force.

Tears stung her eyes, blurring the shimmering lines of the containment seals.

It was too familiar—like losing him in a way she wasn't ready to face.

"Please," she whispered, voice cracking. "Please don't leave me."

Her hand fell to the place just above her heart. The place where the Mating Flame had pulsed onboard the Veyna. Her fingers trembled as she pressed her palm there, sensing nothing at first—just skin, just frantic heartbeat.

She closed her eyes, forcing her mind to focus, like that first time when the flame had lit between them, without his touch, without any warning.

When she had been restrained and still, the connection had burned to life inside her, probably from tasting his blood after she'd bitten him.

And it had stopped his heat flash then. Somehow, impossibly, her Mating Flame had reached through whatever was happening to him and quieted it.

That was what she clung to now, the memory of that impossibility, the hope that it would work again.

Her breath caught. Slowly, her other hand joined the first, both pressed flat over her Mating Flame as if doubling down on the need to reach him. The silence stretched, thick and suffocating. But she refused to let it pull her under.

"Please," she whispered again, voice breaking now, as her tears slipped down her cheeks. "Please... let me reach him."

Maya closed her eyes, every ounce of energy into the strength of their bond."Please," she breathed. "Let it work."

Her pulse stuttered once, hard, as though the flame there caught light. Aflicker ran through her. Not as strong as before, but real.

The heat against the door faltered. The vibrating hum shifted tone.

Maya froze, her breath catching as sharp relief mingled with visceral fear—afraid to hope, afraid it might surge back again.

Her hands pressed flat to the door, palms tingling as though she could still experience

his heat.

For several long seconds, she didn't move, afraid that any motion would break whatever fragile hold she had on him through the flame.

Moments later, the door hissed open.

Riv'En stood there, bare-chested, sweat slicking his skin. His eyes were unfocused for half a breath, until they landed on her.

Maya didn't think. She threw herself into his arms.

He caught her, arms locking around her waist with so much force she could barely breathe. His skin burned against hers but not enough to hurt.

They didn't speak.

She kissed him. Hard and desperate, like she couldn't get enough air unless it came from him. His mouth opened under hers, returning it with just as much force, hands braced against her back.

And yet, even with the heat flaring between them, even knowing how dangerous it was, neither of them moved to pull back.

Maya's hands slid over the bare planes of his back, holding tight, while Riv'En's fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her even closer.

Their bodies pressed together with unrelenting force, mouths moving in a raw, vital manner.

His pulse thundered against her hand and heat seared under his skin, but she didn't let

go. Couldn't.

His breath broke against her mouth. His voice, when it came, was ragged. "I must stop."

Her hands flattened against his chest, the beat of his heart like a war drum. "No," she whispered, not pleading but certain. "We need this."

Riv'En made a sound low in his throat, caught between a growl and a breath. For one endless moment, they hovered there, unwilling to separate, unwilling to let go.

Before she could speak, a pulse shivered through the air around them, low and steady. The entire house responded, walls humming faintly as though bracing for what was coming.

A Council summons came through speakers hidden throughout the house, requiring Riv'en to attend a session at his earliest convenience. Reading between the lines, that meant now.

He exhaled once, steadying. Pressing a final kiss against her temple he pulled back completely, heading toward the bathing alcove off the main room. The water there wasn't harsh or mechanical. It streamed down in a warm, steady cascade from living vines above, scentless and clean.

Riv'En pulled her beneath it with him, his hands moving over her skin, slow and efficient but never rushed.

Maya's breath caught as she let herself lean into him, fingers tracing the planes of his back as the water slid over both of them.

There was no need for words. Each touch was intentional, meant to wash away the

lingering heat and tension without breaking the quiet connection still pulsing between them.

When they finished, he dried her with the same quiet skill before they dressed in silence, both pulling on the soft, layered Elaroin robes folded neatly nearby.

Maya's hands shook as she tied the silver thread around herself, the fabric cool and unfamiliar against her skin.

It seemed heavier than it should have, a reminder this wasn't just about clothing.

It marked her place here, beside Riv'En.

The robes carried a history she didn't fully understand yet, but she wore them anyway. For him. For whatever came next.

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Riv'En's movements were exacting as he fastened the deep violet sash. By the time he faced her again, robed in quiet authority, he looked calm. Self-possessed.

But as they stepped toward the door together, it slid open to reveal two Elaroin guards. Both wore pale silver robes threaded with muted violet, their skin shimmering faintly beneath layered veils. Their faces were impassive, but their presence carried clout.

The shift in the air came immediately, like walking into a room already waiting for judgment. Neither guard moved beyond standing directly in their path, blocking both of them with silent authority.

"The human may not pass," one said, voice cool and stripped of anything resembling warmth.

It wasn't anger or judgment. It was law, delivered with the kind of finality that left no room for argument.

His stance shifted subtly, feet planting wider as if anticipating challenge, the shimmer of containment lines flickering faintly across his skin.

The air tightened between them, like even the walls held their breath.

Riv'En's robe flared red at the edges, astark, pulsing light that bled into the quiet around them.

His eyes narrowed, the movement subtle but unmistakable, aflash of restrained

violence simmering just beneath the surface.

He visibly fought the urge to act. The heat radiating from him intensified, as if the entire space held its breath alongside him.

“Only Fourth is summoned,” the guard said.

Maya laid a hand against Riv’En’s chest before he could speak, her fingers spread wide, the sharp burn of heat still echoing beneath his skin.

Her touch wasn’t just to calm him. It was to anchor herself too, to remind them both that they weren’t stepping apart because they wanted to.

Her gaze met his, steady despite the ache building low in her throat.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “Go. I’ll be here.”

Riv’En’s hand closed over hers once, brief and hard, his grip lingering longer than it should have, as if securing both of them to that single point of contact.

His gaze held hers for a breath longer, black eyes steady and burning with something quiet and unspoken.

Something she sensed more than understood.

It wasn’t just anger or frustration. It was promise.

A silent vow that no matter what waited beyond that door, he would return to her.

Then, without releasing the tension connecting them, he stepped past the guards in one fluid motion, his posture rigid, constrained, though his robe still bled with wisps

of angry red.

The door sealed behind him.

And Maya was left alone.

She stood there for a moment longer, her hand still raised as if the door might open again. But it didn't. With a sharp breath, she turned away from the sealed entrance and let her gaze drift across the space Riv'En had called home.

The silence grew more demanding now. Thicker. The living walls glimmered faintly, their pulse subtle and slow, as if the entire residence had quieted in his absence. Her fingers brushed along the edge of a nearby table, tracing the curve of its living vine surface without really seeing it.

The motion was automatic, a protective move against the rising panic knotting in her stomach.

The room became too big, too quiet, the pulse of the living walls slow and faint like a heartbeat she could not quite match.

She focused on the texture under her fingertips, grounding herself in that small, tangible detail rather than the chaos building in her thoughts.

Her stomach clenched with an echo of heat that wasn't hunger but close.

Still, she crossed to the food alcove and pulled a piece of fruit from the display there.

It was cool beneath her fingers, bumpy and dark yellow-skinned, and when she bit into it, the bumps exploded with a delicious tangy juice.

The taste was crisp and faintly floral. It woke her senses just enough to remind her she was still standing, still here.

But there was no real appetite behind it.

Just motion. Just doing something to keep from standing still.

Her steps took her through the quiet rooms, each surface pulsing faintly beneath her touch.

And then she found it, a small recessed panel near the far wall in a huge gathering area, half-hidden beneath the curve of a flowering vine.

Her brows pulled together as she brushed her fingers along its edge. The surface lit beneath her hand.

A pulse. A whisper of light.

Before she could fully think it through, the room around her changed.

Light unfurled from the panel, rising and expanding until the entire space in the gathering room filled with shifting figures.

She wasn't looking at a viewscreen. She twirled in a swift circle.

She was standing inside a formal room.

All around her, the Council chamber unfolded in perfect, three-dimensional clarity.

Three Councilors stood at the forefront, two males and one female.

The males, tall and broad-shouldered, wore robes patterned in harsh silver and deep green.

Their faces were carved with rigid lines, expressions set in stone.

Between them stood Vaeyra, Second of Elaros Council, her presence quieter but no less commanding. Her silver eyes flickered with something Maya couldn't name. Concern, maybe, or quiet defiance. Vaeyra's robe shimmered subtly at the hem, a softer silver threaded with pale blue.

Riv'En stood before them, shoulders squared, head lifted high, his stance unwavering and powerful, radiating composed strength. It wasn't a projection in the air. It was like stepping from one room into another. Had she somehow been transported to the Council chambers?

Maya's pulse stumbled.

She turned slowly in place, heart hammering.

At first, it appeared terrifyingly real, like she had been pulled straight into the Council chambers themselves.

But as her hand passed through the edge of an Elder's robe, shimmering faintly beneath her touch, realization dawned.

It was a projection. Ahologram. Relief washed through her in a sharp wave, loosening the tight knot in her chest. She hadn't been transported anywhere.

She was still in Riv'En's home. Still safe.

And yet, what she was witnessing shook her.

She wasn't supposed to see this.

But she couldn't make herself look away. Her whole body locked in place, as if moving would make everything she was seeing real in a way she wasn't ready for.

The chamber's projection pulsed faintly as sound kicked in.

Not all at once, but in rising clarity. A deep male voice spoke first, one of the Elders in silver-green robes.

His tone was clipped and forceful: "Final Flight is accelerating beyond expected parameters. We must determine now whether intervention is possible."

Riv'En's voice followed, measured and unwavering. "Intervention is unnecessary. I will manage."

"Manage?" the other male Councilor echoed, his voice deeper, colder. "Your physical scans say otherwise. Your heat output has already crossed threshold. We have protocols for this."

Vaeyra's voice cut in next, quieter but edged with steel. "Those protocols include voluntary entry into cryo-stasis or seclusion. Both options are unacceptable given the contamination threat."

Maya's stomach twisted, a sharp, cold knot tightening deep in her gut.

Her throat grew tight, her breath too shallow, like there wasn't enough air in the room.

Every instinct in her body screamed to run, to escape this unbearable tension, but her legs wouldn't move.

Her fingers clenched into fists at her sides, nails digging into her palms. She couldn't unhear the threat woven into every sentence.

Her mind spun in frantic circles: Was there anything she could do to change their minds?

Would Riv'En really be able to stand against all of them alone?

The first Elder stepped forward slightly. "There is no precedent for halting Final Flight. None. But we are also without precedent regarding this bond. It cannot be ignored. The human must be isolated immediately."

Riv'En's posture didn't shift. "She is not a threat."

The male Councilor's voice rose. "Her presence is accelerating your condition. That is not speculation. It is fact. The human's proximity destabilizes you."

Before Riv'En could answer, a soft chime echoed through the chamber—sharp, yet musical.

Vaeyra lifted her hand slightly, drawing immediate attention.

"A new report has just been received," she said, her voice cutting through the tension like tempered glass.

"The human does not accelerate his Final Flight. Quite the reverse, in fact. The ship's original assessment was incorrect. Her presence slows his condition."

The first Councilor's mouth tightened. "There's no knowing which assessment is correct."

“You doubt our scientists’ report?”

“His Final Flight has not stopped entirely. We need to know why.”

“True,” Vaeyra allowed. “But according to our esteemed colleagues, he would have completed his Final Flight long ago if not for his Bonded Mate. She has changed the progression.” She tilted her head, eyes suddenly narrowing. “Which reminds me.... The Mating Flame—does it exist or does it not?”

Riv’En’s answer was immediate, steady. “It appeared on her. Shortly after first contact.”

Silence rippled through the room. Vaeyra’s gaze sharpened. “Explain.”

“There was a blood exchange during our first contact. Our first confrontation. She bit me and it drew blood.”

Maya flinched where she stood, the memory sparking sharp and immediate. That night she’d been taken by Riv’En. The wild panic. Her teeth sinking into his skin without thinking, tasting blood she hadn’t understood—hot, metallic, unlike anything human.

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She'd been terrified then, convinced she'd crossed a line she couldn't come back from.

But now... now she saw it through a different lens.

That bite had meant something. More than anger or defense.

It had bonded her to him. That single moment might have been the key to all of this—and she hadn't even realized it.

The second male Councilor frowned, glancing at the data screen. "That explains the anomaly. And yet, you bear no visible Flame. Why?"

Vaeyra's voice dropped. "His mother's people. Half-blooded unions manifest differently. It may require the Bonded Chase. The Flame Hunt."

Riv'En's voice cut in before she could say more. "The Bonded Chase was completed." His mouth tightened. "I completed the ritual. But no Flame appeared."

Her gaze narrowed thoughtfully. "Then clearly, something was done incorrectly."

One of the male Councilors leaned forward, frowning hard. "Incorrectly? He completed the ritual, did he not?"

Vaeyra inclined her head slowly. "Perhaps too soon. Or without full adherence to protocol. The Bonded Chase has strict rules. Chase, mate, exchange of blood by both parties. If any step is incomplete, the Mating Flame will not ignite. Timing matters,

yes, but it is the blood exchange that seals the bond fully.” She paused, voice sharpening with purpose.

“Did you bite her during the Chase, Riv’En? That is required.”

“I did,” Riv’En confirmed, his voice steady.

Vaeyra tilted her head in consideration. “And did she bite you in return—during the Chase itself?”

Riv’En stiffened. “No. That did not occur.”

The first Councilor exhaled slowly, as if the answer confirmed some long-standing theory. “There is your error. To fully bond, especially in half-blooded unions, both parties must exchange blood during the Chase to seal the bond fully.”

Maya’s breath caught. Each word dropped more grave than the last, not just something distant and formal, but something with the power to end her future before it had even started.

Her mind fought to make sense of it—blood exchange, the Bonded Chase, protocols she had no words for now.

And all of it wrapped around that one, stark question: Would she be allowed to stay with Riv’En even though she’d been at fault for not completing the Bonded Chase appropriately?

Tears filled her eyes as she realized how much she wanted that answer to be yes.

Even after everything. Even hearing herself labeled a contamination.

Her gaze darted from Councilor to Councilor, trying to read faces that gave nothing back.

Her mouth went dry, her pulse too loud in her ears. And yet still, she could not look away.

The first Councilor didn't speak for a moment. Then, quieter, more deliberate: "Her twin status complicates matters further."

The second male chimed in, "Her genetic structure is unstable, filled with latent contamination markers. Even if the joint bite had occurred it does not guarantee that the Mating Bond would have completed."

Maya pressed her hand flat against her stomach again, her breath frozen. And still, she couldn't look away. She wasn't just hearing words. She was hearing her own future being debated like she was some dangerous thing.

Vaeyra again: "Perhaps. But removing her now may also destabilize Riv'En further. We must weigh all outcomes."

Maya struggled to swallow, as sour taste flavoring her tongue.

Her twin status. The contamination. The Mating Bond.

Would they even be allowed to complete the Bond?

That was the real question. Not just whether her presence hurt him, but whether the Council would permit them to finish what had been started—to seal the bond fully, to make it official in the eyes of his people. Riv'En had indicated that was vital.

The Councilor who had spoken second lifted a hand, activating a series of glowing

panels. “Further scans. Her twin status is confirmed. Her genetic structure—unstable.”

“Twins do not exist in our systems,” the first Councilor snapped. “This is not random.”

The second Elder spoke again. “And when your Final Flight completes? What then? The Council must determine whether she is kept... or purged. The contamination is undeniable. Her twin status defies our laws. If the bond fails, there is no justification for her continued existence.”

Her knees buckled, and she caught herself against the edge of the table, clutching it with both hands like it was the only solid thing in the world.

When they said ‘purged,’ her entire body jolted.

It took everything she had to stay upright, to breathe, to keep her feet beneath her when every part of her screamed to collapse.

Her mind spun: What would they do? Would Riv’En really be able to protect her from all of them? If the answer was no, she wasn’t sure what she would do next. Run? Hide? Somehow fight for herself? The idea of standing alone against an entire Council, against Riv’En’s own people, terrified her.

But more than that was the knowledge she might be forced to walk away from him.

And that, more than anything, drove something sharp and tight through her.

She wasn’t Vettian or Elaroin. She didn’t belong here, not really.

And yet, she did. She wanted to. Her throat went tight, her vision blurred, but still she

watched.

Because even if it broke her, she had to know what they would decide.

Vaeyra's voice was quieter now, but still firm. "Even so, she is here, despite all that. The question now is whether she remains."

Riv'En's head lifted higher. "She will remain."

The room fell into charged silence. Even through the projection, Maya could feel it.

A pulse of heat flared in the projection's color, red haloing Riv'En's form, deepening and brightening like a living warning. It wasn't just a visual flicker. It radiated through the chamber's ambient light, making every surface pulse faintly in time with that angry flare.

Maya wasn't sure if it was meant as a threat or a signal of Riv'En unraveling, but either way, the effect left the room sharper, more perilous—like the walls themselves could splinter under the mass of it.

It was as if even the projection could not contain the force of his quiet fury, that same bitter strength pushing outward in waves.

The first male's voice came again, hard as iron. "Final Flight. Contamination. Twin anomaly. Bond without proof. This is no small thing."

Vaeyra's answer was quiet but unshaken. "And yet, here they remain. Both bound by these issues. We must make a decision."

At that moment, a warning pulse echoed through the chamber. Lights shifted, and one of the Councilors' attendants stepped forward.

“Incoming ships,” the attendant announced. “Three. No identification codes.”

Riv’En turned sharply.

The projection shimmered. Maya stepped back, her heart caught between fear and dread.

Ships. Riv’En’s hand closed into a fist at his side, shoulders squaring as he gave a short nod to the Councilors. Without a word, he turned and stepped toward the exit with the kind of purposeful stride that left no doubt. He would meet whatever approached head-on, whether it was friend or foe.

She pressed her hand against the wall, knuckles white. And waited. Because this time, there was no turning back. Whatever happened next—ships, Council, bond or no bond—she knew one thing for certain. Nothing on this planet would tear her away from Riv’En. Not now. Not ever.

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THEY ROSE in silence just before sunrise, skin still marked by the echoes of the night before, by the heat and closeness neither had spoken of aloud.

Beneath the quiet, aslow, rolling tension unfurled in Maya's chest, equal parts dread and steady resolve. The immensity of what waited beyond their door pressed in from all sides, sharper than breath, more demanding than thought.

Riv'En dressed first, every movement regulated, pulling on the ceremonial robe provided for the gathering.

No armor. Only pale fabric edged in dark thread, falling in quiet layers that concealed muscle and line of form alike.

Maya followed, fingers trembling slightly as she gathered the pale cloth the Elaroin's had provided, knotting it with jerky, too-sharp motions.

The robe's substance settled across her shoulders like something more than fabric, but a signal to everyone who would watch.

When Riv'En extended his hand, she took it. No words. No protest. Their bond throbbed between them like a living thing.

They stepped out into the pale morning together, and the first chime knifed through the air, high and sharp as a blade drawn from its sheath.

Maya froze, spine stiffening beneath the press of Riv'En's hand at her lower back.

Together, they crossed the wide courtyard, the hush of the gathered crowd folding around them like a veil.

Their ceremonial robes whispered with each step, pale gold fabric brushing against stone as they moved in sync, neither speaking.

The raised platform loomed ahead, its base surrounded by concentric circles of inlaid resonance stones that shimmered faintly beneath the dawn light.

Without breaking stride, Riv'En guided her to the first step.

They climbed together, purposefully, each footfall matched, the quiet knowledge of what was coming sinking into every step.

The platform beneath her feet vibrated, a low, steady hum from the resonance stones layered beneath the stage.

At the far side, the Councilors stood in perfect formation, tall and still as carved figures, waiting.

She glanced up, squinting against the riot of color overhead.

The dawn light didn't fall in steady gold as on Earth.

It fractured through layers of crystalline flora, shifting blue to green to a pale, molten silver.

The entire courtyard shimmered with it, trees and buildings alike painted in refracted light that pulsed with the planet's slow heartbeat.

Around them, a crowd had gathered.

Hundreds of Elaroins stood in near-silence.

Tall, sharp-edged warriors with skin in every shade from pale pearl to deep slate, each marked by unique striping and shimmer.

Their ranks dominated the space, a wall of silent judgment and strength.

Among them were a few women, positioned at the outer edges of the gathering.

Their presence was quieter, more observant, not participants but acknowledged witnesses.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't reverence. It was the kind of watchful, predatory quiet Maya had come to expect from Riv'En's people.

Third stood to their right, flanked by Fifth and Sixth. Their expressions were set in stone. All of Alpha Unit had gathered here this morning, with Anya beside Third. She gave Maya an encouraging smile.

Vaeyra stepped forward.

Her bare feet glided across the polished stone platform without a whisper of sound. Her dark skin gleamed like oil poured over silver, intricate black markings swirling up her arms and across her exposed throat.

Maya swallowed as the second chime sounded, deeper this time. It vibrated straight down her spine.

"This is the ancient law," Vaeyra began. Her voice carried clear across the platform, calm and resonant, as if woven into the air itself. It wasn't technology, Maya realized. It was the planet itself, carrying Vaeyra's words like a living speaker system."It is for

the bond. For the future.”

Maya’s throat tightened, her breath locked halfway in her chest. She flexed her hands slowly, as though forcing blood back into fingers gone numb.

Her gaze caught on a flicker of light rippling through the resonance stones, and for a heartbeat, she focused only on that, connecting herself to the shifting silver rather than the storm building around her.

Vaeyra turned her head slowly, scanning the gathered warriors, her gaze a quiet command in itself. When she looked back to Maya and Riv’En, something in her posture changed. Her chin tilting ever so slightly, as if acknowledging them not as individuals, but as something larger.

“When Riv’En, assassin of Alpha Legion, returned to Elaros,” Vaeyra continued, “he did not come as warrior alone. He came marked by anomaly. By change. By bond.”

A ripple moved through the crowd. Faint. Measured.

“His heat flashes marked him unfit,” Vaeyra said, voice sharpening. “His abilities were fractured. His future, uncertain. We have not seen such since the earliest era. But it is not for us to judge whether such can be redeemed. Only for the Chase to determine.”

Maya caught Riv’En’s hand where it rested against her side and squeezed once. The simple contact fortified her, cutting through the swirl of tension. Her breath shuddered out slowly, her pulse steadying just enough to meet what came next.

“By ancient rite,” Vaeyra said, voice cutting clean through the dawn, “the Bonding Chase must be completed. In the earliest era, it was not merely for union, but for survival. Warriors would chase their chosen through the forests of Elaros, proving

strength, proving ability. It was how bonds were sealed, not by word, but by action and by blood. The mate secured. The bond witnessed by all. No less, no more.”

She paused, eyes sweeping over the gathered assembly, her voice steady as stone. “Are there any who claim the right to challenge?”

The gathered voices died abruptly, leaving only the faint pulse of the resonance stones beneath their feet.

Even the air went still. The planet seemed to hold its breath.

Then—

A voice. Deep. Rolling out from the back of the crowd like thunder on the horizon.

“I claim the right to challenge.”

Maya’s stomach plummeted. Her pulse stuttered. She turned, searching the crowd, but it was Riv’En who moved first. His hand shifted from her lower back to her hand, steady and possessive, fingers pressing just hard enough that she sensed it through every layer of skin.

A ripple spread through the warriors, bodies shifting aside. Apath opened.

And through it stepped a man who could only be Elaroin.

Massive. Taller than Riv’En by a head at least. His skin wasn’t the pale pearl or soft bronze Maya had seen among others.

It was deep charcoal, almost black, striped with vivid silver markings that pulsed faintly with each step he took.

His hair was shaved close to his skull, except for a long braided length that hung down his spine like a tail.

His eyes caught hers and held. A sharp chill lanced through her, the kind that tightened every muscle beneath her skin.

Her breath stilled, a cold knot forming just beneath her ribs.

For a flickering moment, all she could see were those liquid, silver eyes, steady and unblinking, as though he already knew her, knew everything that would come next.

The stranger stopped at the base of the platform. His voice rolled out again, perfectly steady, perfectly calm.

“I issue formal challenge,” he said. “By right of blood. By right of trial. By Elaroin law. Enter the Chase.”

For a heartbeat, Maya couldn’t breathe. The quiet didn’t break. It cracked.

Half the warriors shouted in protest—deep, guttural barks that shook the air. The others answered with encouragement, voices rising like a storm front crashing against stone. It wasn’t chaotic. It wasn’t disordered. It was wild, sharp, terrifying.

Maya stumbled half a step back. Riv’En didn’t move except to tighten his grip on her hand.

Third cursed low. Fifth’s hand went to his weapon automatically, only to realize he’d surrendered it upon arrival.

Sixth said nothing, his stance so still it might have been carved from stone, arms folded, expression unreadable as though the entire scene failed to touch him at all.

His eyes tracked the challenger with glacial calm.

Vaeyra didn't flinch.

She lifted both hands, and the air around her shimmered, not with light, but with something stronger. Like gravity increasing.

Silence slammed down again.

Vaeyra's voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. "This is law," she said. Her eyes shifted to Riv'En. To Maya. And then down to the challenger standing below them like a living mountain. "It is Brotha's right to issue challenge. His right to join the Bonding Chase."

Maya's heart slammed against her ribs. Her mouth opened, protest rising, breaking.

But the words caught behind her teeth. She couldn't breathe.

Couldn't speak. Her fingers tightened around Riv'En's hand, the strength of his touch the only thing grounding her as what Vaeyra had said settled over her like stone.

Not fear. Not anger. Something sharper. Cold disbelief, heavy as gravity.

"The winner," Vaeyra said, "will claim the bond. The mate. The future."

Brotha lifted his chin slightly. His silver eyes never left Maya.

Vaeyra's final words fell like a blade.

"Any who fail... will be forfeit."

Maya's breath caught. Her pulse stuttered. For a single beat, her mind whispered: this cannot be happening. And in that moment—

Riv'En's voice broke the silence. Low. Calm. Absolute.

“Then let it begin.”

The words barely faded before Vaeyra's voice rang out once more, sharp and clear. “Maya Mirabella, remove your robe. Riv'En and Brotha, as well. Brotha, join us on the platform.”

Maya's breath caught, her spine going rigid. For a heartbeat, she hesitated, eyes flicking toward Riv'En. His gaze met hers, steady and unreadable, but he gave a single nod. There was no choice.

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With trembling hands, she unknotted the ties. The pale robe slipped from her shoulders, sliding down her arms like water before pooling at her feet. Achill licked over her exposed skin, leaving her completely bare under the shifting dawn light.

Her skin was marked only by subtle bruises and flushed impressions left by Riv'En's hands and mouth.

Marks she wore with quiet pride, not as weakness but as a testament to the force of what existed between them.

They weren't blemishes. They were proof that even now, in the heart of a world that wasn't hers, she belonged to something fierce and real. Marks of passion.

She bore them without shame, a quiet heat rising beneath her skin at the thought. They were proof of what they had shared. Nothing else to shield her, nothing else to hide behind.

The gathered warriors watched in silence, their expressions impassive as stone.

A cold awareness pressed against the back of Maya's neck, the suffocating stillness wrapping around her like an invisible net.

Her skin prickled under their gaze, a shiver crawling down her spine despite the warmth of the dawn light.

Even the women at the edges didn't speak.

This was ritual. Tradition. And it was about to begin.

Vaeyra's voice cut through again. "Step to the edge. When I give the signal, you will run. The Bonding Chase commences from that moment."

Maya swallowed hard, fighting the urge to look back once more. But she stepped forward, feet bare against the cold stone, until she stood at the platform's edge. Beyond, the forest loomed. Darker than she'd imagined. Shifting with light and shadow.

She barely registered the sudden blur of movement behind her.

A sickening crack echoed through the courtyard. She whipped her head around just in time to see Riv'En drop to one knee. The challenger's fist was still extended, a faint shimmer rippling around his knuckles from the force of the blow.

"No!" Maya's voice ripped from her throat before she could stop it.

Brotha didn't even glance at Riv'En. His silver gaze locked onto hers instead, a slow grin pulling across his sharp features. "You are mine, little human," he called, voice a low growl that vibrated through the air itself.

Maya staggered back, her stomach twisting. Her pulse thundered in her ears. Riv'En—

"Run!" Vaeyra's command cracked through the tension like lightning.

Maya didn't think. Her body moved on instinct. She turned and bolted off the platform, bare feet slapping against stone, then grass, then soil. The forest swallowed her in seconds.

Branches clawed at her arms. Leaves brushed her face, slick and cold. The ground wasn't smooth. Roots jutted up beneath her feet, catching at her steps. She pushed harder, lungs burning, heart hammering a savage rhythm in her chest.

Somewhere behind her, she heard it. Not words.

Not footsteps. A presence, vast and implacable, bearing down on her like a living force.

The challenger moved through the trees with terrifying ease, each step breaking branches that should have snapped back to wound or trap.

The underbrush shredded beneath him, leaves and twigs scattering in his wake as though the forest itself parted for him.

No stealth. No hesitation. Just relentless pursuit.

The trees weren't like Earth's forests. Their trunks shimmered with faint bands of color, pulsing gently with inner light. Leaves glowed in shades of blue and green, casting eerie shadows across the ground. Mist slithered between roots, curling around Maya's ankles as she ran.

Her lungs burned, each inhale harsh and tearing, as if she were breathing through smoke.

Each step dragged like her legs had turned to stone, muscles burning with effort.

Her heartbeat pounded like thunder, a relentless throb that swallowed every sound except the slap of her bare feet against the ground.

A flicker of movement caught her eye. Too close.

Maya threw herself sideways, stumbling behind a thick trunk. Her back hit bark hard enough to bruise. She pressed herself flat against the wood, biting back a cry as pain lanced up her side.

Silence.

The challenger's voice slithered through the trees, threatening and dangerous as poisoned mist. "You cannot hide from me," he growled, the words curling around her like claws closing in.

"These woods are in my bones, stitched into the very fabric of my being." His voice stretched and echoed unnaturally, as though the forest itself spoke through him, turning the shadows into something alive and waiting.

Maya's pulse hammered in her throat, the trees closing in tighter with every syllable.

Her throat closed around a sob. The image of Riv'En dropping to one knee replayed behind her eyes, sharp and unrelenting.

She wasn't just afraid. She was furious.

If she gave in now, if she made a sound, it would betray both of them.

She clenched her fists, nails biting into her palms. Think.

Breathe. Camouflage. She knew how. She just had to remember that she did it before with Riv'En.

A whisper of silver light flickered over her skin, an echo of the camouflage she'd used against Riv'En on Earth.

The shimmer wavered like heat off stone, fading almost as quickly as it appeared.

Her heart was hammering too hard, her breath tearing too fast to curb.

She closed her eyes, forcing her thoughts to slow, willing her mind back to the memory of Riv'En's voice, the quiet command that had steadied her before.

But the light remained faint, unstable, flickering and sputtering as her fear overwhelmed the fragile tether to her gift.

A sudden crash came to her right, like a tree trunk splintering under impossible force.

Forceful footsteps thundered against the earth, shaking the ground beneath her feet.

A blur of dark skin and silver markings streaked past her hiding place, close enough to stir the mist in its wake.

The challenger moved with terrifying speed and mass, not a man so much as a living storm tearing through the undergrowth, each step splitting branches and gouging deep scars into the soil.

Maya spun away from the tree, bolting deeper into the woods. Her bare feet slipped on slick leaves. The terrain dropped suddenly—a steep embankment. She skidded down it, arms flailing, dirt and stone tearing at her legs.

Her breath stuttered, catching halfway in her throat as if the air itself had thickened to ice.

Her vision blurred, colors bleeding into one another until the glowing trees and shifting shadows became an indistinguishable haze.

Her pulse hammered violently, like a second heartbeat in her skull, wild and frantic, each beat a warning bell screaming through her entire body.

Each beat giving away her position and helping Brotha find her.

Then—

Silence again.

She collapsed behind another tree, dragging in ragged, burning gulps of air. Her limbs trembled. Her entire body screamed forrest.

And then—he was there.

Brotha's hand clamped around her arm before she could make it another step.

His grip was iron, unshakable, radiating heat and pressure like molten steel.

Maya gasped, twisting frantically, but there was no give in his hold.

His fingers wrapped fully around her upper arm, cutting off motion as if she were no more than a sapling snapped in a storm.

Every muscle in her body fought to break free, her skin prickling with cold and fire all at once, but it was like being caught by the trunk of a tree—immovable, absolute.

His silver eyes glinted down at her, mouth pulling into a slow grin that sent ice down her spine.

“Such a disappointment,” he murmured, voice pitched low, as if savoring every word.

“Too easy. Far too easy. Where is the thrill in that?” His fingers flexed once, holding her in place just long enough to make sure she understood.

Then he released her, shoving her backward with casual force. Maya stumbled, catching herself against a low branch, breath burning in her throat. Her heart slammed against her ribs.

“Run, pathetic human. Make it fun for me.”

She didn’t hesitate. She took off, only this time, she didn’t just run blindly. Her mind snapped into focus.

If she wanted to escape him, she couldn’t rely on speed alone. Brotha knew these woods too well. He moved like he belonged here. She couldn’t outrun that. But she could out-think it.

Maya gathered herself. One slow breath. Her pulse steadied by sheer will. She called up the shimmer again, the faint multi-color camouflage flickering over her skin. This time, she made it stick.

She turned and vanished into the trees.

Her steps fell silent, her path sure and clear. Every step placed carefully. Her feet found quieter ground, smooth patches of moss, soft earth that didn’t betray her path.

She weaved between glowing trunks, slipping into the deeper shadows, matching each cadence of color. She ducked low beneath hanging vines, angled herself behind natural cover. Her breath was slow now, silent, her body moving like water around obstacles.

Brotha’s voice echoed somewhere behind her, growing sharper now. “You can run,

little human, but I am coming.”

Maya didn't answer. Didn't make a sound. She pressed closer to the bark of a wide, shimmering tree, letting the bands of light ripple over her skin and hide her completely.

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Brotha moved past her position, alooming shadow cutting through the mist with the inevitability of a storm front.

His presence pushed the air before him, each forceful step shifting the undergrowth with the strength of something unstoppable.

Maya held her breath, her body locked in place against the bark, muscles rigid, praying the shimmer held.

His silver eyes flicked once to the side, scanning, but never settling on her.

Then, as if the moment hadn't happened, he moved on, footsteps fading into the deeper shadows.

Maya waited. Counted four steady heartbeats. Then she moved again, even slower, even quieter.

A real chase had begun. And this time, it wasn't about running.

It was about disappearing.

Minutes stretched into forever. Maya moved in increments, never rushing, threading between low-hanging branches and dense undergrowth, her movement silent as death, each step chosen with care.

Every time she risked glancing back, there was nothing—no movement, no voice.

Only silence and the slow pulse of the forest's light.

But that silence wasn't peace. It was warning.

Somewhere behind her, Brotha hunted.

His frustration bled into the air long before she heard him speak again. A low growl, too distant to pinpoint: "Where are you, little human?"

The words no longer carried taunting amusement.

They were edged now, sharper, rougher. Maya crouched low beside a cluster of wide-leaved plants, camouflage rippling faintly across her skin as she forced her breath to quiet.

A stick snapped under a violent footfall somewhere to her left. She didn't flinch.

Another minute. Another breath. Another careful step forward.

And then she caught sight of him.

Brotha stalked through the trees with his head lowered, moving slower now.

Less sure. His steps no longer cracked branches like before.

He was hunting carefully, methodically, eyes scanning every patch of shadow.

His mouth twisted into a snarl as he shoved aside a glowing vine that blocked his path.

"Too quiet," he muttered, voice carrying on the damp air. "Should never have released her."

His fists clenched at his sides, the air crackling faintly with heat around him as though his fury was burning through the atmosphere itself. Maya stayed frozen, pressed flat against the wide-leafed plants, their mass barely thicker than her waist.

Another heavy footstep. Then another. Brotha spun suddenly, as if expecting her to appear from nowhere, his expression dark with rising irritation.

“Where are you?” he barked, voice slicing through the mist like a blade.

The sound carried in waves, bouncing off the trees, curling around Maya in every direction.

The ground shivered beneath her, not from footsteps, but from the press of his fury vibrating through the air.

“You will regret this when I catch you,” Brotha snarled again, and this time, his tone wasn’t just irritation.

It was cold promise, soaked in certainty.

The forest pressed in closer, branches twisting unnaturally. Their glowing edges flickered, snapping between colors in short, uneven bursts, like a broken signal. Each pulse sharpened the shadows around her, narrowing the spaces where she could move, turning every opening into a potential trap.

Leaves shifted into intentional patterns, rustling against each other with an unsettling whisper, as though they were speaking in a language too old for her to understand.

Every shadow became sharper, longer, stretching toward her, as though the entire forest wasn’t just watching.

It was hunting alongside Brotha, complicit in the chase, eager to offer herup.

And all the while, he was losing patience.

His movements grew sharper, less measured, jagged light rippling along his arms brighter with each frustrated turn.

Brotha began to lash out at the forest itself.

Ahand sliced through low branches, afist smashed against a tree trunk hard enough to send splinters flying.

His voice rose again, rough and unrestrained now, no longer the voice of a predator savoring the hunt but one on the edge of losing it.

“Enough!” he roared, voice cracking like a physical blow through the mist. “You think you can make me look weak? Think again! I will drag you out of these trees by your hair, little human, and I will show every soul gathered exactly what it means to challenge me.”

Maya forced herself to breathe slow and steady, holding perfectly still as he moved away again. Step by step, she let herself slip further into the trees, deeper into the shadows where even the glowing trunks dimmed to near black.

And then—he was there.

Only this time it wasn't the challenger.

Riv'En .

Riv'En stepped from the darkness so smoothly it was as if he had always been there,

edges of his form solidifying from mist and shadow until he was unmistakably real. One hand shot out, grabbing the challenger by the back of the neck, dragging him away from her in a single, brutal motion.

The impact sent the challenger sprawling. Not unconscious. But checked.

Maya couldn't move. Couldn't speak.

Riv'En didn't say a word. He didn't need to. His entire presence spoke louder than anything else.

He stepped between her and the challenger, body a wall of silent fury.

Maya pressed herself tighter against the tree, fingers clutching at the bark.

Riv'En's voice came at last, low and rough: "Run, Maya."

She did.

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THEY ROSE in silence just before sunrise, skin still marked by the echoes of the night before, by the heat and closeness neither had spoken of aloud.

Beneath the quiet, aslow, rolling tension unfurled in Maya's chest, equal parts dread and steady resolve. The immensity of what waited beyond their door pressed in from all sides, sharper than breath, more demanding than thought.

Riv'En dressed first, every movement regulated, pulling on the ceremonial robe provided for the gathering.

No armor. Only pale fabric edged in dark thread, falling in quiet layers that concealed muscle and line of form alike.

Maya followed, fingers trembling slightly as she gathered the pale cloth the Elaroin's had provided, knotting it with jerky, too-sharp motions.

The robe's substance settled across her shoulders like something more than fabric, but a signal to everyone who would watch.

When Riv'En extended his hand, she took it. No words. No protest. Their bond throbbed between them like a living thing.

They stepped out into the pale morning together, and the first chime knifed through the air, high and sharp as a blade drawn from its sheath.

Maya froze, spine stiffening beneath the press of Riv'En's hand at her lower back.

Together, they crossed the wide courtyard, the hush of the gathered crowd folding around them like a veil.

Their ceremonial robes whispered with each step, pale gold fabric brushing against stone as they moved in sync, neither speaking.

The raised platform loomed ahead, its base surrounded by concentric circles of inlaid resonance stones that shimmered faintly beneath the dawn light.

Without breaking stride, Riv'En guided her to the first step.

They climbed together, purposefully, each footfall matched, the quiet knowledge of what was coming sinking into every step.

The platform beneath her feet vibrated, a low, steady hum from the resonance stones layered beneath the stage.

At the far side, the Councilors stood in perfect formation, tall and still as carved figures, waiting.

She glanced up, squinting against the riot of color overhead.

The dawn light didn't fall in steady gold as on Earth.

It fractured through layers of crystalline flora, shifting blue to green to a pale, molten silver.

The entire courtyard shimmered with it, trees and buildings alike painted in refracted light that pulsed with the planet's slow heartbeat.

Around them, a crowd had gathered.

Hundreds of Elaroins stood in near-silence.

Tall, sharp-edged warriors with skin in every shade from pale pearl to deep slate, each marked by unique striping and shimmer.

Their ranks dominated the space, a wall of silent judgment and strength.

Among them were a few women, positioned at the outer edges of the gathering.

Their presence was quieter, more observant, not participants but acknowledged witnesses.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't reverence. It was the kind of watchful, predatory quiet Maya had come to expect from Riv'En's people.

Third stood to their right, flanked by Fifth and Sixth. Their expressions were set in stone. All of Alpha Unit had gathered here this morning, with Anya beside Third. She gave Maya an encouraging smile.

Vaeyra stepped forward.

Her bare feet glided across the polished stone platform without a whisper of sound. Her dark skin gleamed like oil poured over silver, intricate black markings swirling up her arms and across her exposed throat.

Maya swallowed as the second chime sounded, deeper this time. It vibrated straight down her spine.

"This is the ancient law," Vaeyra began. Her voice carried clear across the platform, calm and resonant, as if woven into the air itself. It wasn't technology, Maya realized. It was the planet itself, carrying Vaeyra's words like a living speaker system."It is for

the bond. For the future.”

Maya’s throat tightened, her breath locked halfway in her chest. She flexed her hands slowly, as though forcing blood back into fingers gone numb.

Her gaze caught on a flicker of light rippling through the resonance stones, and for a heartbeat, she focused only on that, connecting herself to the shifting silver rather than the storm building around her.

Vaeyra turned her head slowly, scanning the gathered warriors, her gaze a quiet command in itself. When she looked back to Maya and Riv’En, something in her posture changed. Her chin tilting ever so slightly, as if acknowledging them not as individuals, but as something larger.

“When Riv’En, assassin of Alpha Legion, returned to Elaros,” Vaeyra continued, “he did not come as warrior alone. He came marked by anomaly. By change. By bond.”

A ripple moved through the crowd. Faint. Measured.

“His heat flashes marked him unfit,” Vaeyra said, voice sharpening. “His abilities were fractured. His future, uncertain. We have not seen such since the earliest era. But it is not for us to judge whether such can be redeemed. Only for the Chase to determine.”

Maya caught Riv’En’s hand where it rested against her side and squeezed once. The simple contact fortified her, cutting through the swirl of tension. Her breath shuddered out slowly, her pulse steadying just enough to meet what came next.

“By ancient rite,” Vaeyra said, voice cutting clean through the dawn, “the Bonding Chase must be completed. In the earliest era, it was not merely for union, but for survival. Warriors would chase their chosen through the forests of Elaros, proving

strength, proving ability. It was how bonds were sealed, not by word, but by action and by blood. The mate secured. The bond witnessed by all. No less, no more.”

She paused, eyes sweeping over the gathered assembly, her voice steady as stone. “Are there any who claim the right to challenge?”

The gathered voices died abruptly, leaving only the faint pulse of the resonance stones beneath their feet.

Even the air went still. The planet seemed to hold its breath.

Then—

A voice. Deep. Rolling out from the back of the crowd like thunder on the horizon.

“I claim the right to challenge.”

Maya’s stomach plummeted. Her pulse stuttered. She turned, searching the crowd, but it was Riv’En who moved first. His hand shifted from her lower back to her hand, steady and possessive, fingers pressing just hard enough that she sensed it through every layer of skin.

A ripple spread through the warriors, bodies shifting aside. Apath opened.

And through it stepped a man who could only be Elaroin.

Massive. Taller than Riv’En by a head at least. His skin wasn’t the pale pearl or soft bronze Maya had seen among others.

It was deep charcoal, almost black, striped with vivid silver markings that pulsed faintly with each step he took.

His hair was shaved close to his skull, except for a long braided length that hung down his spine like a tail.

His eyes caught hers and held. A sharp chill lanced through her, the kind that tightened every muscle beneath her skin.

Her breath stilled, a cold knot forming just beneath her ribs.

For a flickering moment, all she could see were those liquid, silver eyes, steady and unblinking, as though he already knew her, knew everything that would come next.

The stranger stopped at the base of the platform. His voice rolled out again, perfectly steady, perfectly calm.

“I issue formal challenge,” he said. “By right of blood. By right of trial. By Elaroin law. Enter the Chase.”

For a heartbeat, Maya couldn’t breathe. The quiet didn’t break. It cracked.

Half the warriors shouted in protest—deep, guttural barks that shook the air. The others answered with encouragement, voices rising like a storm front crashing against stone. It wasn’t chaotic. It wasn’t disordered. It was wild, sharp, terrifying.

Maya stumbled half a step back. Riv’En didn’t move except to tighten his grip on her hand.

Third cursed low. Fifth’s hand went to his weapon automatically, only to realize he’d surrendered it upon arrival.

Sixth said nothing, his stance so still it might have been carved from stone, arms folded, expression unreadable as though the entire scene failed to touch him at all.

His eyes tracked the challenger with glacial calm.

Vaeyra didn't flinch.

She lifted both hands, and the air around her shimmered, not with light, but with something stronger. Like gravity increasing.

Silence slammed down again.

Vaeyra's voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. "This is law," she said. Her eyes shifted to Riv'En. To Maya. And then down to the challenger standing below them like a living mountain. "It is Brotha's right to issue challenge. His right to join the Bonding Chase."

Maya's heart slammed against her ribs. Her mouth opened, protest rising, breaking.

But the words caught behind her teeth. She couldn't breathe.

Couldn't speak. Her fingers tightened around Riv'En's hand, the strength of his touch the only thing grounding her as what Vaeyra had said settled over her like stone.

Not fear. Not anger. Something sharper. Cold disbelief, heavy as gravity.

"The winner," Vaeyra said, "will claim the bond. The mate. The future."

Brotha lifted his chin slightly. His silver eyes never left Maya.

Vaeyra's final words fell like a blade.

"Any who fail... will be forfeit."

Maya's breath caught. Her pulse stuttered. For a single beat, her mind whispered: this cannot be happening. And in that moment—

Riv'En's voice broke the silence. Low. Calm. Absolute.

“Then let it begin.”

The words barely faded before Vaeyra's voice rang out once more, sharp and clear. “Maya Mirabella, remove your robe. Riv'En and Brotha, as well. Brotha, join us on the platform.”

Maya's breath caught, her spine going rigid. For a heartbeat, she hesitated, eyes flicking toward Riv'En. His gaze met hers, steady and unreadable, but he gave a single nod. There was no choice.

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With trembling hands, she unknotted the ties. The pale robe slipped from her shoulders, sliding down her arms like water before pooling at her feet. Achill licked over her exposed skin, leaving her completely bare under the shifting dawn light.

Her skin was marked only by subtle bruises and flushed impressions left by Riv'En's hands and mouth.

Marks she wore with quiet pride, not as weakness but as a testament to the force of what existed between them.

They weren't blemishes. They were proof that even now, in the heart of a world that wasn't hers, she belonged to something fierce and real. Marks of passion.

She bore them without shame, a quiet heat rising beneath her skin at the thought. They were proof of what they had shared. Nothing else to shield her, nothing else to hide behind.

The gathered warriors watched in silence, their expressions impassive as stone.

A cold awareness pressed against the back of Maya's neck, the suffocating stillness wrapping around her like an invisible net.

Her skin prickled under their gaze, a shiver crawling down her spine despite the warmth of the dawn light.

Even the women at the edges didn't speak.

This was ritual. Tradition. And it was about to begin.

Vaeyra's voice cut through again. "Step to the edge. When I give the signal, you will run. The Bonding Chase commences from that moment."

Maya swallowed hard, fighting the urge to look back once more. But she stepped forward, feet bare against the cold stone, until she stood at the platform's edge. Beyond, the forest loomed. Darker than she'd imagined. Shifting with light and shadow.

She barely registered the sudden blur of movement behind her.

A sickening crack echoed through the courtyard. She whipped her head around just in time to see Riv'En drop to one knee. The challenger's fist was still extended, a faint shimmer rippling around his knuckles from the force of the blow.

"No!" Maya's voice ripped from her throat before she could stop it.

Brotha didn't even glance at Riv'En. His silver gaze locked onto hers instead, a slow grin pulling across his sharp features. "You are mine, little human," he called, voice a low growl that vibrated through the air itself.

Maya staggered back, her stomach twisting. Her pulse thundered in her ears. Riv'En—

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The sound carried in waves, bouncing off the trees, curling around Maya in every direction.

The ground shivered beneath her, not from footsteps, but from the press of his fury vibrating through the air.

“You will regret this when I catch you,” Brotha snarled again, and this time, his tone wasn’t just irritation.

It was cold promise, soaked in certainty.

The forest pressed in closer, branches twisting unnaturally. Their glowing edges flickered, snapping between colors in short, uneven bursts, like a broken signal. Each pulse sharpened the shadows around her, narrowing the spaces where she could move, turning every opening into a potential trap.

Leaves shifted into intentional patterns, rustling against each other with an unsettling whisper, as though they were speaking in a language too old for her to understand.

Every shadow became sharper, longer, stretching toward her, as though the entire forest wasn’t just watching.

It was hunting alongside Brotha, complicit in the chase, eager to offer her up.

And all the while, he was losing patience.

His movements grew sharper, less measured, jagged light rippling along his arms brighter with each frustrated turn.

Brotha began to lash out at the forest itself.

A hand sliced through low branches, a fist smashed against a tree trunk hard enough to send splinters flying.

His voice rose again, rough and unrestrained now, no longer the voice of a predator savoring the hunt but one on the edge of losing it.

“Enough!” he roared, voice cracking like a physical blow through the mist. “You think you can make me look weak? Think again! I will drag you out of these trees by your hair, little human, and I will show every soul gathered exactly what it means to challenge me.”

Maya forced herself to breathe slow and steady, holding perfectly still as he moved away again. Step by step, she let herself slip further into the trees, deeper into the shadows where even the glowing trunks dimmed to near black.

And then—he was there.

Only this time it wasn't the challenger.

Riv'En .

Riv'En stepped from the darkness so smoothly it was as if he had always been there, edges of his form solidifying from mist and shadow until he was unmistakably real. One hand shot out, grabbing the challenger by the back of the neck, dragging him away from her in a single, brutal motion.

The impact sent the challenger sprawling. Not unconscious. But checked.

Maya couldn't move. Couldn't speak.

Riv'En didn't say a word. He didn't need to. His entire presence spoke louder than anything else.

He stepped between her and the challenger, body a wall of silent fury.

Maya pressed herself tighter against the tree, fingers clutching at the bark.

Riv'En's voice came at last, low and rough: "Run, Maya."

She did.