



Hunter's Valentine (Xarc'n Warriors)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Food and water? Check. Shelter? Check. Weapons and ammo? Check. Check.

I thought I was ready when the apocalypse came, but I wasn't prepared for dirty bunker politics. Realizing I'm no longer welcomed, I step foot into a hostile landscape, ready to face down the deadly space bugs in search of a new home.

It's just my luck that I run afoul of a massively muscular, horned and fanged Xarc'n warrior on my very first day out. Mur'k carries me back to his hideout, claiming that I owe him for messing up his hunt.

Nope! No way! I didn't survive the bugs just to become some cocky warrior's plaything. I don't care if he's hot as sin and purrs like a big cat. I'm going to make it to New Franklin on my own if it's the last thing I do!

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I tiptoed silently around the trio of deadly space bugs as they fought over the rancid meat I'd dropped as a decoy. The creatures fought over the stinky morsel, their glossy, dark brown carapaces reflecting the orange glow of dawn. There were only scuttlers in this group. With beady eyes, eight legs, and two scythe-shaped front claws, scuttlers were about the size of a rottweiler and looked like the spawn of a mantis, ant, and spider love triangle.

They didn't have great vision like the flying ones did, nor were they particularly smart. They did, however, have an amazing sense of smell, which was why I was currently drenched in enough Old Spice to deodorize an entire high school football team. The flesh-eating creatures didn't find that scent very appetizing.

They had decent hearing too, but they were making such a racket competing for the rotten food that I doubted they'd hear me. The scuttlers had earned their name because their many feet made a horrible scuttling, scratching noise as they ran over the pavement. It had been that sound that had alerted me to their presence, giving me enough time to throw the bait and hide.

The trick to using decoys successfully was to make sure they were stinky enough to lure the bugs away when they got too close but not so potent that they attracted more creatures from afar. I still had one more, but it was triple-bagged, and the creatures paid me no attention, giving me lots of time to make it past them.

Buggy obstacle hurdled, I silently celebrated my first minor victory of the day, then hurried across the street to the diner where I'd stashed my extra supplies.

Once safely inside, I looked back at the mansion on the hill. The mansion—or rather,

the bunker underneath it—had been my home for the last year and a half since the space bugs landed. But now it was time to say goodbye.

Leaving the bunker hadn't been an easy decision, not with the world outside chind deep in flesh-eating space bugs, desperate cannibals, and terrifying humanoid warriors—also aliens—who claimed they were here to fight the invertebrates. But I'd overheard the rest of the bunker's inhabitants talking about kicking me out, so it wasn't as if I had much of a choice.

It all began about two years ago, when the first alien space bugs landed on Earth and started their reign of terror. At first, people thought they were a hoax, or some elaborate, overdone marketing campaign for a new movie or videogame. But our group had started moving everything into the bunker anyway.

While some believed they could make it on their own, we knew that it was important to have allies when shit hit the fan. Safety in numbers and all that.

Besides, your average Joe couldn't afford their own doomsday bunker, and those who had them didn't always have the necessary personnel to keep everyone in it safe and healthy. Every survivor selected to join this particular bunker—we all met on a preparedness forum—had not only brought tons of supplies of their own to add to the stockpile, but also a skill that would help all those inside.

The couple who owned the bunker and the mansion above it, Mr. and Mrs. Willis, had been expecting their first child when society collapsed. That was how I got in; I'd been her midwife. Things had gone swimmingly until after the birth of their baby boy.

A few weeks post-partum, Mrs. Willis had caught her husband ogling me in the showers. It was bad enough that the man who owned the bunker I was surviving in was a creep and invading my privacy. But to make matters worse, Mrs. Willis blamed

me, claiming I was trying to lure her husband away. Things had been tense since.

As the months went by, it became increasingly clear that I was no longer useful to them. She started accusing me of stealing from the supply room and made biting comments about me eating too much or doing things wrong.

No one stood up for me because she was the boss bitch on campus. Not to mention, some of the other inhabitants thought I was getting a free ride now that baby Willis was born, completely ignoring the fact that I also did a lot of the maintenance tasks around the bunker.

Who crawled into the ducts to clean them last winter? Me. Who took care of the mice infestation? Me!

We weren't the type of bunker that locked up and never opened our hatch since there was never such a thing as too many supplies. So once the crazy summer swarms were over last year, we started sending teams to look for more to add to our stockpile and to gather intel.

This winter, they'd started sending me out to forage on my own. They were probably hoping I'd get killed by a bug, be kidnapped by one of those alien warriors, or freeze to death. I'd spent Valentine's Day, which was a little under two weeks ago, hiding in an attic, hoping I didn't end up as bug food.

Should it have mattered? No. But there wasn't much to do stuck inside a bunker, and we always made a big deal of every holiday. It had hurt that no one had come out to search for me when I didn't return that evening.

Things had come to a head a few days later when I overheard people talking about kicking me out of the bunker for good. They seemed to believe, like Mrs. Willis, that I was stealing from them—when in reality I was bringing in more supplies and

adding to our stash. They were going to do it at the end-of-month meeting.

Argh! It made me so angry I could cut a bitch.

It was time to go. Fuck these people! There was no point in staying somewhere I wasn't wanted. So for the past week I'd been planning my escape, packing away everything I needed.

Ducking into the kitchen of the diner, I opened the now-defunct freezer to take out my ultra-light folding bike. I'd found it during one of my solo foraging trips in a nearby garage. It was one of those really expensive ones that only someone who lived in this neighborhood could afford. Welp, it was mine now.

There had still been snow on the ground when I first found it, and I hadn't been able to use it. But the last few days had been unseasonably warm for mid-winter. This was both a good and bad thing. Bad, because it meant the bugs were more active than if it were colder. Good, because most of the snow had melted. The bike would be a great help in getting me to my destination: New Franklin.

I already had the bike unfolded and the storage bag strapped on. The others would be waking up now, and they'd realize I was gone soon enough since I was supposed to make the morning meal today. I wanted to get as far away from the bunker as possible. They had a vehicle, and when they realized I'd taken some of the antibiotics and a bunch of water filters, they'd probably come for me.

Did I feel bad about taking the supplies? Nope! First, I'd come in with tons of goodies. The food, the water, the medicine, the gun and ammo... it was all mine. And second, if they were going to punish me for something I didn't do, then I might as well just do it anyway. Right? Plus, they were being assholes.

Inside the bike bag were all the non-essentials: extra food, extra ammo, and anything

I'd thought I could use as trade, like the medicine and the filters. If I had to abandon it somewhere, it wouldn't be the end of the world. In my backpack and hip bag was everything that I needed to survive: food for three days, as much water as I could comfortably carry, a water filter, my Ruger Mini-14 and ammo, a radio, that last decoy, and everything that might save my life in an emergency.

I'd chosen the lightest option for everything, which meant I was leaving my heavy winter coat behind. A shame, but it inhibited my movement too much. I'd opted for a windbreaker under a lightweight jacket instead. As I sped down the street, I shivered at the freezing gust of wind that went right through me.

Damn it! I should've left yesterday when it was still warm. Today was much colder, though the skies were clear. Great. I got to be cold, and the flyers would be active.

No matter I'd just have to ride until I saw the first one. I hadn't actually spotted anymore scuttlers since the group earlier, but as the day wore on, that would change.

I planned on sheltering in abandoned buildings along the way. The settlement of New Franklin should be in the nearby town of Franklin. It couldn't be too far, since we were able to tune in to *Staying Alive*, a daily radio show that broadcast from the settlement; though Jack, the radio host, had been careful not to give away their exact location.

Perhaps Mr. Willis was right, and New Franklin wasn't nearly as nice as Jack made it sound. Mr. Willis was convinced that they used the radio show to lure survivors in and eat them. But my gut told me otherwise.

I was already halfway through our little town when I saw the Xarc'n warrior on one of the roofs.

The buff, loincloth-wearing aliens had shown up shortly after the space bugs,

claiming it was their life's duty to fight "the scourge." Not everyone had believed them. Our government sure hadn't.

I stayed close to the building and got off my bike. Luckily for me, the alien warrior looked to be preoccupied with something else and hadn't seen me.

He was huge, almost seven feet tall. He had massive, ram-like horns and equally substantial shoulders, making him the epitome of top-heavy. Despite the winter chill, he wore nothing on his upper body except for a few strategically placed pieces of armor, showing off his well-formed pecs. From where I stood, the building blocked my view of anything below his chest, but I knew he'd be wearing a leather loincloth. They all did.

They all—at least all the ones I'd seen on the internet before we lost our connection—had yellow eyes, purple, leathery skin, and massive claws on their feet. All our differences aside, they were undeniably humanoid, especially the upper body, and every last one of them would put a bodybuilder to shame. Our species were also "compatible" enough that there'd been accounts of them stealing women away into their shuttles for nefarious purposes.

This one was still busy with something, so I used the distraction to sneak around him, looping around several buildings to put some distance between us. I didn't want to be a statistic.

But then I heard it. Oh god, I smelled it, too!

Panic filled me as I covered my nose with a gloved hand and searched for a safe place to hide.

A little farther ahead, a shop door was swinging in the wind. An open door usually meant intact windows and a way to lock up. I hopped onto my bike and pedaled as

fast as I could toward it. I was just wheeling my things into the store when they came into view: a writhing mass of alien bugs stampeding down the adjacent street. I froze, not wanting to make any movement that would draw their attention, but it was too late.

A shrill call had me looking up. Two hideous winged scorpions were in the sky despite the early hour, and one of them had spotted me. The bugs all turned, forgetting their original destination, and started down the street toward me.

“Ahh! Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

I dug in my pack for the last decoy. It would buy me a few seconds at most, but I might as well try. I threw the package of rotten meat as hard as I could, adrenaline giving me superhuman strength. It hit the ground with a wet splat, the plastic tearing as the rotten contents spilled out.

Then I scrambled inside the store as death came barreling toward me.

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I realized my carefully laid plans were all for nothing the moment the scourge started veering away from my strategically placed traps. I'd spent all yesterday evening setting them up and had then run around with a lure at dawn, trying to gather as many of the infernal creatures as possible so I could burn them all to a crisp at once. But while the first part had gone as planned, the scourge had started down the wrong road only two intersections away from their demise.

That could only mean one thing: something had caught their attention, something alive and edible. I scented the air, but all I could smell were the scourge and their blasted fungus.

I backed up and made a running jump onto the next roof to see if there was anything I had missed. I'd chosen this area in particular to set my traps because of how close together the buildings were and how easy it was to maneuver from building to building without ever setting foot on the ground. It meant I could take my time destroying the flyers methodically without having to worry about the scuttlers or spitters.

I finally detected it two roofs over—something delicious and delicate. Human, but not like any of the ones I'd scented before. I knew there was a small group of survivors living in this area. I'd seen them earlier in the winter, but they'd been exploring as a group, and it was clear that whoever had messed up my traps had come alone. Strange. It was rare for humans to forage by themselves.

There was the smell of something else as well, something putrid. Rotting meat. The human must have thrown it to distract the scourge, and that was what the scuttlers were now investigating.

I inhaled again, trying to isolate the human scent. Female, for sure. Any other hunter would be excited to rescue a female and bring her back to his shuttle, but not me. I wasn't interested in a mate. I did, however, want to see who'd messed up my hunt. I'd spent a good deal of time setting it up, and I was more than a little annoyed that she'd wrecked it.

This hunt was supposed to beat my personal best. And now it was ruined.

The sudden sound of gunfire rang out from one of the buildings below. That must be her, though what her weapon could possibly do against this many scourge, I didn't know.

I sighed. The human might have ruined my hunt, but I wasn't going to let her die, not when she smelled so utterly delicious.

Usually, I preferred to fight the flyers melee-style for a fun challenge, but time was of the essence here, so I used my blaster instead. I grounded them by shooting them in the wings; those were large, easy targets. Then I got close enough to get in two headshots—one for each of the flyers. Now all I had to do was get the scourge's attention away from the little human.

I was glad I'd decided to trade with the hunters living in New Franklin. The hunters there worked and lived with a large group of humans, and they had this wonderful invention called a repellent. It only cost me a few dozen useless "phone batteries."

The repellent worked much the same way our lures did, using sound. But while our lures sent out a frequency that sounded like a distressed queen to draw the creatures near, the human-made repellent emitted a noise the creatures couldn't stand. I hated it too. It was the most obnoxious thing I'd ever heard and it hurt my ears, but it worked to get rid of the scourge when I didn't want to hunt anymore. The combination of the repellent, my lure, a series of well-placed traps, and fire meant that I'd been more

successful than ever in my hunts.

I turned off the lure that I'd been using to draw the scourge in and switched on the deterrent. A high-pitched whirring that made my head want to burst had me immediately clenching my jaw. The scourge heard it, too, and the majority of them scrambled away, trying to get as far away from it as possible. A few particularly hungry ones stayed, deciding that food was worth rupturing their tympanic membranes.

My eardrums weren't faring any better, so I waited just long enough for the retreating scourge to put some distance between us before I turned the repellent off. With luck, the creatures would've already forgotten why they were here. I was just glad there weren't any of those long, centicreep creatures in this batch.

Now, to locate the little female who had ruined my carefully planned hunt.

That wasn't hard at all because the handful of scourge that remained were all hovering around the entrance to one building. I jumped off the roof, axe drawn, and let out a battle cry, catching the attention of the scourge.

They'd broken through the store's window, and there was spitter acid sizzling in a puddle just outside the door. The acid would soon eat through the door, and although that would take some time, it told me there was a spitter in the mix.

Death by spitter was one of the worst ways to go. We could regenerate lost muscle and skin, and even nerves and sometimes bone. But there was nothing to regenerate if we melted into a puddle of goo.

I scanned the surroundings and found the spitter off to the side. With its one and only attack already spent, it would take some time for it to re-arm, so I ignored it for now.

Another loud gunshot came from inside the store. The female had pulled down several shelves in an attempt to stop the scourge. Two dead scuttlers lay twitching on the floor. She must have gotten them in the head. Only a few Earth weapons commonly carried by civilians were strong enough to pierce through the main body carapace, and hers hadn't been loud enough to be one of them. A third scuttler lay trapped under a fallen shelf.

The female looked up and our eyes met through the broken store front for a split second. There was recognition in her gray eyes. I might not have noticed her because I was so engrossed with the scourge, but she'd known I was here. But there was no time to marvel that her eyes were the color of storm clouds because the first scuttler was already on me.

Years of training took over as my body effortlessly went through the movements of a deadly dance, slashing until there was nothing left but severed, twitching limbs, and headless scourge. As I moved, I could feel the female's eyes on me. I sure hoped she wouldn't turn that weapon on me now that the scourge were no longer attacking her. She seemed to know exactly how to use it, which was incredibly sexy.

I approached my last adversary, the spitter. Knowing it couldn't attack me without its acid, it turned tail and fled. But I didn't let it get away. I threw my battle axe. The edge of it glowed with plasma energy as it spun through the air and arced toward the creature. Then it sank into its thick skull with a satisfying thud.

Another loud crack had me turning to see the female landing a heavy iron bar into the head of the scourge trapped under the shelving. She tossed the iron away, then pushed the hair that had fallen out of her braid back from her face before leveling her gaze at me.

She looked ready to fight me too.

Krux! That was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

But I reminded myself that she was the one who'd ruined my hunt. And now, I'd saved her . I should be the angry one!

Unlike other warriors who were eager to find their mates, I just wanted to hunt. I didn't need a human female dragging me down. We hadn't known the humans were mating compatible with us until we'd already arrived on Earth. Having never found such a species before, we hadn't thought it was even possible.

We were the only ones left of our species, and we technically weren't even the original Xarc'n race. We were genetically modified soldiers, clones of the ten thousand Original Hunters created to fight the scourge. And until we found Earth, we'd thought we'd eventually die off from clonal decay since there were no females left.

Still, a mate and a family were the dreams of other hunters, not mine. I was happy to spend the rest of my life hunting the scourge.

"What are you doing here, female?" The translator at my belt repeated my words aloud.

She didn't reply at first, and I wondered if perhaps I had my translator set to Mandarin again. When I first arrived on the continent, my translator had been set to the wrong language, and it had taken an embarrassingly long time before I figured out why none of the humans could understand me. That was another thing the survivors at New Franklin had helped me with. But I double checked, and it was set to American English.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded again. "You ruined my hunt."

She narrowed her eyes at me and spoke. “What am I doing here? I’m trying to survive. And what the hell do you mean, ruined your hunt?”

“I was luring the scourge to the traps I’d set.” I crossed my arms over my chest and stood in front of the broken window, blocking the only way out. The acid was still eating through the door and giving off noxious fumes. “Then you got in the way and drew their attention instead. You owe me a hunt.”

To my surprise, the female didn’t shy away. Instead, she swung her weapon, which was on a strap, over her back and picked her way over the broken glass, her eyes bright with determination. She tried to hide a limp, but I noticed it anyway. She nudged over a piece of debris and stepped on top of it so that we were almost eye to eye.

“Listen here, buddy.” She jabbed me in the chest so hard with her finger that it almost hurt. Almost . “I owe you nothing.”

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I didn't know what gave me the nerve to get all up in the terrifying hunter's face like that. Maybe it was because I'd been living with people who didn't give two shits about me, and I was sick and tired of being pushed around. Or maybe it was the adrenaline from being trapped by the bugs and killing three of them in as many minutes. Either way, I wasn't going to let this asshole blame me for squat, and my body moved before my brain even realized what it was doing.

His musky, masculine scent drifted through the air, momentarily overpowering the stench of the dead bugs around us. I wanted to step even closer so it would keep blocking out the offensive smells, but then we'd be touching. Technically, we were already touching because I still had my finger on his chest, which was so warm I could feel it right through my ultra-thin gloves. He was basically naked from the waist up, save for a few pieces of armor. And yep, I called it, he was wearing the trademark Xarc'n loincloth.

The alien warrior looked as stunned by my actions as I felt, but only for a second. A grin replaced his look of shock, showing a row of white, gleaming teeth and a set of sharp fangs, reminding me that he was a predator through and through. Something blossomed insidiously in my belly—

Wait just a stinkin' moment ! Did I find fangs sexy? Holy crap, I did. What was the matter with me?

Was I really that desperate after being trapped in a bunker with the same people day in and day out and not getting any? Whatever the reason, finding any part of a Xarc'n hunter attractive was not acceptable.

I tried to pull my finger away, but he grabbed it, trapping me.

“Hey! Let me go!”

“You will come with me,” he said. Well, to be precise, he made a scary-sounding string of growls, and a device on his belt translated.

“What? No!”

I yanked again, but he caught me by the wrist instead. Then he tugged, and since I was balancing on a piece of debris to get as close to eye level with him as possible, I lost my footing and fell. I flung my arms out, trying to stop the inevitable tumble, and ended up plastered all over his front, clutching his leather armor.

“I am glad you agree.” Thick arms wrapped around me.

Before I could protest, I was tossed over his massive shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and he was strolling away, not even reacting to the broken glass under his feet. I clutched onto my rifle sling, hoping I wouldn’t lose it or my backpack.

“Wait! My supplies.”

“Where are they?”

“Inside that building.”

“I will return for them.” He started walking again.

“No! Let me go!” I struggled, thumping on his back with the fist that wasn’t holding my things and trying my best to kick him in the face from my precarious perch on his shoulder. I didn’t escape from the bunker just to be kidnapped immediately by some

purple freak.

“You have ruined my hunt once already. I will release you once my hunt is successful.”

“Hold up. You said that before. What exactly do you mean that I ruined your hunt? I still don’t understand how this is my fault.”

“I spent days planning this. Setting traps, putting up barriers to funnel the scourge into them. Everything was perfect. I turned on my lure. The scourge all followed the right path until you showed up. This was supposed to be the hunt of the century. I could’ve killed hundreds of scourge today.”

Oh shit! Now it made sense why there were so many bugs out even though it was winter. He’d called them in. And now that he mentioned it, I had thought it strange that so many of the streets had been blocked by debris. The only reason I’d made it through was because I was on a bike and not a larger vehicle. Mindless groups of alien bugs wouldn’t bother weaving through and around obstacles; they’d simply find an easier, unobstructed route.

“Okay. First off, I apologize for ruining your plan. But can’t you just call them back and have your hunt anyway?”

“Negative. The barriers and traps only work if the scourge all come from one direction—their nest. Because I used the repellent, they have now scattered everywhere.”

It took me a moment to figure out why the sentence sounded so strange. Then it hit me: the word “repellent” was spoken in English. A heavily accented English, but still English.

“Repellent?”

“Affirmative. I traded for it with humans from New Franklin .”

That too was spoken in English. Jack had mentioned on his show that their group worked with Xarc’n warriors to fight the scourge nest at the center of their town. Their plan was to destroy the nest completely and free the town of the invertebrate menace. It was a lofty goal, one Jack claimed could only happen if Xarc’n and humans worked together. It was this that had stopped many of the others in the bunker from listening to Staying Alive , even though the radio show gave amazing tips on how to survive in the post-apocalyptic landscape.

“Do you work with the humans there?” I asked, hope flaring within me. “Do you know Jack?”

“I do know Jack. But I do not work with New Franklin. Only trade. I am a lone hunter.”

Oh. That was too bad. But he knew where New Franklin was. And he did know Jack.

“Is it true that Jack’s wife is pregnant?” That was one of the reasons why I was heading there. I figured I would be needed.

He suddenly released me, and I slid down the front of his body only to be caught again, his palms on my ass this time.

“Hold on tight, female. I must climb.”

We hadn’t gone far, just to the building I’d seen him on earlier. We were at the fire escape, and I realized that the hunter planned on climbing it like an oversized ladder, rather than going up the stairs like a normal person.

“I don’t think this is a good—” I was cut off when he started ascending the metal deathtrap.

Not wanting to fall to my doom, I flung my arms around his neck and held on tight. There was that pleasant smell again. At least he didn’t stink.

The building wasn’t too tall, six or seven stories at most, but it was the tallest one in this area. Once we were safely on the roof he continued walking, taking huge strides toward the opposite side where there was a garret. This must have been his temporary hideout while he set up his traps, because the door was open and the place looked lived in.

He released me when we were by the entrance, but my eyes weren’t on his hideout anymore. Instead, they were on the traps he’d set. I walked over to the edge of the roof to take a better look.

He’d used the entire courtyard as his battlefield and wow, he hadn’t been kidding when he said it had taken him a while to set up. He’d used found objects, fences, barricades, nets and cables, containers, and anything else you would find in an abandoned town to make his traps.

I pictured the scourge coming in through two of the buildings, funneled there by the barriers he put in place, then being split into different groups. One group would climb a ramp only to be dumped into a giant hole that would be hard to escape. Others would get stuck in a makeshift oversized wildlife trap, the metal grates slamming down to lock them in.

There was a large X in the middle of the courtyard.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“My net launcher. After most of the scourge are stuck in the traps, I will throw food at the center and draw them to the X before shooting my net. There will still be a few loose, but I’ll take care of them when they try to flee the fire. They’ll try to leave the way they came in, and I will be waiting.”

I nodded. “Impressive,” I admitted. “I wouldn’t have thought it possible to kill the entire swarm of bugs I saw earlier in one shot, but this might actually do it.”

“Of course it will.” The hunter sounded peeved that I’d only said might .

“Well,” I said, slowly making my way back to the fire escape, “you don’t need me around for that. Call them in tomorrow morning and try again.”

“Why, so you can mess it up for a second time?” He moved so fast it was barely a blur, and I was lifted off my feet once more. “You will stay right here until the hunt is over tomorrow. I’m not going to let you spoil it again—”

He moved suddenly, covering my mouth with his palm.

“Humans,” he said quietly. Interestingly enough, his translator also managed to whisper. “I hear one of their vehicles.”

I didn’t, because our electric cars were quiet enough not to draw the attention of bugs or hostiles. We didn’t use them often since charging them was a challenge, especially since someone had stolen some of the solar panels from the roof early on in the bugpocalypse.

That had been our bunker’s first major emergency, actually. So we’d gone out in the evening, as soon as the flyers had returned to their nest, to relocate the remaining panels to a less conspicuous position in the back yard behind an overgrown garden. Even though we had to clear the growth off it occasionally it was a much better

location, because most human survivors wouldn't think to search there. One look at our roof and the empty panel mounts and they would leave, thinking the entire place was completely looted.

Would they take the vehicles out to look for me? Not if they simply thought I was gone. They'd rejoice. There'd be more for everyone else! But if they realized I'd taken some of the supplies, using the SUV was probably worth it.

Maybe it was best if I stayed here after all. The last thing I wanted was to deal with those ungrateful assholes again. Imagine if Mrs. Willis found out I had been caught by a hunter when I hadn't even left the town limits. The horror!

Also, this whole getting cornered by a swarm of bugs, fighting my way out, getting human-napped by a warrior who was angry because I'd messed up his hunt thing had taken time. Too much time. Even now I could see flyers on the horizon, and I didn't mean the two that had come with the group earlier, but a whole slew of them. It would be far too dangerous to travel any time soon unless I wanted to risk being bug chow.

I let the hunter guide me back into the garret, which had a large window facing the courtyard, a plan forming. I'd hide here during the noon hours when the bugs were most active, enjoying some sexy purple eye candy. Then later, when he was occupied with his hunt, I'd escape, recover my supplies, and head merrily on my way.

Perfect.

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The female's name was Sara. It was a common human name and I'd heard it before, but that didn't make it any easier to pronounce. The sibilant sound at the beginning wasn't one we had in our language, and although we had something similar it still came out sounding wrong, no matter how many times I tried.

Sara had just as much difficulty pronouncing my name.

Currently, she glared at me like I'd been the one to ruin her hunt and not the other way around. I had to admit, it felt good when she called my setup impressive. But of course it was! I took great care with my work, and despite not being the best fighter in my contingent, I was one of the best hunters.

Hunting the scourge wasn't always about strength and power, though I had plenty of that as well.

I had hunted in this area before, although it wasn't my usual hunting grounds. That was why I didn't know much about Sara and the people she lived with. I assumed she came from the underground dwelling at the top of the hill. That meant this was her territory, and she'd stay in the area if I let her go, possibly getting in the way when I tried to call the scourge in again tomorrow morning.

I'd brought her up here so she'd be out of my way. Now I regretted it because her scent was filling up the tiny space, making it difficult to think. It was a distraction I didn't need.

She'd found a map of the area, drawn on a large piece of paper instead of conveniently condensed onto a screen, and had spread it out on the floor. As she

concentrated, analyzing the map, she chewed on her bottom lip.

I doubted the map was accurate, considering the changes that had been made to the landscape since the scourge had arrived. Their towns and cities no longer looked the same. And even if the roads were still there, many were blocked by stationary vehicles or other barriers placed there to stop the scourge.

Sara must be traveling on foot, since I didn't see a vehicle. But how she managed to get from the underground shelter to this location by this time of day, I did not know. Perhaps she'd traveled during the night, but humans had atrocious night vision, so it was doubtful.

She hadn't tried to flag down or contact the human vehicle when it had driven near. She must not know them, or perhaps she did and knew they were dangerous. I must've been mistaken. The vehicle couldn't have been from the bunker.

She blew out her breath, her frustration at the map transcending the language barrier between us.

"What are you looking for?"

She jumped at the sound of my voice, which was eerily loud in the silence. "Nothing," she said.

"One does not look for nothing," I said, stating the obvious. "What are you looking for?"

"None of your business," she quipped. "It's already bad enough that I got caught in that bug stampede you created. You say I ruined your hunt? Well, I say you ruined my travels."

“Where are you traveling to?”

Was she returning to her shelter rather than leaving it? That would explain why she was so far from her shelter so early in the day. She did mention having supplies. Yes, that must be it. She must be heading back to her shelter with supplies she’d found, and not the other way around.

Were her people expecting her? Would they send a team out looking for her if she didn’t return on time?

Krux! That would disrupt my hunting even more!

Perhaps waiting until tomorrow to try my hunt again was a bad idea. Instead, I could initiate the hunt today in the late afternoon, when most of the scourge would be returning to their nest. As long as they were between here and the nest, it would work. I wouldn’t catch as many scuttlers, and I’d have to deal with a lot more flyers, but it would still be a successful hunt.

Sara still hadn’t replied to my question, so I decided on a peace offering. We’d had a rocky start, but I understood now that she hadn’t meant to mess up the hunt on purpose. “When are you expected back at your underground shelter? I have slowed you down. I will help you return on time.”

Judging by the look on her face, that had been the wrong thing to say.

“I don’t need your help, alien.” She poked me in the chest again.

This time, she’d removed her thin gloves, and the skin where we touched sizzled with awareness. Her fingertips were also ice-cold—humans were notoriously bad at regulating their temperatures—and I had the sudden thought to warm her up.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you enjoy touching me.”

“I do not!” She shoved me away, but I trapped her hand on my chest, bringing her with me as I leaned back against the wall.

She stumbled because of our height difference and fell against my chest.

“There,” I said. “You no longer need to pretend to be angry to touch me.”

She was much colder than I’d thought she’d be. Maybe that was why she didn’t immediately move away. But that didn’t explain my own actions. I did not need a human female reliant on me. She’d be better off with a hunter who actually wanted a mate or, better yet, a male of her own species. But just the thought of another male holding her suddenly had me wanting to fight an enemy that wasn’t there.

Her intoxicating scent invaded my senses. My arms moved on their own, one of them tightening around her ass and lifting her up higher. The fingers of my other hand tangled in her hair. I wanted to bury my face in her clothes and find the source of her essence. Instead, I just pressed my nose to her neck and inhaled.

She gasped and froze.

The scent was heavenly, if such a place existed. According to hunter lore, it did, but it was a place full of all the scourge a warrior could fight, endless battles, and endless victories. This was a promise of something else. Something better.

My chest, which had been silent until now, exploded in an insistent rumble so loud that it threatened to shake apart the entire building. I lifted my head, shocked at my inability to control the sound.

Her eyes went wide. “Oh my god! You’re purring!”

Hunters did not purr. But our chests did rumble when we were in the presence of a mating-compatible female—although that did not necessarily mean that she was my mate. Just compatible.

I should release her and put some distance between us before the mate bond reared its ugly head. I didn't want a mate!

Instead, I bent my head to bury my face in her neck again. But she moved, and instead of her neck, my lips landed on the corner of her mouth. Instinct took over, perhaps aided by the fact that I'd seen human-Xarc'n couples do the human mouth-mating dance at New Franklin. It had never intrigued me, but right now, it was all I wanted to do.

Against my better judgment, I covered her mouth with mine. Just one taste to sate my curiosity, I told myself. I'd let her go after; no harm done.

Sara pounded on my chest twice, hard, before she melted in my arms, her body molding to mine. And then she was kissing me back.

I knew immediately I'd made a massive error in judgment.

The force of my need hit me so hard that my knees buckled and I slid to the floor. I forgot all about the world outside and instead drowned in everything that was her.

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I should've pushed away when I had the chance, but Mur'k was so warm, and I was freezing. So I'd stayed. But then the purring had started, and everything had changed. I got my warmth all right, in the form of little fires spreading all over my body from the places we touched, amplified by the vibrations. The last remaining fear I had dissolved, turning into unyielding need that surged through me so strongly I couldn't breathe.

And then he was kissing me. His lips were soft but firm against mine, and the press of his fangs was titillating and exciting. His fingers tangled in my hair, already messy from the fight with the bugs earlier. Heat surged through me as he held me captive in his embrace.

Despite his clear inexperience he was assertive, claiming every part of me he touched. And when I responded with a surprising hunger of my own, he demanded more. He'd slid down to sit against the wall, hauling me down to straddle him. Something hard and insistent bumped the V of my legs, sending another surge of lust through me, clawing to be set free.

All the tidbits I'd ever heard about the alien hunters rushed to fill my head, the most important of which being that we were sexually compatible despite our differences. There definitely was a size difference; they were huge everywhere. They were not human-shaped down there, either, a fact I could now confirm from what I felt, though I couldn't quite tell what shape it was exactly.

Firm hands rolled my hips against the hard bar of his erection, and a needy moan escaped my lips.

God! What was I thinking?

I couldn't let this continue. I had to get to New Franklin, and that wasn't going to happen if this hunter stole me away and onto his shuttle.

I reached up, grabbed his horns and shoved, using them for leverage. But the rumbling in his chest got even louder. His hips bucked, grinding us together again.

Okay, note to self: do not grab the bull by the horns unless I want a wild ride.

So I shoved at his chest instead, hard, and he finally released me. My breath was ragged, but to my credit, Mur'k appeared even more dazed than I was. He blinked several times, like he was trying hard to regain control of himself.

I used the opportunity to put some distance between us, scrambling to the opposite side of the room.

"Don't even think about kidnapping me back to your shuttle for sex," I said, glad that I sounded a lot more composed than I felt. "If you do, you'll be sleeping with one eye open."

"There is no fear of that," he huffed. "I'm not interested in a mate. You're the one reeking of desire."

I gaped at him. How dare he call me out!

I mean, he wasn't wrong, but still. The nerve .

I glanced down at the erection threatening to bust right through his loincloth. "Says the one sporting a tentpole."

He looked confused, so I gestured to his crotch and the poor piece of leather that was straining to keep it all in.

“You are attacking me with your pheromones.”

What the hell ?

“Excuse me? You can’t control yourself, and it’s my fault? You’re just as bad as the rest of them.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Men!”

“I am not a man. I am a Xar—”

I saw the movement reflected in Mur’k’s golden eyes even as he stopped mid-sentence. My back was facing the window so I couldn’t tell if it was a flyer or one of those giant centipede-like creatures, the only two types of space bugs that could make it all the way up to the roof. Whatever it was, our arguing had drawn its attention.

“It’s behind me, isn’t it?” I whispered.

Instead of replying, Mur’k moved, pulling me away from the window and behind him. The sound of glass breaking sent fear zinging through my fingers and toes. I knew before I turned and looked what I would see.

Only the giant centipedes could break glass so easily. I’d seen them do it before by smashing the sharp protrusions on the sides of their body at windows. They were also adept climbers and ridiculously fast. Not to mention, those protrusions were tipped with a neurotoxin, so if they cut you, you were basically dead meat.

Hell, if they even saw you, you were as good as dead. And this one had seen us.

Quick as lightning, Mur’k snatched up his axe, then brandished it in front of him, the

edge of it glowing white-blue with energy. Was he seriously planning to engage with it? The thing was huge!

I guess it was fight or die.

I couldn't believe that after all I'd been through, I'd meet my end here, next to a stupidly brave purple warrior. Well, if he was going to be brave, so was I.

I reached for my weapon, which was leaning against the wall. The rooftop garret was small, and it would be nearly impossible to fight that monstrosity with Mur'k's axe if it got inside. He wouldn't even have room to swing.

It was only now that I realized I'd used three shots, and I hadn't reloaded. I had no idea how many shots I had left. The choice to start my travels without a full mag was now coming back to bite me in the ass.

The creature reared back, then smashed the side of its body on the glass again, making the hole even bigger. It was long and sinuous, and it didn't need a large opening to get through. Mur'k slashed at the creature, trying to cut off its head, but the thing was fast and managed to dodge his blows, especially since Mur'k was trying hard not to get tagged by one of the many spikes sticking out from the creature's body.

My brave hunter got several hits in, but the beast didn't react to a single one. It wasn't here to tango with the alien warrior. It had its eyes on a better prize: me. These bugs attacked anything that moved but had a clear preference for what was tastier. It dodged another swing and rounded on me.

"I cannot fight it in here," Mur'k yelled. "We must go."

I barely managed to put on my pack and swing my rifle over my shoulder before I

found myself in Mur'k's arms again. I didn't know how he managed to run with me barely hanging off him, but we were soon speeding across the roof.

I wasn't sure where he was going but anywhere was better than a tiny room with that thing in it. Mur'k had slammed the door closed behind us, forcing the creature back out the window, slowing it down. But now we were exposed to the flyers, and many had already come to investigate, having been alerted of our presence by the giant centipede.

I slammed the magazine into the slot, and it clicked into place. It was an awkward position to shoot from, but I managed. The first flyer that swooped down got a wing full of lead—not enough to kill it, but enough to take it out of the fight. But now the giant centipede had backed itself out of the window and was coming across the roof toward us. And it was fast.

I tried to shoot it, but I either missed every shot or it didn't feel them at all. It continued charging.

Mur'k and I were suddenly flying through the air. I glanced down at the street below and at the scuttlers waiting there amidst the rubble. I'd never seen it from this angle before, and it was so surreal that my brain didn't comprehend what was happening until we landed on another roof.

Damn! He'd leaped to the next building while carrying me! I was never going to underestimate these warriors again.

But the roof didn't stop the centipede either. It disappeared over the edge and seconds later was already on our roof. The way it moved was unnatural: fast, smooth, yet also jerky, like something out of a horror movie.

Just as the creature got close enough to lunge for me, a gray door slammed shut in its

face. The creature, unable to stop itself in time, rammed into it, and the air molecules around me shuddered from the force. My heart was pounding hard and my brain was barely managing to stop the life-flashing-before-my-eyes sequence when I realized I wasn't going to die after all.

Mur'k deposited me on something soft and comfortable that smelled wonderfully like him. I realized that I was inside his shuttle. This must be his bed. I looked around, curious. I'd never been inside one of these shuttles before. In any other situation, I would've been freaking out, but with the terrifying creature still outside...and clearly trying to get in, by the sounds of the scratching...I was grateful to be in here and not out there.

The inside of the shuttle was disappointingly barren, with dull gray, metallic-looking walls. There was a sleeping area which consisted of no more than the mat on which I sat, a pilot's chair that Mur'k was currently occupying, a large screen, an alcove in the back that I assumed must be for bodily functions, a counter that looked like it could be for food preparation, and very little else.

Where were all the high-tech devices and cool alien gadgets? There wasn't even anywhere to place his weapons, unless that was the purpose of the strange thing that looked like a B-movie stasis pod.

"Shuttle, show external feed."

I expected a video of what was happening outside to play on the screen, but instead, the walls all around me appeared to turn transparent. The centipede thing was right in front of me! I shrieked but managed to muffle the tail end of it with my palm.

All the walls were screens! There must be thousands of cameras outside in order for them to be able to relay every section of the terrifying beast to us. How did that work? Wouldn't they be easily damaged? I'd seen hunters use the tops of trees to

brush flyers off their shuttles before. Surely no cameras would survive that.

The giant centipede had wrapped itself around the shuttle, treating me to a detailed view of the underside of its belly. It was lighter than the top, and each articulated section was connected by darker joints. The carapace of each section overlapped, sliding under itself as it undulated, giving mobility while still protecting the creature from attack.

I saw now that I hadn't missed at all. There were singed spots on the carapace from my bullets, and one was still lodged in a joint, impeding the creature's movement. Another note to self: aim for the joints next time.

Who was I kidding? It moved so fast that "aiming" was nearly impossible. Those had all been lucky shots.

"Fear not, little warrior. It cannot get inside."

"That's a relief."

He pressed something on the screen, and the gray walls returned. I relaxed, glad that I didn't have to stare at that ugly thing until it left. Who knew how long that would be? I'd heard of people being trapped for days before the bugs gave up.

"So... Now what?" I asked.

Mur'k stood, approached one of the walls, and slapped it with his palm. It opened up to reveal the inside of a closet. Oh, so that was where they kept everything.

"Now, we wait."

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Having Sara in my shuttle was sheer torture.

Her scent was driving me crazy, and I was willing to bet it had already seeped into the sleeping mat so that she would haunt me even after she was gone. How would I sleep tonight without taking myself in my hand?

That had me thinking of the strange, human mouth-mating ritual we'd shared earlier. I regretted initiating it, but not because I didn't enjoy it. On the contrary, I'd enjoyed it far too much. It was all I could think about now—that and continuing my explorations of her body and burying my face between her legs.

She was currently in the pilot's chair, poring over the updated map on the screen, which meant it would be covered in her scent as well—especially since she'd removed her outermost layers of clothing and left them in my sleeping nook.

She was surprised that we had kept and used one of their map programs, which confused me. Why wouldn't we? It was more work to map the area ourselves, and our time and energy were better spent hunting the scourge.

"Is this date correct?" she asked, pointing to the numbers at the top of the map.

"It is the date all humans working with hunters follow. Hunters use it because Xarc time is confusing on other planets. Why?"

"Just that it says today is February 12. But we have today as February 26 at the bunker."

“You can correct it when you return,” I said.

“I guess I didn’t spend Valentine’s Day alone again this year after all.”

“What is this vale-and-tines day? Is it like your Christmas?”

Humans had many holidays, and I hadn’t bothered to keep up with them all.

She chuckled. “How do you know about Christmas?”

“The humans who work with our hunter groups celebrate it. I do not understand it, but there is much food. I enjoy food.”

“You and me both. But no, it’s not like Christmas.”

She explained how Valentine’s Day was when lovers showed affection with words and gifts, and how children also made cards with hearts on them to give to their friends and family.

“Hearts? But isn’t that messy? Where are they getting the hearts?”

She giggled, the sound bouncing merrily off the shuttle walls. “Not actual hearts. It’s symbolic. I wish I had an example to show you. I’m not good with explaining.”

“Will access to your internet help?”

“Yes! Don’t tell me they got that back up!” Her eyes were wide with excitement.

“How does an internet fall down? Do you mean your satellites?”

“I mean, it’s working.”

“We saved what we could and use it as a reference guide to the locations, animals, and other things we come across. But there are many useless recordings.”

Her scent filled my lungs as I reached over her to pull up their internet. The last video I'd been watching popped up and started playing. I immediately moved away from the page.

“Did you just try to hide a video?” She eyed me suspiciously, then quickly went back to the page.

The video of the young feline attacking a fake bird on a string started playing again.

“Aww! That's so cute. I miss cat videos.” She shook her head. “Sorry, the way you were acting, I thought it was porn or something.”

I made a face. “Videos of humans fornicating do not interest me.”

I looked at the screen, then at Sara's smile as the next video started playing automatically and several kittens pounced on each other.

“Recordings of felines are not useful for the hunt,” I explained. “It feels like I am shirking my duties.”

“Yeah, but they're cute. It's fine, unless you are addicted to them and watch them all day and night.”

I didn't comment. I watch many, many of them.

She showed me red and pink shapes on the screen. “There. Those hearts.”

“Those are not hearts. They cannot pump.”

“Like I said, it’s symbolic. People tend to think that love comes from the heart, even though it really comes from the brain.”

“I see. I think.” I thought of how Xarc’n chests rumbled for those they were compatible with, and how my chest had done that for her. What I felt when we did the mouth-mating was like a hunger, but different.

As if sensing my thoughts, Sara’s stomach rumbled. She dug into her pack and produced a solid yet light cake of food that was very different from any of the others I had seen humans eat.

She caught me looking, broke off a piece, and held it out to me. “Want some?”

I took it and chewed. It was hard and unpalatable, perhaps even blander than our food bars, and my tongue detected very little protein or nutrients. It might be high in calories, but that was all. Where was the protein and all the vitamins? She couldn’t possibly live on such inadequate sustenance.

I opened my cabinet to retrieve one of our food bars. Unwrapping the waxed packaging, I broke off a piece for her. She took it, probably because I’d already taken some of her food. Many humans refused to take food from Xarc’n hunters because they worried it meant we would steal them away into our shuttles. But technically, she was already here.

“It’s tough,” she said after taking a bite. “But not too bad.”

That surprised me. “Usually, humans find our food bars to be unpalatable. You are the first to say that it’s ‘not bad.’”

“Well, you’ve tasted mine.” She waved her flavorless bar in the air.

I had to admit, hers was worse.

“Food at the bunker isn’t...great,” she admitted.

“You come from the underground shelter behind the large house,” I said. It wasn’t really a question, but I was interested to know if I’d guessed correctly.

She was silent for a beat, then changed the subject, denying me my hoped-for confirmation. “I have a question, and don’t take this the wrong way, but if hunters were created to fight ‘the scourge’”—she used our word for the creatures—“then why can’t you fight the big centipedes? I have seen you hunters take on the flyers and even the spitters without difficulty.”

“The centicreeps evolved here on Earth. We are not trained to combat them.”

She frowned at the name. “Centicreeps?”

“That is what we call them.”

“Why is it in English? All the other names, like flyers or spitters, are translated from your language.”

“Because they were first discovered here on this continent. The name was adopted planetwide.”

“Huh. Interesting. Now that you mention it, I didn’t see these bugs until after we’d gone down into the bunker. The internet was down by then, and the only way we found out about them was from our drone that we sent out to gather information. It didn’t last long. A flyer snatched it up mid-air on its second flight.” She wrinkled her nose. “So, if you can’t fight it, what happens if it shows up when you are hunting?”

“I can fight it if it is caught in a trap, or I pin it with a net. Conditions were not right this time. And other hunter groups have developed many effective ways to fight these creatures, but they all require more than one hunter.”

“And you hunt alone?”

“Affirmative. Except during the summer swarms, when I join one of the groups. That is how hunters have done it on other planets. Many now stay in groups permanently, but it is because they have females they must protect. I, however, am not interested in a mate.” I didn’t know whether I said that to reassure her, or to convince myself.

Sara also tried some of my vitamin water, which she said was quite tasty, so I mixed some up for her, and she filled one of her bottles with it. Then I offered her an Earth-made protein bar, which I collected to trade with other hunter groups.

“No thanks,” she said, even as her eyes lingered on it.

She was still hesitant to take food from me.

“I do not enjoy them,” I said. Then I left the bar out next to the navigation screen, in case she changed her mind.

It was late afternoon by the time the centicreep lost interest in my shuttle and headed back to its nest. The other scourge in the area were returning home, too. Even though there were more flyers in the sky than there had been in the morning, the hunt would still be successful, with some modifications.

“I will attempt the hunt now,” I announced. “And since you interrupted it the first time, you will help me.”

That had Sara bristling again. I secretly enjoyed her ire, especially when she was

glaring at me like that. It reminded me of an angry kitten I'd seen in a video. Felines were hunters, too. Perhaps that was why I enjoyed watching them so much.

"I will show you how to use my ship's blaster so you can shoot down the flyers. Flyers that wouldn't have been there this morning," I stressed.

"Fine, whatever. I still say you ruined my travels, but shooting down flyers actually sounds kind of fun."

"It is. This is another thing the humans at New Franklin helped me with. They remounted the blaster so I can use it both in flight and as a turret when stationary."

I brought up the screen to control the ship's weapons, then pulled her down to sit on top of me in the pilot's seat.

"Hey!" She pushed away from me, struggling in my lap.

I groaned at the way she rubbed up against me and tightened my hold on her so she'd stop squirming. "Stop moving, female!"

She did so, but it was already too late. My chest was rumbling like a volcano about to erupt, and my cock had stolen all the blood from my brain.

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It was impossible to pay attention to anything Mur'k was saying with his cock pressed up against my ass like that. But he seemed to be doing his damndest to ignore it, so I did the same.

Luckily, the ship's blasters were easy enough to use. I had the choice of using either a device that looked an awful lot like our video game controllers or the touchscreen. While the touch screen was easier, Mur'k warned me that it was less accurate and should only be used if the flyers were close enough.

"And how do I know if the flyers are close enough?" I asked. "I mean, for either option."

"The shuttle will not lock on if it is beyond its range."

"Okay. That's simple."

Frankly, I was still shocked that Mur'k would let me control his ship's weapons, but I wasn't going to question it because shooting down flyers sounded like the opportunity of a lifetime. I'd always wanted to go ham on those assholes, and here was my chance. I couldn't wait!

"We will use this flyer as a test," Mur'k said when one of them got too close. "Press your palm to the screen. I need to capture your biosignature to give you temporary control of the weapons."

Moments later, we were ready to rumble.

I decided to use the controller since it was familiar and I'd always been pretty good at video games. Getting the ship to lock on was a bit tricky, but when it finally did, I fired. I'd aimed for the creature's body, but it clipped a wing instead.

Damn it!

It was hurt, but I wanted it dead, not merely injured. I aimed again, even as it fell. My second shot got it right in the throat.

"Ha! Die, you motherfucker!" I did a little happy dance before twisting around in my seat. "Did you see that? That asshole went down !"

"You did very well." But his voice was strained, and by the hardness under my ass, I knew exactly why.

Oops! I should save the celebratory wiggles for when I wasn't on his lap.

"Sorry." I scrambled off him.

He got up with some difficulty and started preparing for his hunt, strapping on more weapons than one person could possibly ever use.

"Once I am in place, I will turn on the lure. Focus on the flyers. Shoot them. Do not shoot me. If they get too close to the rooftops, I will take care of them. Aim only for the ones in the sky."

"Got it. Shoot the flyers. Don't shoot you." That was when I realized the amount of trust he was putting in me. If I were anti-Xarc'n, and many back at the bunker were, I could easily shoot him instead. But I wasn't, and I wouldn't.

"Thank you and good luck!" I yelled after him as he stepped outside.

I knew the moment he turned on the lure because every single bug in the area stopped, turned and started toward us, completely forgetting where they'd been going. Several flyers were coming in at the same time, and I held my breath as I aimed and fired. I didn't manage to kill all of them, and the ones I missed went straight for Mur'k.

He was back on the roof near the now-destroyed garret, his body moving with lethal grace as he faced the deadly creatures. It was like he was built for this. The stories that they had been created specifically to fight the scourge had to be true. I couldn't help but admire his speed, strength, and agility.

I didn't have much time to ogle him, however, because more flyers were coming. Mur'k was correct—there would have been far fewer to contend with in the morning, when the bugs were first coming out of the nest. I focused on my targets, taking down as many as I could. There was no time to celebrate each victory now.

Just when I finally had time to stop for a breath, I spotted the centicreep climbing over the buildings, making a beeline toward Mur'k.

Shit! Was this the same one from before? I couldn't tell.

I had to get rid of it before it could reach him. Mur'k was already occupied with two flyers.

I tried to aim toward the creature, but the shuttle refused to lock on. I tried a second time but got the same result.

“Argh!” I shouted into the shuttle. “Why won't it work?”

“The blaster is in turret position. It cannot aim at that angle.”

I whipped around, but there was no one there. It took me a moment to realize it was the shuttle itself that had spoken to me.

“Can you put it in the other position?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if it would answer, but it was worth a try.

“I must lift off to do so.”

“Can you do that?” Then, to be extra safe, I clarified, “Turn on the cloak, lift off, hover stationary in the air, and put the blaster in the other position.”

“We are already cloaked.”

“Okay, then maintain cloaking and do the rest.”

There was a sudden sense of vertigo as we lifted off, and something on the screen changed, though I didn’t see what exactly.

“Actions completed.”

I tried to aim for the centicreep again, and this time, the reticle locked on it. A good thing too, because it was almost at Mur’k’s location. If it got any closer, it would be too dangerous to fire.

I double-tapped, sending two shots hurtling toward it. The shuttle shuddered from the power of the blasts but both shots hit, breaking off huge chunks of the creature.

“Ha! Take that, asshole!”

To my surprise, the centicreep kept moving like it didn’t even realize that half its body was missing. It turned and started toward the shuttle. I fired again, taking

another big chunk of its body off, but it kept coming.

It either couldn't see me because of the cloaking or couldn't reach me up in the air, because it just circled on the roof below me. By now, more flyers were coming in, and I needed to get them off Mur'k's back. I fired at them, but every shot shoved the shuttle back, the movement making it much harder to take my next aim.

The flyers seemed to be able to see the shuttle despite the cloaking. They all veered in my direction.

"Oh, fuck!"

It was either land and risk the centicreep pinning me down or stay in the air and possibly crash in a flyer dogpile. Mur'k was not going to be happy if I fucked up his shuttle. What was I supposed to do?

Suddenly, blaster shots hit the centicreep.

Mur'k! He'd realized my predicament. I hoped the damage was enough to give him the upper hand.

The centicreep moved away from the shuttle and toward its new target. With it gone, I quickly instructed the shuttle to return to our original location and move the blaster back into turret position, figuring it was impossible to crash if I was already on the ground.

I kept shooting until there were no more flyers and Mur'k had turned his attention to the bugs on the ground. He must have switched off the lure. As he rounded up the remaining scourge, I planned my escape.

I had to get out of there before he got back. Mur'k claimed he wasn't interested in

this mating business, but his body seemed to have its own ideas. And unfortunately, mine did too.

I wanted to straddle him, grab him by the horns and ride him all night long, and that scared me. I had to get away before I did something I'd regret. He might claim that my pheromones were messing with him, but I was beginning to wonder if there was some aphrodisiac in the air affecting us both.

Now was also a really good time to leave since the bulk of the bugs in the area were either stuck in his traps, dead, or in the process of being hacked to pieces.

Seeing the once-popular map app on Mur'k's screen had been a surprise. I hadn't thought I'd ever see it again. It had been updated recently, and the nests and surrounding area were now clearly marked in red, as were any other dangerous locations. Any blockages on the road were clearly noted, too. I also noticed that Mur'k's ship was indicated with a shuttle-shaped icon. Other similar icons moved about the map, and I guessed those were other hunters' ships.

There were both alien glyphs and English words on it, adding weight to both Jack's insistence that they were working with friendly hunters and also Mur'k's claim that he'd been in contact with the humans in New Franklin.

I wondered if I'd see him again the next time he visited the settlement. I'd be in a more stable situation by then, hopefully, and perhaps then we could explore whatever was blossoming between us. I was a living, breathing woman, and I had an itch to scratch. Just...not right now.

Then I remembered the date. It was February 12, not February 26. And that meant the real Valentine's Day was in two days. Maybe—

No!

I shook my head. I couldn't believe I was actually considering it!

I had to get out of here. Putting my jacket and trail boots back on, I made sure my rifle was properly loaded with a full mag this time, then went to the door. But I found no handle or other way of opening it. I tried ordering the shuttle to open it for me, and lo and behold, the door slid open.

Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.

I stepped out onto the roof, ordered the shuttle to close again, and then went to look for a way down. Unlike the other roof, this one didn't have a fire escape. I was, however, able to open the door to the stairwell. I got my bearings and found my way back to the store where my bike and other supplies were.

My things were just the way I'd left them, but the door had melted into goo, as had the floor beneath it, and I wasn't sure I wanted to roll my wheels over that. So I did it the hard way, lifting the bike through the broken window.

Then, after a quick check of my trusty, rusty compass, I was off.

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I returned to my shuttle to find that Sara had snuck out while I took care of the scourge on the ground, and she had left the protein bar.

Hadn't that been the plan all along? She was supposed to leave once my hunt had proven successful. So why was there an inexplicable hollowness in my chest?

How had she managed to get out? I'd only given her access to the blasters. I had my shuttle replay her last moments and realized she'd simply asked it to open the door, and it had.

I groaned, dragging my palm down my face. When I collected Sara's biosignature for my shuttle, I also ordered the craft to facilitate her mission of shooting down the flyers. I'd failed to mention that it was not to help her with anything else.

But she had done an exemplary job of keeping the flyers off me so that I could take them down one at a time—not to mention, the truncated centicreep. Curious, I scanned through the recording to watch how she had fought them off.

Her little maneuver, rising in the air to shoot at the centicreep and then landing again once I'd distracted it, had been risky but fruitful. She hadn't managed to kill the wretched thing outright but had removed enough of the body sections so that it was not much longer than a spitter. Every body section gone meant one less set of blades I had to avoid.

It wasn't just the maneuver with the centicreep, either. Sara managed to take down a large number of flyers as well. I'd tried setting the lure outside and shooting at flyers from inside the shuttle before, but it had only been mildly successful because usually

when flyers found nothing to attack they veered away, out of range. Seeing me on the roof, they'd milled around waiting for an opportunity to attack, making themselves perfect targets.

I saw now why mated hunters sometimes brought their partners along to hunt with them. Not only had this hunt been the most successful one I'd had to date, it had also been faster. Imagine what else we could achieve together; the scourge would not stand a chance!

But Sara was gone now.

I lifted off the roof to hover over the town, scanning the landscape for her. I couldn't see her anywhere between here and her underground shelter.

Had she ducked into one of the homes to forage? She couldn't have gone too far.

Movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention. There she was! She wasn't heading back to the underground shelter but traveling away from it. And she wasn't on foot but riding a two-wheeled contraption as she sped down the abandoned streets.

A quick glimpse through my shuttle's history showed that she'd scrolled the map showing the way to New Franklin. Was that where she was going? After spending the last few hours with her, I didn't think she'd be a danger to the people there. However, the group she lived with had been marked as hostile, so I couldn't be sure. Were they sending her over as a spy? Or was this a diplomatic mission?

I could send a note to the hunters there and let them figure it out. So why was I considering ordering my shuttle to follow her?

It had to be because of the successful hunt. It would be prudent for us to continue working together. I was a hunter, and my job was to destroy the scourge. She'd make

a good ally and improve my hunts. Yes, that was the reason. It had nothing to do with liking her or wanting more of her company.

I glanced down at the piles of scourge still burning away in my traps. My net was there too, but I could return for that later. For now, I should go.

Staying here was tough on my shuttle's filter. It wasn't just the smoke and ash from the fire but the aerosolized fungal spores from the dead scourge. The scourge's symbiotic relationship with the fungus was what made them so difficult to fight. It put them at the top of the food chain in every biome it infested.

The fungus was toxic to any other creature, and anything dumb or desperate enough to eat the scourge, despite its horrendous stench, quickly succumbed to it. But the fungus needed to be back inside a scourge to complete its life cycle, so when it was time, oozing sores opened on the sick animals. The horrendous smell called every scourge in the area to it so that the weakened animal could be consumed.

The fungus also served as a secondary immune system for the scourge, fighting off infection and helping to repair damaged cells. It was a strong partnership, one the original Xarc'n military itself had created. It was still a mystery to me why they ever thought they could control it. No matter, they hadn't been able to, and we were the ones created to pick up the pieces.

I ordered my shuttle to tail my little human, then started to strip off my armor. I ran my weapons and armor through the decontaminator first before stepping inside to clean myself. I stank of the scourge as well as of fire and ash, and I couldn't wait to be rid of the smell. The cleansing light of the contamination unit passed over my body, tingling as it went. It didn't quite clean as thoroughly as a good, hard rain, but it did kill the scourge's fungus, which was important. It also neutralized the stench.

Sara's fragrance hit me the moment I stepped out of the unit, bold and intoxicating.

Krux!

The shuttle was away from the dying embers of the burning pyres now, so I asked it to refresh the air in my shuttle. It did little to help. Sara's essence was everywhere, like she'd sunk into the very fabric of the mat in my sleeping nook and molded the pilot's seat to fit her form.

Was this what happened to hunters who found their mates? Was this why their life goals of hunting as many scourge as possible changed virtually overnight?

I didn't want that to happen to me. At the same time, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I told myself again it was because she and I made a good team. She didn't need to be my mate; she could be my hunting partner.

Sara was already at the edge of town. With the area cleared of the scourge and riding her two-wheeled contraption, she moved fast. She continued onto a long stretch of paved road where her vehicle really shone. It might only be powered by muscle and bone, but it moved much faster than she could on foot. She was only forced to stop when darkness fell.

As she made camp for the night, I found myself scanning the area to make sure there were no scourge or hostile humans. Then, knowing she was safe, I returned to our hunt site to retrieve my nets.

I spent the entire night in my sleeping nook, remembering the taste of her lips and resisting the urge to swoop in and carry her back to my shuttle. I wondered if she thought of me too.

She was moving again the instant it was bright enough for her to see the next morning. But unlike the day before, today was dark and gloomy. Clouds had blown in overnight, and snow was drifting down in ever-increasing amounts with every

moment that passed.

Worse yet, she'd crossed over into hostile territory. The human survivors in this area were anti-Xarc'n and had shot at me numerous times over the last few months. I wasn't sure if they were any friendlier to their own, but then again, the underground shelter Sara came from had been marked as hostile as well, due to negative interactions with hunters. With any luck, Sara would be through their territory by the time the weather forced her to stop.

But luck was not on our side today.

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I looked up at the sky in dismay. The snow was coming down, and it was coming down hard. The wind had picked up too, and the heavy, wet flakes was snowing sideways.

I decided to take my chances and get as far as I could on two wheels before the weather made it impossible. I prayed to whatever deity that was listening that it would just be a small snow, but nobody answered my prayers.

I'd expected the freezing cold; it was winter, after all. I'd even expected the snow. But I hadn't expected the wind to be so strong that it threatened to topple me over with every gust. It slowed me down so much it felt like I was pedaling through molasses.

Eventually, I reluctantly admitted defeat. Mother nature had won this round and I had no choice but to stop. I'd made good time after the hunt yesterday, since all the bugs in the area were gone. I'd stopped for the night at a little motel by the side of the road and had started out at first light, eager to make up the distance I'd lost yesterday while with Mur'k.

I wondered what he was doing now. Probably setting up for his next hunt. Did Xarc'n warriors do that during snowstorms? Or did they spend them warm and cozy in their shuttles?

Man! To be in that shuttle right now! So much better than out here with the wind whipping snow in my face.

I turned into the parking lot of a mall that looked like it had seen better days. It was a

small mall with all the necessities to serve the neighborhood. Even from the outside it looked rundown, and I knew I'd find relics from the 80's and 90's once I stepped inside.

I sheltered under the overhang for a moment, wondering if this was a good idea. Something niggled at the back of my mind, as if I was missing something. Then I remembered. This area on the updated map had been shadowed gray. I hadn't been able to read the alien glyphs, so I didn't know what that meant. I'd noticed that the area around my old bunker had been gray too. Did that mean there were human inhabitants here?

Fuck.

What a horrible place to be stranded in a storm. If there was anything I'd learned, it was that other survivors could be just as dangerous as the bugs. If anything, I'd been lucky to bump into Mur'k because at least I knew that a Xarc'n warrior wouldn't try to eat me for dinner. Well, not literally, anyway.

What were the chances the survivors here were friendly? Knowing my luck, pretty damn slim.

But despite my misgivings, this mall was my only choice. The last shelter before this had been a ransacked feed shop that someone had driven a truck into. It wouldn't protect me from the elements, and it was a little ways back. Given how hard the snow was coming down and how much the temperature had dropped, I didn't think I'd make it. I was already shivering, and my teeth chattered so loudly that Mur'k could probably hear it from his shuttle. If I didn't get inside now, the cold would be the end of me.

I tried to tell myself it would be fine, that while malls had been dangerous during the start of the apocalypse, they were safer now since they'd long been looted. There was

no reason for anyone to be inside unless they were living in it. If there were permanent inhabitants here, there would be signs on the outside, like piles of refuse.

If there was no one in it, that meant no bugs either, since the bugs' only job was to feed.

Deciding to be extra safe, I braved the freezing cold for a little longer and continued to walk around the building with my bike. Nope. No garbage piles, or anything else suggesting that there were survivors here.

I went back to the entrance and found an unlocked door. I opened it just enough to roll my bike inside. As expected, premillennial decor greeted me. This place hadn't been updated in decades. It had probably been falling apart even before the bugs and the apocalypse had been the final nail on the proverbial coffin.

There was a strange smell in the place—almost like the bugs, but not quite. That had me on edge, but then again so did the storm outside. I wasn't sure if I hadn't lost the tips on my ears to frostbite already. They were hurting like a mofo as they warmed up. The tips of my fingers too.

I had to take my chances. I didn't barge in yelling "Is anyone there?" at the top of my lungs like they did in horror films. If I stayed quiet and near one of the doors, whatever was in here wouldn't notice me. At least, it was what I told myself.

Who knew? Maybe there was no one here at all, and I was just scaring myself.

I cringed at the loud squeak my wet boots made as I stepped off the carpet and onto the tile floor. I carefully stepped back onto the carpet and dried my shoes off as best I could before wheeling my bike into a nearby store and ducking behind the counter, hoping to god that the noise of my shoes hadn't given me away.

I double-checked to make sure my bike hadn't left a trail. It hadn't. Good.

It took all of five minutes for me to realize that I wasn't alone. Three human forms came down the main corridors, walking right past the shop I was in. They didn't look friendly. And they didn't look healthy either. One of the women seemed almost normal but there were sores on her face and a wild look in her eyes. The other two, a man and a woman, looked almost like zombies from a movie. They shuffled instead of walked, and they had sores all over. One of them had bloodshot eyes, and the other's were glazed over with a white substance.

Jesus! They stank too.

Not the stink of not washing for weeks; I was used to that, being in the bunker. These people smelled like the bugs.

I held my breath to prevent myself from coughing and giving myself away. Before the internet went down, I saw a video of a lion that had been like this. It was surmised that it had caught a disease from eating the bugs.

"Someone was here," said the woman.

The other two didn't reply but made unintelligible noises.

"It's colder in here," the woman continued. "The door was open. And I see footprints. Hopefully this one will have some meat on him. I'm hungry."

I shuddered. So, cannibals then. Well, at least there was no question if they were hostile or not. No point in trying to be nice.

Instinctively, I swung my rifle forward. The two zombie-like ones were slow-moving, but who knew, maybe they got a sudden burst of speed if they found prey. Either

way, they were going down if they so much as looked at me.

I was hoping they'd skip over the shop I was in, but no such luck. I decided to take a stand as soon as they walked into the store.

"Stop, or I will shoot," I announced from behind the counter, aiming my weapon at them.

The woman that looked the most normal paused, but not the other two. They continued toward me, foaming at the mouth and salivating like they'd scented prey.

I didn't have time to think. Just like during the bug attack, I let my training at the range take over.

Breathe in.

Relax.

Aim.

Breathe out.

Squeeze the trigger.

Keep squeezing to follow through.

The shot rang out loudly through the store, and the first guy who had been coming toward me fell to the ground. He must have been ready to fall apart anyway, because his insides splattered everywhere, like he'd stepped on a land mine.

I retched at the disgusting stench that filled the air.

Oh god!

Even if I got out of here alive, I'd probably die because I'd caught whatever he had. But I didn't have time to think about that. Because his zombie woman friend was coming my way.

Instead of attacking me, though, she dropped to the ground in front of him and started eating him, gut first, like she was one of the bugs. I wanted to hurl.

The woman that still seemed most human ignored the macabre scene before us. Since her friend was distracted by the impromptu feast, I trained my weapon on her.

I can do this.

Breathe in.

Gag .

Unable to go through the full routine I just fired, hoping it was good enough. But this one was fast. She zig-zagged through the store, using the clothing racks to block my view. Where the hell was she? I saw her zooming between some shelves and fired again, only to miss. She was almost at the counter now.

Fuck! I was going to die!

I panicked, firing several more times. She was close enough at this point that I really didn't need to aim anymore. Finally, she fell dead just an arm's length from the counter.

I didn't have time to analyze the fact that she'd come charging into battle unarmed despite knowing that I had a weapon. I could hear shouts and footsteps coming down

the mall corridor.

By the sounds of it, there were plenty more where these three had come from. I needed to get out of here. I wheeled my bike carefully around the body and back into the mall. I had just made it outside when they came into view.

Holy shit! There were a lot of them.

I climbed onto my bike, deciding that it was still faster to cycle despite the snow, and started pedaling as hard as I could. That had been the wrong choice because the wheel started sliding out from under me, and I found myself sprawled on the ground.

So. Here it was. This was the end.

Damn it! I should've stayed with Mur'k. What I wouldn't give to go back in time and make that choice instead.

There was a sudden metallic click, and I flinched as something flew over my head. A giant net fell over the group of zombie-like people.

I whipped around to see a smug-looking Mur'k leaning against his shuttle that I swore hadn't been there just seconds ago.

"Still getting into trouble, I see."

"You came for me."

"The second I heard your weapon, little hunter."

That meant he had been nearby. I didn't even care that he was tailing me. I was just grateful he was here.

Mur'k moved suddenly, drawing his axe, his eyes fixed intently on something behind me. One of the crazy infected guys had avoided the net and was charging toward us. But he had no chance against Mur'k and his plasma-edged weapon.

I watched as Mur'k moved like a natural predator. He was quick and efficient: the perfect hunter. And he was saving my life yet again.

He looked hot as hell doing it too, especially with the storm raging around him. Talk about cinematic! Seconds later, he was stalking toward me, his axe already cleaned on the newly fallen snow.

I found myself being lifted off the ground. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, burying my face into the crook of his neck, glad to smell something that wasn't that horrible stench.

"Come, little hunter," he said, even as the purring started up again. "We need to get these spores off you."

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Sara reeked of the scourge's fungus, and everything in my being demanded that I remove every offending piece of clothing and get her into a decontamination unit this very instant.

“I killed them .” Her voice was hollow, like the look in her eyes.

This must be the first time she'd killed one of her own species. Had she never encountered infected humans before?

“You did what had to be done.” I carefully turned her so that she could no longer see the ones trapped in my net. “They were infected.”

“But they were people.” Gray eyes swimming with concern looked back at me.

“Affirmative. Were . They are scourge now. It is too late for them. Death is a mercy.” I cupped her face and pressed my forehead to hers. My chest continued to rumble softly in a tone meant to calm. “You did them a favor. It is better they die here quickly than inside a nest simply waiting to be eaten.”

I searched her body carefully for any injuries. She wore many layers, and we only needed to ditch the outermost one.

“I had to take the life of a fellow hunter once on another planet,” I said as I worked on her jacket's fastening. It was the first time I'd told this story to anyone. “He was badly injured, missing limbs. I carried him for half a day trying to make it back to camp until he begged me to put him out of his misery. I refused at first, but then we were cornered. I was still able to fight. He was not, and he did not want to be carried

back to the scourge's nest alive. I did what I had to. I didn't understand at the time, but I do now."

"I'm so sorry." Sara's hand tightened on my forearm. "Is... Is that why you hunt alone?"

"Yes. I couldn't bear to lose another close friend."

With the worst of the fungus gone, I ushered her into my shuttle. She was still in shock.

Once we were safely inside, I continued to strip off her clothes. She didn't smell as strongly of the fungus with the outer layers gone, but she'd inhaled it, and it was also in her hair. Though not immune, hunters were engineered to be resistant to the fungus; humans, however, were susceptible.

She looked around my shuttle, slowly coming out of her daze.

Retrieving my medical device from storage, I held it to her arm. It recognized that she was human right away and, detecting the spores in her system, gave her a quick dose of antivirals. Our devices knew what to do for humans now, since so many hunters were mated to them.

"Hey!" She snatched her arm away from the sting.

"It is medicine against the spores you inhaled," I explained while I peeled her tank top off to reveal the contraption that held her breasts.

"What are you—"

"The fungus is all over you. And in your clothes. I can smell it."

She raised her eyebrow quizzically. “Is that your way of saying I stink?”

Good. She was trying to make funny words.

“You must decontaminate.”

She eyed the decontaminator suspiciously. “In that thing?”

“Affirmative.”

“Are you sure it’s safe for humans?” she asked, even as she helped me remove the strange garment, then stepped out of her bottoms.

She was naked now, and I couldn’t stop my eyes from roaming all over the silky soft skin on display. The soft chest rumbles that had been intended to soothe her exploded into loud ones of need and desire.

“Many humans use our decontaminators. We can do it together.”

I spun her around, nudging her into the small stall even as I unfastened my loincloth and let it fall to the shuttle floor. I stepped in behind her, naked as well, my quickly hardening cock pressed to her back. We were built differently than human males, and I didn’t want her to be frightened—or, worse, disgusted.

She tried to sneak a peek, but I reached over to start the decontamination cycle, blocking her view.

“You will feel a tingle as the light passes over you,” I explained. “It’s normal. Some prefer to close their eyes. Lift your arms slightly and stand with your legs apart so the light can get everywhere.”

She let out a giggle and squirmed as the cleansing light passed over her skin. “It tickles.”

I groaned and tightened my grip on her. There wasn’t enough room in here for her to squirm without pressing against me, and I was already fighting for self-control with her naked and so close. I forced myself to focus on getting clean instead. The smell of ozone soon drowned out her scent, making it a little easier, but my cock still refused to stand down.

As the light made another pass, I removed the tie holding her hair together and raked my fingers through the soft strands, making sure the light and ozone touched everything. She let out a soft hum that went straight to my crotch. She arched her back, pressing her ass against me, and the scent of her arousal almost brought me to my knees.

“Stop,” I said through gritted teeth. “Unless you want me to fuck you right now.”

“What if I do?”

The rumbling in my chest threatened to shake the decontaminator unit apart.

“I almost died,” she continued.

“But you did not.”

“Thanks to you. Now I want to feel alive.” She reached behind her and wrapped her fingers around my cock. “Please, Mur’k. Help me feel alive.”

Krux ! How could I deny her anything? If she asked me to move the planet for her, I would.

She turned around in the small space, her eyes bright with curiosity as they landed on my cock. I sensed no disgust from her. Just desire.

“Ooh! It is different.”

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Smashed up against him in the decontaminator, I got an up close and personal look at the alien shape of Mur'k's cock. Instead of a single head and shaft, it had three sections, each shaped like a mushroom, one after the other. The thickest part of each section had a hardened ridge. It was huge, too, just like the rest of him.

I squeezed my legs together, desire making my pussy wet.

He was already purring, but when I reached for him, the purring changed, getting stronger. It had me wondering if his cock would vibrate inside me as well.

Ooh! It was hard as a rock.

As the decontamination unit made another pass over our bodies, I explored him, moving my hands languidly over the three bulges. The one closest to the base was the thickest, and I wondered if I could even take it.

Fuck it! I was going to give it my best shot.

Mur'k was gripping a bar at the side of the unit, and I could see his knuckles turning white—okay, light purple—from how hard he was squeezing. I looked up and saw that his eyes were closed, and the tip of one fang was pressed to his bottom lip, like he was biting it. It made me feel powerful to know that I could make such a strong and mighty warrior feel this way.

The decontaminator beeped, and I was lifted off my feet and carried to the sleeping mat.

“Little hunter, if you don’t tell me to stop now, it will be too late.”

Mur’k stood over me, every bulging muscle on display. It was fucking hot, and I wanted him now before my brain came up with any reasons to stop. I didn’t want reasons! I wanted the powerful hunter before me. Purple was quickly becoming my favorite color.

“Don’t stop. I want this.”

Before the words were even out of my mouth, he was dropping to his knees on the floor. Then he was on me, his fingers questing, his lips kissing, his tongue stroking. He started at my neck and I turned my head to make room for his horns. He skated over my collarbone and moved down my body, cupping my breasts in his palms.

I gasped when he sucked a nipple into his mouth. Then he moved to the other breast, giving it equal attention before trailing even farther down. My hands had naturally landed on his horns by the time he was at my belly. How convenient!

I gave them a squeeze, and he snarled. The sound was vicious and would’ve frightened me a few days ago, but now it just turned me on. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me.

I encouraged him to move lower, wondering if he would go down on me. I didn’t need to wonder long. I felt his breath over my mound for a brief second before he dove in. I didn’t know if it was completely by accident or if he’d studied human anatomy, but his mouth closed over my clit. My hands tightened on his horns, and I hissed, not expecting the sudden jolt of pleasure.

Realizing he’d found a good spot, Mur’k stayed there a while, licking, kissing, and suckling until my hips were bucking on their own and I was tossing my head side to side on the sleeping mat. His fingers found my entrance, and he was pushing two

thick digits in.

I let out a breathy scream. He had big hands, but I knew that his cock was larger than two fingers. How would it fit if I was already so full?

Mur'k groaned and I lifted my head to see him touching himself with the other hand. Yup! His cock was much larger. Huge, in fact. And those ridges were even more pronounced now. What would they feel like?

Then he was finger fucking me, and I threw my head back and pressed my hand to my mouth to muffle a scream.

He lifted his head, and I keened at the loss of his tongue. He took my hand from my mouth and pressed it firmly to the mattress at my side.

“Do not cover your mouth. I like your sounds. They will not leave this shuttle.”

Then he was on me again, his mouth moving over my clit and his fingers driving a relentless rhythm. Something stretched tight inside, like an elastic band about to break. Every exhale was a small scream. Then the elastic snapped and I was tumbling over the edge.

I was still rolling in bliss when Mur'k climbed up on the bed and flipped me over onto my stomach, positioning me on my hands and knees. I arched my back as he lined us up and shoved back, eager to feel him inside.

The tip of his thick head slid in, and I gasped.

“Kruux!” Mur'k's hips jerked and his hand tightened on my hips.

My eyes widened at how full I felt. Holy fuck ! I'd bitten off way more than I could

chew. There was no way the rest of his cock was going to fit. It had been too long since I'd had sex with anyone. Suddenly panicked that I'd committed to too much, I crawled forward on my hands and knees.

“Calm, little hunter. You can take me. Many Earth females pair with hunters. I will be gentle.” The words sounded like they were said through gritted teeth. “You are very wet. We will go slow.”

He moved again, still holding my hips so he could control the motion. I exhaled when he pulled out, but then he was pushing right back in again. I shut my eyes and tried to relax when I felt the ridge of the first section. It sank in, and I closed around its girth.

It felt good, but he was already pulling out again. Each subsequent thrust of his hips joining us closer together. Soon, I was impaled on all but the last section. He released my hips. I was rocking to help him now, my head bowed.

He reared back again and started thrusting with just the first two sections. Not expecting the intense pleasure from the ridges rubbing inside me like that, I let out a scream.

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The sound of Sara screaming in pleasure was everything I hadn't known I needed in life. I'd thought destroying the scourge was my ultimate purpose, but now I wondered if giving her ecstasy was a more fulfilling one.

I wasn't completely inside her yet, but I was happy just to fuck her any way I could. I'd never done this before, but I followed my instincts and her feedback, latching onto every reaction like a prize. She was so tight I had to struggle to move, but it felt so good, especially when her hips started moving back against mine. I reached around her body, searching for the tiny nub that gave her pleasure. The moment my fingers found the spot, she gasped and shoved back hard.

The last section of my cock sank in, and another scream bounced off my shuttle walls. I held still, letting her get used to me.

“Breathe.”

She was taking such shallow breaths I was worried she'd pass out. After a few seconds, I rubbed the little nub again, and with each pass of my fingers I felt her walls clench tighter around me. I kept stroking, buried in her to the hilt until she was moaning and pushing back against me. I didn't let up until she was pulsing around me, crying and begging wordlessly.

Fresh wetness coated my cock, and I finally straightened up to grab her hips again. When I pulled out, it was like her cunt had suctioned onto me. I watched, fascinated, as each section disappeared into her welcoming warmth again.

With one hand on her hips and the other reaching forward to tangle in her hair, I

started to fuck her again, this time with my entire cock. I still took it slow, but it was killing me. I needed more.

I inhaled the scent of her pleasure and squeezed her luscious, round ass before giving it a soft tap with an open palm. The sound was sharp as it echoed through my shuttle. She reacted by grinding her hips back against me, hard.

I growled, grasping both hips again to hold her still.

“Do not,” I said through a clenched jaw. “I’m trying to be gentle.”

Sara turned her head to look at me over her shoulder. Then, with her eyes locked on mine, she deliberately did it again. And again. Each time, a look crossed her face that could’ve been mistaken for pain were it not for the overpowering scent of lust in the air.

Krux !

That last one was too much. The self-control I’d been clinging so hard to shattered.

I growled and started hammering into her, fucking her hard. She cried out, the sound muffled when she buried her face into the sleeping mat. I closed my eyes, trying my best to last, but then her channel started to milk me again.

It started at the base of my spine. It felt as if Sara and I were connected, and we were feeling everything together. She became everything, my entire existence. Every cry from her lips, every squeeze of her cunt, every whiff of her lust... It all added to the pool until it overflowed. Then I was coming with a snarl and spilling into her.

I held still until the shuttle was quiet again, with nothing but the sound of our breathing. I arranged her limp, thoroughly satisfied body so that she was tucked into

my arms, not wanting to be separated from her just yet.

I didn't know how long we lay there or when we fell asleep, but I was suddenly jolted awake when my shuttle alerted me that something was approaching the craft. Since the shuttle didn't believe we were in danger I ignored it, but I did disentangle myself reluctantly from my little female. We were sticky and sweaty.

"I will clean us up." I went to retrieve a damp towel.

"Oooh! It's warm," Sara said, stretching lazily in my sleeping nook.

"Affirmative. There is a special alcove in the facility that disinfects and prepares our cleaning towels," I explained.

I joined her back on the bed and turned on the privacy screen. It settled across the entrance to the sleeping nook, shutting us in.

"Oh, I didn't know that was there." She reached out to touch it. "It's solid, but not quite."

"It is made of energy." I reached around her to the control panel and brought up my favorite scene. Stars appeared, dotting the ceiling along with Xarc'n twin moons. Blue and purple grass swayed gently in an unfelt breeze around us.

She gasped. "So pretty!"

"This is Xarc. It might be gone, but we can still sleep under its skies."

"What about the people outside?"

"The infected? My ship is monitoring them. One more came out from the building,

but he was very far gone and did not understand that his comrades were trapped. You are safe in here. The storm is still raging outside. We will rest until it ends.”

She yawned, even as she nodded. I tucked her into the hollow of my body, musing at how perfectly she fit there. Then, under the Xarc’n night sky, we slept.

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“Stay with me.”

I blinked at the words, unsure if I’d heard him right.

“You mean tonight?” He must mean just for tonight .

“You are good with the shuttle’s blaster. Help me with my hunts. We will destroy the scourge together. It is an honorable life. You seem to enjoy my company, as well as my cock and my tongue. Do you not?”

Trust him to be blunt. But I couldn’t deny it. I did enjoy his company. And I most definitely enjoyed his cock and tongue. Then again, I couldn’t just abandon my plan to get to New Franklin, and shack up with Mur’k forever—

Why not? demanded a small voice in my head.

“If my performance was not to your liking, I can assure you it will improve as I learn your body. I can—”

“No! I mean, yes.” Shit. Of all the times to get tripped up on my words. “I mean, there’s no need to improve, even though I’m sure you would. But I can’t stay. I...”

I struggled to find the words to explain that I no longer had a home and needed to get to Franklin so I could make a new one there.

Why can’t you make a home with him in his shuttle ? asked the small voice again.

“You are traveling to New Franklin,” he said.

How did he know?

“I am.”

“Did your people send you there to spy on the other survivors? Or are you going to negotiate trade?”

I was at a loss for words. He thought I was either a spy or a diplomat? The ridiculousness of it had me breaking down into laughter.

“What is funny?” Mur’k did not look amused.

“Nothing,” I said between chuckles. “No one sent me to New Franklin to do anything. The rest of the bunker doesn’t even know where I’m going. It was my decision to leave. I didn’t see the point of staying if no one wanted me there anymore and thought I was useless.”

The anger that crossed Mur’k’s face surprised me.

“You are not useless.”

“Thank you. That means a lot. But if I were really capable, you wouldn’t have had to come rescue me again.”

“Capable does not mean invincible. Even hunters require rescues occasionally. I myself have called for backup many times.”

“Point taken.”

Then, because he genuinely seemed to care, I told him the whole story from the beginning. I told him about the prepper forum, joining the bunker, and how everyone was great to me until the baby was born and my services as a midwife were no longer required.

“I guess they don’t plan on having more children,” I finished up.

“But you are more than that. You are brave and quick-thinking. And you are a good hunter.

I raised my brow. “A good hunter? You said I ruined your hunt.”

“That was before. Your help with the flyers resulted in my best hunt to date on Earth. And I would have struggled against the centicreep without your assistance.”

“I guess we did make a pretty good team.”

“Affirmative. And that’s why you should stay with me. We will hunt together. We can be hunting partners.”

Oh. So that was the real reason he wanted me to stay: he wanted a hunting partner. The mind-blowing sex and good company were just a very convincing bonus. Still, it was tempting. It was a different life, and after being in the bunker for so long, I was ready for something new.

But I still needed to see what was at New Franklin first. What if there were pregnant women there who needed my help? Maybe after I got to New Franklin I’d ask him if he wanted to come visit. He’d mentioned trading with them, so he must spend time there.

Mur’k had viewed me as a liability at first, and I appreciated that he was able to

change his mind. But as much as I had enjoyed shooting the flyers and thinking that I'd helped him immensely, I knew that I couldn't put my life on hold for that.

Now, if we'd spent more time together and he was professing his undying love, that would be another situation altogether. As it was, though, he was looking for a hunting partner. And that wasn't me. Not yet.

"I need to go to New Franklin."

I couldn't miss the disappointment that flitted temporarily across his golden eyes. His body language changed too, stiffening. The hurt of rejection transcended species, and I immediately felt horrible for turning him down.

I wanted to tell him that it wasn't no forever, that he could come visit me in Franklin once I got set up, that we could go hunt then, but I couldn't find the right words. Everything sounded so dumb, like I was making excuses.

He got up from the bed, the screen and the peaceful display of the alien meadow disappearing as he did.

"Where are you going?" I asked as he tied on his loincloth.

"To retrieve your items."

Right. I'd almost forgotten about them and those poor people still stuck under his net.

He must have seen my thoughts on my face because he said, "Do not worry, they will not suffer long. I will return to take care of the infected after."

"After what?" I asked.

“After I take you to New Franklin. It will be faster and safer.”

“Oh! Thank you.”

I was glad we were traveling together for a little while longer. I’d hate to part when things were still awkward. Maybe by the time we got to the settlement, I’d have found the right words.

Unfortunately, things between Mur’k and I were still strained by the time we got to New Franklin. I decided that I just had to spit it out, but he stomped out of the shuttle before I could speak to him. He’d left me with a man named Roger and disappeared to visit the hunters’ compound.

The settlement of New New Franklin—yes, it officially had two new’s, though it was usually shortened to one—was situated in an industrial zone on the outskirts of the town of Franklin. There were covered pathways linking the buildings, and bridges connecting the rooftops. There were also several greenhouses, and from Mur’k’s shuttle, I’d noticed several fenced-in fields too. This was a community squarely focused on long-term survival and not just relying on everything they’d saved up before the collapse.

The nest at the center of town was hard to miss; from the shuttle, I’d seen the white tendrils of mycelium from the bugs’ fungus stretching out for several city blocks. Mur’k had explained that it was considered a medium-sized nest, while the one by my bunker had been a tiny one, big enough to be marked on a map but not large enough to merit a dedicated hunter group. Minor nests came and went, being destroyed by hunters only to be replaced the next year by migrating scourge from bigger nests like New Franklin’s.

This was why hunters got together in the summer to fight the swarms together—to reduce the number of scourge that could make it out to build new nests. The

disappearance of small and medium-sized nests was the first sign that they were winning the war on any given planet.

The hunters and humans here worked together to eradicate the nest. I already knew that from Jack's radio show. Roger, it turned out, was this group's human leader. I didn't know who I'd expected to be New Franklin's leader, but it definitely wasn't someone with piercings and an overgrown mohawk flopped over to the side, sporting a t-shirt from a band I'd never heard of. But if he was good at what he did, who was I to judge? He was friendly and didn't set off any of my alarms. So, I told him my story.

"I heard on *Staying Alive* that Jack's wife is pregnant, and I thought maybe my expertise would be useful here," I finished.

That had Roger grinning from ear to ear, a genuine smile that had me smiling too.

"She sure is. And she isn't the only one. We've got lots of new lives about to start here, and we'll need all hands on deck. Let me call Jack over, and you can meet him."

To my surprise, he brought out a cell phone. Not a walkie-talkie, but an honest-to-goodness smartphone. How was his phone still working? The only thing my phone was good for now was as a paperweight. We used walkie-talkies in the bunker, and on the few occasions we went out as a group.

Jack wasn't anything like I'd expected, either. From his velvety, smooth radio host voice, I'd thought he would be a lot older. He looked barely out of college, though the last two years had put some age on his face, like it had everyone else. But any doubt I had was erased the second he spoke. I'd have recognized that voice anywhere.

"Everyone will be excited to meet you," he said. "We don't get many new members. Come on, I'll show you around, and then you can meet my wife, Stacey."

I glanced back at Roger. “Wait. That’s it? You’re letting me in? You don’t even know me. What if I’m a spy or something?” And that had me thinking of Mur’k again.

Roger grinned. “Mur’k alerted us that you were traveling here. Your story matches his. It’s all good. He also said you were great with the shuttle’s blaster. We always need another good shot. Welcome to New New Franklin.”

Mur’k put in a good word for me? That was nice of him. Now that I knew I had a future here, I wondered if I could convince him to visit me sometime. I wouldn’t mind helping him on his hunts occasionally when things were slow here. Who knows, maybe we could spend some more time in his sleeping nook. Yes please!

“All righty, then,” I said with a smile. “Give me the grand tour.”

It turned out that we had been speaking in the “main survivor building,” so named because most of the original New Franklin group of survivors lived here. It was a sturdy, two-story affair that had once boasted small offices on the second floor and larger businesses below.

The hunters’ compound was several buildings over. It was where Xarc’n warriors assigned to this nest had first set up camp. The humans had joined them after the original New Franklin settlement was overrun by bugs, which was when they’d changed the name to New New Franklin.

As Jack showed me around, I met more people than I could possibly keep straight, including, as Roger had mentioned, quite a few pregnant women who were more than happy to see me. But it was hard to focus and try to remember everyone’s name when all I could think about was Mur’k. I was secretly excited when Jack took me over to the hunters’ compound.

“Stacey and I actually live here with the hunters,” Jack said. “I was one of the originals who joined them before the main group did.”

He explained that most of the hunters were out fighting the scourge, but I got to meet Rajiv’k and his mate, Natalie.

“You’re the one Mur’k brought in!” Natalie said with a bright smile. “He came to trade some electronic parts he found.”

I perked up when I heard his name.

“Where is he now?” I asked after the introductions.

“Oh, he left. Something about helping a hunters’ group on the East Coast. That guy’s always moving. Said he’ll visit again before the summer swarms.”

My heart plummeted. He hadn’t even stayed long enough to say goodbye.

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I swung my axe numbly, neatly beheading another scuttler. Normally, I reveled in the fight. I lived for nothing else. But I hadn't been able to find any joy in it since I'd dropped Sara off in New Franklin.

I knew that if I'd stayed, I'd steal her back into my shuttle, so I'd left right after trading some electronic parts for a small bottle of Earth-made "weeskee." I felt like a coward, something I'd never felt before. I'd also never wanted someone's company like this before, nor experienced that stab of rejection.

So I'd run, telling myself that the survivors of New Franklin needed her more than I needed a hunting partner.

A hunting partner. Who the krux was I trying to fool? Sara was so much more than a hunting partner to me. I hadn't wanted a human female, but the universe had thrown one at me anyway, and I'd let her slip right through my fingers.

Today was the day of giving hearts she had told me about. Surely the humans of New Franklin celebrated this day. Would another male give a symbol of his heart to her? What if she was already mated the next time I saw her?

I gritted my teeth at the unfamiliar, crippling tightness in my chest, even as I rolled to dodge a volley of spitter acid.

I should've asked her again and given her more reason to stay with me. Should've told her that I wanted her as more than a hunting partner. Should've offered to stay at New Franklin to be with her.

Instead, I'd run. The original plan had been to help a hunter group that had put out a call, but they were all the way on the eastern edge of this continent, and the farther I got from Sara and New Franklin, the less I wanted to go. I decided on an impromptu hunt the next morning, even though I wasn't familiar with the area.

That had been my first mistake.

My second was not paying more attention.

I hacked at the scourge mindlessly, like they were the ones causing me pain. By the time I realized they were about to overrun me, a centicreep had snuck up behind my position, blocking my way to my shuttle. I initially thought I'd dodged the creature's first strike, but it was quick, and I looked down to see a long gash on my calf.

Krux!

Like a scuttler's claws, the centicreep's many blades were tipped with a neurotoxin. Hunters were engineered to be resistant to it, same as we were to the fungus, but not immune. I'd be able to recover from a cut like this, but it would take time—time I wouldn't have if it slowed me down enough for the centicreep and the other scourge to tear me apart.

Before I could even react, it struck again, catching me on the arm. More pain had me turning to see a scuttler tagging me with its claws as well.

My odds had just decreased substantially.

I did what any wise hunter would do: I ran. I used the buildings to my advantage, running through them until I found myself trapped. Someone had barred the door from the other side, and the only way out was the way I came. There was another door, but it only led to a storage room.

I could try to fight my way out. The hallway I'd come down was narrow. I'd only be fighting one or two scourge at a time. But even as I considered that option, I felt myself weakening. I'd received a larger dose of the toxin than I'd thought, and it was already making its way through my system.

The scourge were almost on me now, and I didn't have time to deliberate. I ducked into the storage room and slammed the metal door shut behind me. I put out a call for help, but it was too late. The door wouldn't hold for much longer, and I was struggling against the toxins.

My last thought as everything went dark was that I'd never see Sara again.

When I finally opened my eyes, I was looking into familiar, stormy gray ones. Sara. I blinked to make sure it was really her. It was.

"Mur'k?" That was her voice too.

"Sara?" I reached for her, but I didn't seem to have any arms. "Did I die? This must be the afterlife. I must have been a great hunter if you are my prize for all eternity."

She made a strangled sound. "That's ridiculously sweet. But you are still alive, Mur'k."

"Does that mean I don't get to keep you?"

There was a sound of a male clearing his throat, and I looked around the unfamiliar room, really seeing it for the first time. There were red and pink paper "hearts" strung up along the wall. What day was it? It was dark outside the window, and the hallway was dark as well. Had I missed the day of heart giving?

Roger leaned against the wall by the door. “Glad you’re up, Mur’k. They retrieved your shuttle, so you can rest there as soon as this healing device is done.” He nodded to the unit strapped to my leg. “But no rush. We don’t need the classroom back until morning.” He turned to Sara. “You realize it’s not either or, right? You can help us out and hunt with Mur’k. The hunter shuttles are fast. If we need you, he can get you here quickly.” Then Roger gave us a single nod before stepping out into the darkened hallway.

“How are you feeling?” Sara’s brows were furrowed, and her eyes were rimmed with red, like she’d been crying.

“Better, now that you’re here.”

“They told me it looks much worse than it is, and that you’ll recover.”

“I am a Xarc’n Warrior; we heal quickly.”

“You... You were already gone when Jack took me to the hunters’ compound. I wanted to ask you if you wanted to come visit me here. I realize that you only asked me to stay with you because you wanted a hunting partner, and I know I said no, but I...” She blew out her breath. “I really like you, and I’d like to keep seeing you.”

My chest swelled and erupted into a joyful symphony.

“I would like that too,” I said. “And I do not simply want a hunting partner. I want you. Stay with me. We will stay near New Franklin.”

She nodded in a human-style affirmative, a smile lighting up her beautiful face. The healing device beeped, signaling that it was done.

“Let’s get back to your shuttle,” Sara whispered, her eyes glancing over to the open

door just as a pair of curious youngsters poked in their heads. “We’ll have more privacy there.”

That was for the best. “Roger had called this a classroom, which I understand to be a place where young humans learn.”

“It is.”

“Why am I in here instead of the infirmary?” They had pushed several small desks together and I was lying on them.

“Because you kept fighting the hunter that was trying to carry you, so he left you in here. Don’t worry, he knows you didn’t mean it. You were processing the toxins.”

“I see. One more question.”

“Shoot.”

“I do not have a blaster.”

She chuckled. “I mean, ask your question.”

“Is it still Heart Giving Day?”

“You mean Valentine’s Day? Yes, for like, five more minutes.”

“Good,” I said, pushing myself up to sit, only realizing now that one of my arms hung uselessly at my side. “Because I want you to have my heart. I do not have a paper one to offer you yet, but you will not spend Heart Giving Day alone.”

Sara threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and planting little kisses

all over my face. I embraced her back, or tried to, given that I only had one working arm. I still managed to haul her up onto the desks and on top of me. She buried her face into my neck, and I closed my eyes, wanting to memorize her scent.

After a short eternity, she said, “You have to let me go eventually. You know that, right?”

I tried to release her, but the arm I had around her simply refused to move. It held onto her like it was the end of the universe, and she was my only hope.

“The mate bond,” I whispered, awestruck.

She inhaled sharply. “You mean the mate bond? Natalie said that when a hunter bonds with a woman, she becomes the only one for him, and there will be no one else, ever. Is that true?”

“Affirmative.”

“And you feel this for me?”

“Affirmative.”

I didn’t know if that would be a good or a bad thing for her. Was this happening too fast? Humans did not have mate bonds, and many “dated” for months, sometimes years, before they committed.

There was the universe’s longest silence, followed by a squeal.

“Does that noise mean you are happy?” I asked.

“Yes!” She made a sound that was suspiciously like a sob. “I know it’s only been a

few days, but I want to make this work. Every day hiding in that bunker felt like another day waiting to die. You showed me something better. You showed me I could fight back. You showed me hope for a better world. And for the first time in a long time, I feel alive again. The mate bond couldn't have chosen better." But now there was doubt on her face. "What about you? I thought you didn't want a mate."

"I did not, but that was because I had not yet met you, my little hunter."

Then she was crying, and I knew these were the famous, if confusing, "happy tears" I'd heard about.

"Then you can have my heart too," she said, her words muffled by my neck.

A sense of rightness settled over my soul. I hadn't come to Earth to find a mate, but now that she was here in my arms, I knew it was what I had needed all along.

"I am honored, little hunter. I will cherish it forever."

Epilogue: Sara

I stepped out onto the roof and inhaled the cold, crisp winter air. This one had been a long labor, but the newest addition to New Franklin was nursing in her mother's arms, and I could finally take a break.

The sun was already setting, which surprised me because I could have sworn it was morning the last time I checked. That meant Mur'k would be back any time from his hunt.

We'd gotten into a good routine over the past year, dividing our time between New Franklin and the surrounding states where we hunted the minor nests. We stayed in the settlement over the weekend so I could check in with my clients, and whenever

one of them was near term, I'd stay longer.

The best thing of all was that New Franklin had access to Xarc'n medical devices, which our scientist types had tweaked so I could test for everything I needed to make sure my patients were healthy. I didn't even have to wait for lab results.

Last summer, Mur'k had joined the hunter group here to tackle the swarm, and the hunter who delivered supplies to the various groups started bringing his monthly rations here.

In the fall, we'd bumped into a man from my bunker while hunting around my old stomping grounds. He'd reacted to Mur'k much better than I'd expected. He hadn't known about them wanting to kick me out until Mrs. Willis said that my disappearing saved her the hassle of forcing me to leave. He'd been part of the group that had gone out looking for me that day, not because of any missing supplies but because they wanted to make sure I was okay. They'd seen the swarm of scourge and assumed the worst.

Bunker politics had never been the same again. It was good to know not everyone hated me.

I'd let him know that I was practicing in New Franklin now, and that if he wanted to jump ship, we were always looking for good people who were willing to help out—though I made it clear that the Willises and anyone who'd talked about kicking me out weren't welcome unless I got a very public, groveling apology. He'd showed up with his wife just after the new year with the bunker's stolen SUV and a bunch of flyers chasing them.

There was a single sharp beep followed by a set of blinking lights at the edge of the roof top patio. I quickly moved over to give whoever was landing his shuttle more space. It landed and uncloaked, and I recognized our shuttle. I hurried toward it, eager

to see Mur'k after almost twenty-four hours.

All I wanted to do was snuggle and watch cat videos.

I found him still inside the decontamination unit. I'd learned after I got to New Franklin that the unit worked over thin layers of clothing, and technically one didn't need to be completely naked, but many hunters and humans preferred to use them in the nude. Mur'k did as well, as evidenced by the gorgeous expanse of purple muscles on display.

I'd stripped down too and was trying to sneak into the decontaminator when he turned around, catching me mid-sneak.

With a wide grin that showed off his sexy fangs, he pulled me into the tiny space. "You've got to be quieter than that to surprise me, my heart."

"What? Not your little hunter today?" He'd started calling me "my heart" after our first Valentine's Day, switching between the two nicknames.

"You can be both, since today is a special day."

I knew he meant that it was Valentine's Day again, and so technically, our anniversary. The decontamination cycle ended, and he ushered me into the sleeping nook.

"I didn't go hunting today," he confessed quietly. "I flew up to the mothership."

That could only mean one thing. "You got the block on your fertility removed?"

"I did."

When they said that we were compatible, they meant biologically compatible in all the ways. There were several mixed Xarc'n-human babies born already, and every time I saw them, my ovaries would start reminding me that I wouldn't stay young forever. We'd started talking about having kids during the Christmas celebrations, and he'd said he'd fly up to the mothership and get the procedure done.

But then there was the raider attack, and then the big snowstorms, and it had kind of fallen by the wayside.

“So you're fertile now?”

“Affirmative. No more blank shooting.”

I laughed at the wrong order of the words. He'd been spending more time with the human men and had picked up some slang, though he never got it quite right. I thought it was cute though, so I never corrected him.

“Best present ever!”

“I was told it could take many tries.” He pushed me down onto the bed and crawled over me, the intent clear in his eyes. “I am very excited for that part.”

Cuddling and cat videos could wait. I reached up to grab my big, powerful, protective hunter by the horns, and his purring filled the shuttle.

“Then we'd better get started.”

THE END

New to the Xarc'n Warriors and looking for more? Here's an excerpt from Claimed by the Hunter, the book that started it all!

A sound at the door alerted me of the presence of an intruder. I peeked over the counter and froze. At the door stood a Xarc'n hunter. The alien warrior was huge, with giant shoulders and a broad, muscular chest. He had to duck to get through the door. Even when he stood up fully in the convenience store, he looked almost hunched over from the masses of muscles on his neck and back. And he was staring straight at me as if he'd come in looking for me.

Yellow-green eyes met mine. They glowed slightly in the darkened store, standing out against the purplish mauve of his leathery skin. I noticed his horns next. The black horns curved from his temples, reminding me of a ram. They looked heavy, and I was sure they were used often as a weapon from the wear marks on them. No wonder he had such a thick neck; only a tree trunk could hold up those horns.

He took a step toward me, and I gawked at the inhuman-looking legs. Each muscular limb ended in giant feet with three toes in the front and one opposable digit at the back, and each toe was capped in sharp claws. Those were the feet of a monster. He took another step toward me, and the claws gleamed as they passed through a beam of sunlight shining in from the broken window.

Panicked, I backed away and grabbed the metal bar strapped to my thigh. Though how the metal crowbar would help me, I did not know. It looked like a toothpick next to his monstrous form. His dark skin looked tough and leathery. I'd bet he was very well armored naturally. Even if I put all my weight behind the swing, it would bounce off him like nothing.

He didn't wear anything except what looked like a loincloth, a belt, and a harness. Pieces of armor were strapped strategically to the harness to protect him. He wore a long axe on his back and a blaster on his belt as if his claws, fangs, and horns weren't weapons enough. He also had a few pouches and devices strapped to his harness.

He growled unintelligibly before a device strapped to one of his belts translated it to

English. “Calm, female. No fear. Not harm you.”

Sure, and I was a monkey’s uncle. I wasn’t stupid. Not trusting the alien, I gripped my crowbar tighter and brandished it in front of me. The alien frowned, and the effect was downright terrifying, drawing attention to his elongated canines.

More growling ensued, and I waited for the translator to do its job. “No fear me. I care for female.” He reached into a pouch strapped to his belt and brought out a handful of what looked like alien nutrition bars. He held one out for me, the strange yellow-green eyes still holding my gaze.

I shook my head, and then, realizing that Mr. Big, Tall, and Scary might not understand the gesture, I said, “No, I don’t need any.” There was no way I was going to take gifts from a Xarc’n warrior. It was rumored that they would offer gifts of food to starving women, and if the women took the food, they took the women. No one has ever seen a female Xarc’n alien, and it doesn’t take a brain surgeon to know what they wanted with us.

The translator didn’t growl anything back at him, but he looked as if he understood my words all the same. He smiled, and the look was so terrifying, I nearly shat myself. Sharp teeth lined his mouth, and there was no doubt I faced a predator. I preferred him frowning.

“Take. Hungry.”

“No, I’m not hungry. I don’t want your food.” My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly, calling me out as a big, fat liar.

A low rumble sounded from him, his chest shook, and mirth sparkled recognizably in his strange eyes.

The oversized asshole was laughing at me! I narrowed my eyes at him, suddenly pissed. The nerve! Fuck him and his food. I wasn't going to take the food anyway, but now I was doubly sure he could keep it and shove it where the light didn't shine.

Shoring up my courage, I stood a little straighter and announced, "I'm leaving this store now. Please let me leave."

The alien didn't move but continued to block the door. He thumped himself on the chest and said a single word. The device did not translate.

"Move so I can leave," I repeated. Then a little louder, since he hadn't hurt me yet, "Get out of my way!"

"Female no go." Instead of moving, he repeated his motion and word.

Was he trying to tell me his name? He repeated the word one more time, and I took my best shot at the strange alien name. "Kajeck."

"Kaj'k," he swallowed the last syllable.

"Kaj'k."

He grinned, showing a row of shiny, super sharp teeth. I shuddered and backed away.

Find Out What happens!

Chapter 14: Mur'k

I swung my axe numbly, neatly beheading another scuttler. Normally, I reveled in the fight. I lived for nothing else. But I hadn't been able to find any joy in it since I'd dropped Sara off in New Franklin.

I knew that if I'd stayed, I'd steal her back into my shuttle, so I'd left right after trading some electronic parts for a small bottle of Earth-made "weeskee." I felt like a coward, something I'd never felt before. I'd also never wanted someone's company like this before, nor experienced that stab of rejection.

So I'd run, telling myself that the survivors of New Franklin needed her more than I needed a hunting partner.

A hunting partner. Who the krux was I trying to fool? Sara was so much more than a hunting partner to me. I hadn't wanted a human female, but the universe had thrown one at me anyway, and I'd let her slip right through my fingers.

Today was the day of giving hearts she had told me about. Surely the humans of New Franklin celebrated this day. Would another male give a symbol of his heart to her? What if she was already mated the next time I saw her?

I gritted my teeth at the unfamiliar, crippling tightness in my chest, even as I rolled to dodge a volley of spitter acid.

I should've asked her again and given her more reason to stay with me. Should've told her that I wanted her as more than a hunting partner. Should've offered to stay at

New Franklin to be with her.

Instead, I'd run. The original plan had been to help a hunter group that had put out a call, but they were all the way on the eastern edge of this continent, and the farther I got from Sara and New Franklin, the less I wanted to go. I decided on an impromptu hunt the next morning, even though I wasn't familiar with the area.

That had been my first mistake.

My second was not paying more attention.

I hacked at the scourge mindlessly, like they were the ones causing me pain. By the time I realized they were about to overrun me, a centicreep had snuck up behind my position, blocking my way to my shuttle. I initially thought I'd dodged the creature's first strike, but it was quick, and I looked down to see a long gash on my calf.

Krux!

Like a scuttler's claws, the centicreep's many blades were tipped with a neurotoxin. Hunters were engineered to be resistant to it, same as we were to the fungus, but not immune. I'd be able to recover from a cut like this, but it would take time—time I wouldn't have if it slowed me down enough for the centicreep and the other scourge to tear me apart.

Before I could even react, it struck again, catching me on the arm. More pain had me turning to see a scuttler tagging me with its claws as well.

My odds had just decreased substantially.

I did what any wise hunter would do: I ran. I used the buildings to my advantage, running through them until I found myself trapped. Someone had barred the door from the other side, and the only way out was the way I came. There was another

door, but it only led to a storage room.

I could try to fight my way out. The hallway I'd come down was narrow. I'd only be fighting one or two scourge at a time. But even as I considered that option, I felt myself weakening. I'd received a larger dose of the toxin than I'd thought, and it was already making its way through my system.

The scourge were almost on me now, and I didn't have time to deliberate. I ducked into the storage room and slammed the metal door shut behind me. I put out a call for help, but it was too late. The door wouldn't hold for much longer, and I was struggling against the toxins.

My last thought as everything went dark was that I'd never see Sara again.

When I finally opened my eyes, I was looking into familiar, stormy gray ones. Sara. I blinked to make sure it was really her. It was.

"Mur'k?" That was her voice too.

"Sara?" I reached for her, but I didn't seem to have any arms. "Did I die? This must be the afterlife. I must have been a great hunter if you are my prize for all eternity."

She made a strangled sound. "That's ridiculously sweet. But you are still alive, Mur'k."

"Does that mean I don't get to keep you?"

There was a sound of a male clearing his throat, and I looked around the unfamiliar room, really seeing it for the first time. There were red and pink paper "hearts" strung up along the wall. What day was it? It was dark outside the window, and the hallway

was dark as well. Had I missed the day of heart giving?

Roger leaned against the wall by the door. “Glad you’re up, Mur’k. They retrieved your shuttle, so you can rest there as soon as this healing device is done.” He nodded to the unit strapped to my leg. “But no rush. We don’t need the classroom back until morning.” He turned to Sara. “You realize it’s not either or, right? You can help us out and hunt with Mur’k. The hunter shuttles are fast. If we need you, he can get you here quickly.” Then Roger gave us a single nod before stepping out into the darkened hallway.

“How are you feeling?” Sara’s brows were furrowed, and her eyes were rimmed with red, like she’d been crying.

“Better, now that you’re here.”

“They told me it looks much worse than it is, and that you’ll recover.”

“I am a Xarc’n Warrior; we heal quickly.”

“You... You were already gone when Jack took me to the hunters’ compound. I wanted to ask you if you wanted to come visit me here. I realize that you only asked me to stay with you because you wanted a hunting partner, and I know I said no, but I...” She blew out her breath. “I really like you, and I’d like to keep seeing you.”

My chest swelled and erupted into a joyful symphony.

“I would like that too,” I said. “And I do not simply want a hunting partner. I want you. Stay with me. We will stay near New Franklin.”

She nodded in a human-style affirmative, a smile lighting up her beautiful face. The healing device beeped, signaling that it was done.

“Let’s get back to your shuttle,” Sara whispered, her eyes glancing over to the open door just as a pair of curious youngsters poked in their heads. “We’ll have more privacy there.”

That was for the best. “Roger had called this a classroom, which I understand to be a place where young humans learn.”

“It is.”

“Why am I in here instead of the infirmary?” They had pushed several small desks together and I was lying on them.

“Because you kept fighting the hunter that was trying to carry you, so he left you in here. Don’t worry, he knows you didn’t mean it. You were processing the toxins.”

“I see. One more question.”

“Shoot.”

“I do not have a blaster.”

She chuckled. “I mean, ask your question.”

“Is it still Heart Giving Day?”

“You mean Valentine’s Day? Yes, for like, five more minutes.”

“Good,” I said, pushing myself up to sit, only realizing now that one of my arms hung uselessly at my side. “Because I want you to have my heart. I do not have a paper one to offer you yet, but you will not spend Heart Giving Day alone.”

Sara threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and planting little kisses

all over my face. I embraced her back, or tried to, given that I only had one working arm. I still managed to haul her up onto the desks and on top of me. She buried her face into my neck, and I closed my eyes, wanting to memorize her scent.

After a short eternity, she said, “You have to let me go eventually. You know that, right?”

I tried to release her, but the arm I had around her simply refused to move. It held onto her like it was the end of the universe, and she was my only hope.

“The mate bond,” I whispered, awestruck.

She inhaled sharply. “You mean the mate bond? Natalie said that when a hunter bonds with a woman, she becomes the only one for him, and there will be no one else, ever. Is that true?”

“Affirmative.”

“And you feel this for me?”

“Affirmative.”

I didn’t know if that would be a good or a bad thing for her. Was this happening too fast? Humans did not have mate bonds, and many “dated” for months, sometimes years, before they committed.

There was the universe’s longest silence, followed by a squeal.

“Does that noise mean you are happy?” I asked.

“Yes!” She made a sound that was suspiciously like a sob. “I know it’s only been a few days, but I want to make this work. Every day hiding in that bunker felt like

another day waiting to die. You showed me something better. You showed me I could fight back. You showed me hope for a better world. And for the first time in a long time, I feel alive again. The mate bond couldn't have chosen better." But now there was doubt on her face. "What about you? I thought you didn't want a mate."

"I did not, but that was because I had not yet met you, my little hunter."

Then she was crying, and I knew these were the famous, if confusing, "happy tears" I'd heard about.

"Then you can have my heart too," she said, her words muffled by my neck.

A sense of rightness settled over my soul. I hadn't come to Earth to find a mate, but now that she was here in my arms, I knew it was what I had needed all along.

"I am honored, little hunter. I will cherish it forever."

I stepped out onto the roof and inhaled the cold, crisp winter air. This one had been a long labor, but the newest addition to New Franklin was nursing in her mother's arms, and I could finally take a break.

The sun was already setting, which surprised me because I could have sworn it was morning the last time I checked. That meant Mur'k would be back any time from his hunt.

We'd gotten into a good routine over the past year, dividing our time between New Franklin and the surrounding states where we hunted the minor nests. We stayed in the settlement over the weekend so I could check in with my clients, and whenever one of them was near term, I'd stay longer.

The best thing of all was that New Franklin had access to Xarc'n medical devices, which our scientist types had tweaked so I could test for everything I needed to make

sure my patients were healthy. I didn't even have to wait for lab results.

Last summer, Mur'k had joined the hunter group here to tackle the swarm, and the hunter who delivered supplies to the various groups started bringing his monthly rations here.

In the fall, we'd bumped into a man from my bunker while hunting around my old stomping grounds. He'd reacted to Mur'k much better than I'd expected. He hadn't known about them wanting to kick me out until Mrs. Willis said that my disappearing saved her the hassle of forcing me to leave. He'd been part of the group that had gone out looking for me that day, not because of any missing supplies but because they wanted to make sure I was okay. They'd seen the swarm of scourge and assumed the worst.

Bunker politics had never been the same again. It was good to know not everyone hated me.

I'd let him know that I was practicing in New Franklin now, and that if he wanted to jump ship, we were always looking for good people who were willing to help out—though I made it clear that the Willises and anyone who'd talked about kicking me out weren't welcome unless I got a very public, groveling apology. He'd showed up with his wife just after the new year with the bunker's stolen SUV and a bunch of flyers chasing them.

There was a single sharp beep followed by a set of blinking lights at the edge of the roof top patio. I quickly moved over to give whoever was landing his shuttle more space. It landed and uncloaked, and I recognized our shuttle. I hurried toward it, eager to see Mur'k after almost twenty-four hours.

All I wanted to do was snuggle and watch cat videos.

I found him still inside the decontamination unit. I'd learned after I got to New

Franklin that the unit worked over thin layers of clothing, and technically one didn't need to be completely naked, but many hunters and humans preferred to use them in the nude. Mur'k did as well, as evidenced by the gorgeous expanse of purple muscles on display.

I'd stripped down too and was trying to sneak into the decontaminator when he turned around, catching me mid-sneak.

With a wide grin that showed off his sexy fangs, he pulled me into the tiny space. "You've got to be quieter than that to surprise me, my heart."

"What? Not your little hunter today?" He'd started calling me "my heart" after our first Valentine's Day, switching between the two nicknames.

"You can be both, since today is a special day."

I knew he meant that it was Valentine's Day again, and so technically, our anniversary. The decontamination cycle ended, and he ushered me into the sleeping nook.

"I didn't go hunting today," he confessed quietly. "I flew up to the mothership."

That could only mean one thing. "You got the block on your fertility removed?"

"I did."

When they said that we were compatible, they meant biologically compatible in all the ways. There were several mixed Xarc'n-human babies born already, and every time I saw them, my ovaries would start reminding me that I wouldn't stay young forever. We'd started talking about having kids during the Christmas celebrations, and he'd said he'd fly up to the mothership and get the procedure done.

But then there was the raider attack, and then the big snowstorms, and it had kind of fallen by the wayside.

“So you’re fertile now?”

“Affirmative. No more blank shooting.”

I laughed at the wrong order of the words. He’d been spending more time with the human men and had picked up some slang, though he never got it quite right. I thought it was cute though, so I never corrected him.

“Best present ever!”

“I was told it could take many tries.” He pushed me down onto the bed and crawled over me, the intent clear in his eyes. “I am very excited for that part.”

Cuddling and cat videos could wait. I reached up to grab my big, powerful, protective hunter by the horns, and his purring filled the shuttle.

“Then we’d better get started.”

THE END

New to the Xarc’n Warriors and looking for more? Here’s an excerpt from Claimed by the Hunter, the book that started it all!

A sound at the door alerted me of the presence of an intruder. I peeked over the counter and froze. At the door stood a Xarc’n hunter. The alien warrior was huge, with giant shoulders and a broad, muscular chest. He had to duck to get through the door. Even when he stood up fully in the convenience store, he looked almost hunched over from the masses of muscles on his neck and back. And he was staring straight at me as if he’d come in looking for me.

Yellow-green eyes met mine. They glowed slightly in the darkened store, standing out against the purplish mauve of his leathery skin. I noticed his horns next. The black horns curved from his temples, reminding me of a ram. They looked heavy, and I was sure they were used often as a weapon from the wear marks on them. No wonder he had such a thick neck; only a tree trunk could hold up those horns.

He took a step toward me, and I gawked at the inhuman-looking legs. Each muscular limb ended in giant feet with three toes in the front and one opposable digit at the back, and each toe was capped in sharp claws. Those were the feet of a monster. He took another step toward me, and the claws gleamed as they passed through a beam of sunlight shining in from the broken window.

Panicked, I backed away and grabbed the metal bar strapped to my thigh. Though how the metal crowbar would help me, I did not know. It looked like a toothpick next to his monstrous form. His dark skin looked tough and leathery. I'd bet he was very well armored naturally. Even if I put all my weight behind the swing, it would bounce off him like nothing.

He didn't wear anything except what looked like a loincloth, a belt, and a harness. Pieces of armor were strapped strategically to the harness to protect him. He wore a long axe on his back and a blaster on his belt as if his claws, fangs, and horns weren't weapons enough. He also had a few pouches and devices strapped to his harness.

He growled unintelligibly before a device strapped to one of his belts translated it to English. "Calm, female. No fear. Not harm you."

Sure, and I was a monkey's uncle. I wasn't stupid. Not trusting the alien, I gripped my crowbar tighter and brandished it in front of me. The alien frowned, and the effect was downright terrifying, drawing attention to his elongated canines.

More growling ensued, and I waited for the translator to do its job. "No fear me. I care for female." He reached into a pouch strapped to his belt and brought out a

handful of what looked like alien nutrition bars. He held one out for me, the strange yellow-green eyes still holding my gaze.

I shook my head, and then, realizing that Mr. Big, Tall, and Scary might not understand the gesture, I said, “No, I don’t need any.” There was no way I was going to take gifts from a Xarc’n warrior. It was rumored that they would offer gifts of food to starving women, and if the women took the food, they took the women. No one has ever seen a female Xarc’n alien, and it doesn’t take a brain surgeon to know what they wanted with us.

The translator didn’t growl anything back at him, but he looked as if he understood my words all the same. He smiled, and the look was so terrifying, I nearly shat myself. Sharp teeth lined his mouth, and there was no doubt I faced a predator. I preferred him frowning.

“Take. Hungry.”

“No, I’m not hungry. I don’t want your food.” My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly, calling me out as a big, fat liar.

A low rumble sounded from him, his chest shook, and mirth sparkled recognizably in his strange eyes.

The oversized asshole was laughing at me! I narrowed my eyes at him, suddenly pissed. The nerve! Fuck him and his food. I wasn’t going to take the food anyway, but now I was doubly sure he could keep it and shove it where the light didn’t shine.

Shoring up my courage, I stood a little straighter and announced, “I’m leaving this store now. Please let me leave.”

The alien didn’t move but continued to block the door. He thumped himself on the chest and said a single word. The device did not translate.

“Move so I can leave,” I repeated. Then a little louder, since he hadn’t hurt me yet,
“Get out of my way!”

“Female no go.” Instead of moving, he repeated his motion and word.

Was he trying to tell me his name? He repeated the word one more time, and I took my best shot at the strange alien name. “Kajeck.”

“Kaj’k,” he swallowed the last syllable.

“Kaj’k.”

He grinned, showing a row of shiny, super sharp teeth. I shuddered and backed away.

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