



Owned by the Hvrok (Stolen From Earth #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Sylvia never imagined a quiet afternoon at the beach would end with her being torn from Earth and sold to the highest bidder at an intergalactic auction. Fierce, furious, and absolutely unwilling to accept her fate, she finds herself trapped aboard a silent, deadly ship—claimed by a towering alien male cloaked in armor, shadow, and silence.

He doesn't speak her language. He doesn't explain why he bought her. But he radiates control, menace, and something else she can't name—something that ignites every time he looks at her.

She's defiant. He's unrelenting.

She wants freedom. He wants obedience.

And in the tightening space between fury and fire, something dangerous begins to spark.

But her captor is being hunted, and their flight through deep space is anything but safe. As threats close in and choices narrow, Sylvia must face the truth: the most perilous thing aboard this ship might not be her captor's enemies...

It might be him.

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CHAPTER 1

The sizzle of steak and the wail of a toddler still echoed in her ears.

Sylvia kicked off her shoes at the edge of the sand, the warm grains slipping between her toes like silk. The late summer sun draped the ocean in gold, turning the waves into molten copper. Cronulla Beach stretched out before her, wide and mostly empty.

Just how she liked it.

She was lucky to be out of Archie's before the dinner chaos kicked in. The lunch shift had been hectic enough. One of the servers had called in sick— again— and the kitchen was running behind on every second ticket. But the dinner roster looked worse, and for once, she wasn't the one stuck staying late.

Small mercies.

Her apartment was only a few blocks from here, a modest two-bedroom in one of those squat 70s-era brick buildings—the kind with narrow balconies and stair rails rusting from years of salty ocean air. The place smelled faintly of old carpet and sea spray, and she liked it that way. It wasn't glamorous, but it was hers.

She'd chosen to stay close to where she'd grown up. She liked it here. Her parents' nursing home was nearby, too. They were both there now, age catching up to them faster than anyone wanted to admit.

Anthony, her eldest brother, ran a small but busy building company. Chris, the

middle child, was a GP up on the North Shore. Both married, both with kids. Both well-meaning and overbearing in equal measure.

She loved them. She just needed space.

Especially after Mark.

Her chest tightened at the thought. He'd seemed sweet in the beginning—kind, generous, the type who opened doors and sent flowers for no reason. But that had changed. Gradually at first, then sharply. Jealousy. Constant messages. Rules about who she could see, where she could go, what she could wear. The last fight had ended in shouting. The one before that in tears.

Now, there was silence.

She'd left her phone in the car on purpose. No messages. No notifications. No last-minute questions from junior staff. No temptation to check socials or answer calls she didn't want to take. Just her and the ocean.

Sylvia sighed and tilted her head back, breathing in the salt air. This was her escape route, her decompression walk. From the front doors of Australia's busiest mid-priced steak-and-seafood chain to this: open sky, endless sea, and the distant, rhythmic hush of waves on shore.

She walked further than usual. Past the familiar dunes. Past the last of the joggers. The warm pink sky was deepening, edging into twilight blues. Her shoulders loosened with each step, the ocean breeze brushing away the tension that had coiled in her neck since noon.

The beach grew quieter. Emptier. Beautiful in a lonely kind of way.

Then she saw it.

A shape in the water.

At first, she thought it was driftwood. A large piece, dark and rounded, floating just offshore. But it wasn't floating. It was rising.

Sylvia stopped, frowning. Her heartbeat quickened. The object had a sheen to it, a metallic glint that caught the fading light. It was domed—smooth and symmetrical—and it made no sound. No splash. No disruption.

Just there, emerging silently from the ocean like it belonged.

She took a step back.

It didn't look like anything she'd seen before. Not a boat. Not a buoy. Not even a military sub—not unless they came shaped like alien mushrooms now.

A low, pulsing hum drifted through the air.

It vibrated against her skin.

She swallowed hard.

Something was wrong.

Her gaze darted left and right. The beach was empty. No witnesses. No help. And her phone—deliberately out of reach.

Then something moved.

Figures—more than one. They surged from the water around the dome, fast and deliberate. At first, she couldn't tell what she was seeing—too fast, too unnatural—but then her brain caught up.

Not human.

Oh, my god.

They were humanoid in shape, yes, but stockier. Their movements were sharp, inhumanly smooth, and they wore some kind of armor—dark, glistening, segmented. Their helmets were featureless, except for thin glowing lines across the face.

She stumbled backward, hardly believing what she was seeing.

Panic surged. She didn't scream yet. Couldn't. Her brain was still catching up. Still trying to make this into something explainable.

But she couldn't explain the way they moved.

Or how fast they closed the distance.

She turned to run...

But they were already there.

A grip like iron wrapped around her wrist, yanking her off-balance. Another figure appeared beside her, slamming a heavy palm into her shoulder and sending her crashing into the sand. Wind left her lungs in a sharp gasp.

She tried to scream then, but her mouth barely opened.

One of them held a sleek, needle-like device. She caught a flash of silver.

A sharp sting pierced the side of her neck.

“No—” she gasped.

Her body betrayed her. Limbs turning to stone. Vision blurring. Sound fading to a strange, underwater thrum. The beach spun around her. Her pulse raced, then slowed. Her hands twitched in the sand.

Above her, stars began to appear in the darkening sky.

And then the world dissolved into black.

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CHAPTER 2

The walls weren't walls.

They shimmered like heat rising from asphalt, rippling with an iridescent sheen that made Sylvia's eyes ache. No corners. No seams. Just smooth, concave surfaces pulsing with a faint blue light.

She sat on the floor, her back against the cool curve behind her. Her skin still smelled of salt and the ocean, but now it was layered under the sterile sting of something chemical. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her knees. She hadn't spoken in hours.

Maybe she'd forgotten how.

There had been no sky since the light took her.

Just the white flash on the beach. The crackling hum. The sensation of gravity flipping upside down. Then darkness. Now this.

A metallic click echoed beyond the curved partition.

Sylvia's head snapped up.

The wall in front of her shimmered again, the surface folding inward like melting glass. She scrambled to her feet, her bare soles skidding slightly on the smooth floor.

Three figures entered.

The first was short and thickset, its green skin glistening under the chamber lights like oil on stone. It waddled forward on thick legs, powerful arms swinging loosely at its sides, claws clicking softly with each step. Its eyes were black pits. Cold. Lidless.

Her breath caught in her throat. It wasn't fear at first. It was instinct. Primal.

The thing wasn't human. And it didn't care if she was.

"S-Stay back," Sylvia said, her voice raw.

It didn't respond. Didn't even pause.

Instead, it tilted its head, emitted a string of dry, clicking sounds, and tapped a device on its thick belt.

Pain.

Instant, searing, indescribable.

It burst through her neck like lightning. Her knees gave out. She dropped to the floor, hands clawing at the collar she hadn't even realized she was wearing. A scream tore out of her before she could stop it—hoarse, ragged, full of shock.

Then it stopped.

She gasped. Gagged. Her whole body trembled, teeth chattering. The metal around her throat pulsed once, like a warning.

Through blurred vision, she saw two more enter behind the green brute.

Tall. Thin. Graceful.

Alien.

Their faces were completely blank, covered by smooth plates of mirror-dark glass. Their bodies moved like water, silent and unsettlingly precise. Their long fingers glided through the air as they approached her, as if they didn't walk—they drifted.

“No,” she rasped. “Don't?—”

They grabbed her. Cold, hard fingers. No response to her struggling, her kicking. She cried out, tried to fight, but the collar hissed again, and pain shot through her body.

Her limbs gave up.

They stripped her.

Effortlessly.

Like she wasn't even a person. Just an object.

Tears slid down her cheeks, but she bit her lip to keep from sobbing. She wouldn't give them that. Not yet.

They dragged her to another chamber. Mist poured down from overhead—warm, dense, and laced with that same sterile, sharp scent. She stood naked beneath the jets, trembling as invisible streams scoured her skin.

She clenched her fists.

“I'm not a fucking animal,” she whispered.

But no one heard her.

When the mist faded, they handed her garments—if you could call them that.

The fabric slithered between her fingers like something alive. Slick, dark purple, trimmed in silver. The top hugged her chest tightly, leaving her arms and midriff bare. The lower piece was worse—high-cut, narrow, showing far more than it covered.

Shame battled fury in her chest.

They wanted her on display.

And that meant she was being prepared for something.

She tried to ask: “Where am I? What is this place? What do you want from me?” But her mouth stayed shut. Her throat felt raw. Useless.

They marched her back to the cell.

The green one returned, stood in the doorway, and clicked something at her in its grating language. Then it pointed to the collar again.

Obey.

She didn't respond.

The creature stared for another long moment, then turned and left.

When the wall sealed shut, a panel hissed open and a tray emerged.

Grey paste. A cup of water.

She didn't move toward it.

Not yet.

She slumped against the far wall and pulled her knees to her chest. The outfit clung to her, a second skin she couldn't shed. The cell was quiet, save for the steady, low hum of the systems around her.

Everything inside her was screaming.

Sylvia had always thought of herself as strong. Stubborn, even. The kind of girl who didn't back down, didn't run from fights.

But now she felt impossibly small.

And whatever this place was—whatever was coming—it wasn't a fight she knew how to win.

Not yet.

But she would.

She had to.

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CHAPTER 3

She woke to light. Bright, artificial, too white to be natural.

And glass. Or something like it. Clear walls on all sides. She was enclosed. Exposed.

Sylvia bolted upright with a gasp.

The container she was in was rectangular, sleek, and seamless. Transparent but glowing faintly around the edges, its material pulsing with faint circuitry. There were no seams, no doors. Just containment. She could move, yes, but not far. A few steps in any direction met invisible resistance. Her breath fogged the surface in front of her as she reached out...

And recoiled.

She was on display.

Like a product.

Her pulse pounded in her ears. Her mouth went dry.

No. No. No.

She spun, taking in the market around her. Other beings—aliens, creatures of all shapes and sizes—milled about a cavernous space beneath a domed ceiling that stretched far above. Strange symbols flickered across suspended panels. Drones

hovered overhead. The air buzzed with voices—clicks, growls, melodic tones—none of it human.

None of it comprehensible.

This couldn't be real.

But it was.

Her fingers trembled as they touched her own skin, her face. No dream. No hallucination.

She was here—wherever here was.

The outfit they'd forced her into clung to her like a curse: two pieces of slick, iridescent fabric that barely covered her. Her stomach was bare. Her legs, her arms. She crossed her arms over her chest instinctively, heart thudding with a sharp, primal rage.

How dare they?

How dare they dress her like this and parade her like a prize animal?

She pressed her forehead to the glass. "This isn't happening," she whispered.

But it was.

One by one, the beings approached.

The first was spindly and grey-skinned, with a bulbous head and long, three-fingered hands. Its voice was like a wind chime tangled in a storm. It stared at her, blinkless,

fingers twitching as it spoke to a nearby drone. Glyphs floated around them, changing rapidly. Then it reached out, gesturing toward her.

To her horror, a section of the container slid open with a hiss.

“No!” she jerked back, but it was already reaching in.

Its hand touched her arm—clammy, cool, and dry. It stroked her skin with a deliberate slowness, as though examining a fruit in a market stall.

She swatted it away. “Don’t touch me!”

But the thing only blinked once, cocked its head, and withdrew.

Then came another.

Red-skinned, hulking, armored. It tapped the controls with a clawed hand. The panel hissed open again, and it reached in. Its fingers brushed her cheek before running down her shoulder. She flinched and shoved its hand away, disgust curling in her stomach.

They weren’t seeing her. Not as a person. Not as Sylvia Russo, twenty-seven, from Cronulla, who worked two jobs and had just broken off an engagement she’d tried to convince herself was right.

No. To them, she was meat. Exotic. Rare. Valuable.

Her skin crawled with disgust.

Her soul recoiled in horror.

This was really happening. This absolute fucking nightmare.

More came. Dozens, maybe more. She lost count.

Some asked to touch her, others simply stared. One appeared to take pictures with some strange alien device. She wanted to scream, to lash out, to claw at the walls. But the collar pulsed at her throat whenever she raised her voice, and she quickly learned not to push it.

And the worst part—worse than the touch, worse than the humiliation—was the helplessness.

There was no escape. No Earth to run back to. No help.

No one.

She blinked against the sting in her eyes. Her throat tightened. The tears were coming.

But she refused.

No. Not here. Not in front of them.

She clenched her jaw, bit down hard, and glared through the glass at the next one who came near.

They wouldn't see her cry. They wouldn't see her break.

Her fear was ice beneath her rage, and both held her upright.

Let them stare. Let them prod.

Let them wonder what they were really buying.

Because she wasn't just some trembling thing from a backwards planet.

She was Sylvia. She was human.

And she would survive. She had to.

CHAPTER 4

It began with a tone: shrill, metallic, echoing through the market.

Then came the glyphs.

They flared to life above her transparent cell: glowing shapes, alien numerals she couldn't decipher. They pulsed in midair, shifting with every new bid.

It took Sylvia a moment to understand.

They were bidding.

On her .

Her stomach turned. "No," she whispered. " No, no, no. "

But it didn't stop.

Figures pressed toward the platform—dozens of them. Creatures of every shape and size, waving devices, issuing commands to floating consoles. Voices overlapped in a frenzied mess of languages: clicks, snarls, trills, and mechanical tones.

She staggered back, hitting the rear wall of the display cell.

The tall, gray-skinned alien with the glassy black eyes and razor-thin limbs started the bidding. Then came the red brute—the same one who had touched her

earlier—shouting in some gravelly language, his claws flashing as he barked his bid.

A thick, slug-like being chimed in next, its voice a wet slop of vowels that made her gag. Then another, a being made entirely of overlapping scales and chitin, its mouth constantly moving as it spoke through what looked like translator tech fused to its jaw.

All of them. Staring at her. Competing.

Competing to own her.

Sylvia's pulse thundered in her ears. She could hardly process the horror. Every motion, every raised device, every flickering glyph above her cell chipped away at what was left of her reality.

She backed into the corner, trembling.

And then, her mind... slipped. Just a little.

She felt distant. Detached. Like she was floating above herself, watching someone else go through this nightmare.

Maybe she was breaking. Maybe that was the only way her brain could cope.

She watched the red brute bark a final bid, his body tense, victorious.

And then it came.

A voice.

One word.

Spoken in a language that carried no translation, but reverberated through her bones like the crack of a mountain splitting in half.

Low. Deep. Measured.

The market silenced in a single breath.

The glyphs froze in the air. The lights dimmed.

And the crowd moved.

Not because they were pushed.

Because they knew.

They parted like prey sensing a predator. A ripple of unease passed through the gathered aliens: hushed murmurs, clicks of disbelief, warbled warnings. Even the red brute took a step back, his snarl cut short, confusion contorting his features into something like fear.

Sylvia didn't understand... until she saw him.

He walked through the opening crowd without haste, without comment.

And the moment she laid eyes on him, the air seemed to vanish from the room.

He was enormous. Tall and broad, every inch encased in armor so black it drank the light around it. There were no glowing sigils, no adornments, no rank markings. Only pure, endless black, like a void given form. The armor moved like liquid metal, seamless, flexible, and somehow wrong, as if it weren't made for this universe.

A helmet covered his head: sleek, sharp, angular. No eyes. No mouth. Just a single, brutal visor that gave away nothing.

Weapons lined his body. Thick, high-caliber cannons on his back. A jagged blade on one hip. Strange alien tech along the other. Devices Sylvia couldn't even begin to comprehend. All of it silent. All of it deadly.

And from his back, tightly folded...

Wings.

Not feathered. Not delicate.

But massive. Armored. Segmented. Built of the same void-black material as the rest of him. They shifted slightly with each step, an ominous whisper of movement that felt more biological than mechanical.

He didn't speak again.

He didn't have to.

The auctioneer—a floating orb with mechanical limbs—issued a low, pulsing tone. The bid was final. Accepted.

The other bidders turned away, some muttering in disbelief, others simply vanishing into the shadows. Even the red brute seemed to shrink, his victory stolen. Fear hung in the air like smoke. Not one dared protest.

Sylvia couldn't breathe.

Her cell began to lower slowly from the stage, the translucent panels folding back

with a whisper.

She stood, frozen.

The black-armored being moved to meet her descent. His posture unshifting. His intent unknowable.

She stared at him—her new owner—and felt every drop of blood drain from her face.

This... thing. This force in the shape of a man.

No.

Not a man.

An alien.

It hadn't needed to shout. It hadn't raised a weapon.

It had spoken.

And won.

She didn't know if she should scream or faint.

When the cell touched the ground, she stumbled forward on trembling legs.

The being waited. Still. Silent.

He made no move to approach her.

But Sylvia knew.

There would be no resistance. No escape.

He had claimed her with a word.

There was no way she could fight this... thing.

And now she was his.

CHAPTER 5

The cage glided soundlessly, floating just above the metallic ground, casting a faint shadow beneath the glowing path lights of the station. Sylvia sat inside, legs drawn up, arms hugging her knees. The alien who had bought her—the one who had ended the auction with a single word—walked beside her. Silent. Imposing. Utterly unreadable.

She hadn't heard a word from him since the auction ended. Not even a glance in her direction. It was as if she were freight. Property.

But she wasn't alone.

Everywhere they went, beings stared.

Until they saw him.

Then the stares vanished. Heads dropped. Shoulders tightened. The hum of chatter fell to a hush wherever he walked. He didn't have to do anything—just look, and that was enough to make other aliens avert their gazes or stumble aside, clutching their companions or their drinks or their parcels of alien goods.

They passed through a crowded area that reminded Sylvia of a food court. At least, that's what it looked like: smoke curled from heat vents, strange aromas hung in the air, and tables were scattered across a broad atrium. But the moment he entered, it changed. Utensils clattered onto tabletops. A hulking, furred alien snatched its tray and slunk away. Conversations ended mid-sentence.

The crowd parted for him like water around a blade.

Sylvia kept her eyes on him through the curved glass of her cage.

If she weren't so afraid, she might find it fascinating—the fact that every being here feared him.

He was obviously the most dangerous thing on this station, but she should have known that already from his appearance.

His armor was unlike anything she'd ever seen—deep, void-black, absorbing all the light around it. There were no glowing symbols. No alien runes or decoration. Just blank, silent menace. The flexible plating moved like muscle, hugging a tall, muscular frame with the kind of balance that spoke of coiled strength. His steps made no sound. No heavy footfalls. No mechanical clicks.

Too fluid. Too precise.

And behind him...

Those wings. Folded tight. Massive. Segment upon segment of the same eerie black material. Could he really fly? What kind of being was he?

He looked more like a demon than an alien.

She shivered and looked away, heart hammering. But her gaze crept back a moment later. She didn't want to stare, but she couldn't help it.

Curiosity battled fear in her chest.

He said nothing. He didn't acknowledge her. Didn't spare her a glance.

And somehow, that terrified her more.

They descended into darker corridors now. The lights dimmed with every level they passed, the walls growing smoother, more ominous. Fewer beings passed them here, and those that did vanished into doorways or down side paths with their heads low and their voices hushed.

Until finally, they entered a cavernous chamber: vast, circular, lined with docking berths and the parked vessels of a dozen different species.

And there it was.

His ship.

It wasn't the largest. But it was... breathtaking in its own terrifying way. Sleek. Angular. Pitch-black like him. No name, no insignia, no markings of any kind. It sat like a sleeping predator, poised and waiting.

Her floating container glided to a halt before it.

He raised one armored hand. There were no visible buttons. No console. Just a low, guttural command spoken in a language she couldn't begin to understand.

The ship responded.

The hatch peeled open with a hiss.

Smooth and silent—as if the vessel itself had been waiting for him.

The glass chamber moved again, drawn forward into the yawning darkness of the ship's interior.

Sylvia's breath hitched. The walls swallowed the light as she entered, and her reflection vanished.

No one was going to save her.

She was going with him. Wherever he was taking her.

And she still didn't even know his name.

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CHAPTER 6

The chamber was cold.

Not freezing, but sterile. Bright, clinical light poured from a band along the ceiling, casting long shadows across the smooth, metallic walls. Her transparent container—her cage—hovered quietly in the center of the room, making no sound, not even the hum of a motor.

He left her there.

Without a glance. Without a sound.

He simply turned and walked away, his black wings folded neatly behind him, vanishing through a seamless door that slid shut without a whisper. No hiss of hydraulics. No locking mechanism she could hear. He was just... gone.

Sylvia sat rigidly in the center of her confinement, muscles tight with a simmering mix of fear and fury. Her bare feet pressed into the slick glass floor, every nerve taut. She kept expecting something—someone—to follow him in. Another alien, maybe, to gawk at her. To give orders. To explain.

But no one came.

The silence was absolute. Oppressive.

She waited. Minutes passed. Or was it an hour? Two? Time had started to blur. The

only thing that kept her grounded was her rising heartbeat, pounding steadily.

She looked around the space again. The chamber had no corners, no visible panels, no furniture... just the glowing strip of cold light above and the gentle curve of seamless walls. Even the floor seemed suspended over nothing, like it could peel open and drop her into space.

He had just left her.

Like she wasn't worth his attention.

She swallowed hard. The initial fear that had gripped her in the auction room hadn't gone away, but now, layered over it, was something else, an insult she couldn't articulate. He'd bought her like a possession. She was terrified of him, yes, but she was also a person. And he hadn't even acknowledged that. Not a word. Not even a flicker of curiosity.

Her fists clenched at her sides.

Fine. If he wanted a mindless pet, he could think again. She'd figure out what he wanted from her eventually, and when she did...

A low vibration shuddered through the walls.

Sylvia froze.

There was another tremor, deeper this time. A subtle throb beneath her feet, like the heartbeat of something colossal.

The cage shifted slightly.

She scrambled to brace herself, palms flat against the glass, staring up at the ceiling as if it could offer answers. The vibration turned into motion. A slow, smooth ascent—no jerking, no tilting—but the unmistakable sense of acceleration.

They were moving.

The ship was taking off.

A protest rose to her lips, but the words dried out in her throat. Her breath fogged against the inside of the transparent shell.

She wasn't just captured. She wasn't just auctioned off to the most terrifying being she'd ever laid eyes on.

And now, she was leaving.

Earth was behind her now, already out of reach. Her world. Her beach. Her family. Her life.

Gone.

She pressed her forehead against the glass and closed her eyes, trembling.

She didn't know where she was going. She didn't know who—or what—he was. She didn't even know if she was still in the same solar system.

No one to call. No way to scream.

Just her.

And the being who now owned her.

CHAPTER 7

She waited.

Time became a haze, a stretch of nothingness blurred by silence and sterile light. The floating container remained still, suspended in the center of a cold, metallic chamber. The walls were smooth, without seams or visible exits. The lighting was dim and bluish, like the soft glow of a fridge left open in the dark. No sound. Not even the faint hum of machinery. Just oppressive quiet.

Her throat tightened, and the tears came. Not loud sobs. Just a slow, silent welling. She blinked furiously, refusing to let them fall. She wouldn't give in. Not again. Not after what happened on the trading station. Not after those slimy hands had pawed at her like she was nothing.

But it wasn't just the fear. It was the humiliation. The fury. The feeling of being erased, turned from a person into property. She was still wearing the skimpy silken outfit they'd shoved her into. Her skin crawled with the memory.

She clenched her fists and stared at the ceiling.

The silence was the worst part.

No one had come. No guards. No servants. Not even him.

The one who bought her. The one in black armor, with weapons and wings and a presence that made the other aliens quake.

He hadn't said a word. Not even a glance once they were aboard. Just left her like a forgotten object in this sterile chamber.

She thought of calling out. Screaming. Slamming her fists against the walls of the container. She even considered harming herself, just to force some kind of response. But then she imagined his reaction.

She didn't know what he was. What he was capable of. She only knew the way the air seemed to freeze when he moved. The way others had looked at him... and then looked away.

Doing anything reckless was a gamble she couldn't afford.

So she waited.

And as she waited, her thoughts turned homeward.

Cronulla. The soft roar of waves rolling onto the beach. Her friends, her family. Her job at the marina café. Her mum's nagging text messages. Her dad's laugh. She imagined them waking up and realising she was gone. No note. No explanation. Just... vanished. Would they think she drowned? Got lost? Run away?

Would they ever stop looking?

The ache that thought brought was almost worse than the fear. Almost.

Because in the absence of everything else, there was still one thing she clung to like a rope in the dark.

Hope.

Hope that she might return. Hope that this wasn't the end of her story, just a detour into something terrible that she could someday escape.

She inhaled slowly, controlled, reminding herself she was still alive. That she still had choices, even if they were few.

Then, the air shifted.

A sound: soft, like air being disturbed by movement.

She sat up straighter.

A figure stepped through the wall.

Not through a door. Through the wall—like it was nothing. Like it had been waiting all along.

It was him.

The being in black.

The one who had bought her.

He moved without sound, his armored frame absorbing light like a void given shape. His presence filled the chamber instantly, a shadow stretching across her thoughts, her breath. He didn't speak. Didn't look at her. Just stood there, like a storm waiting to break.

Sylvia's pulse thundered in her ears.

She wasn't ready.

But he was here.

CHAPTER 8

He stood before her, hulking and silent.

The weapons were gone. That was the first thing she noticed when he returned. The jagged blades, the spined rifle across his back, the unidentifiable holstered tools... gone. Stripped away, as if discarded casually, as if he didn't need them at all. And maybe... he didn't.

Because even without the arsenal, he was terrifying.

He still wore the armor: sleek, seamless black that absorbed the light around him like a void in the universe. Not a single marking or glowing sigil broke its surface. Just pure, matte black, contoured to a body that was impossibly large and undeniably powerful. His arms were thick with muscle, corded and flexing beneath the plates of armor that clung to his form like a second skin. His chest was broad and immovable. His legs, braced apart, gave the impression of immense weight, of a being too grounded, too solid, to be moved by anything or anyone.

His wings remained folded behind him: massive, armored, deadly-looking. They arched high even when furled, like the wings of some titanic insect built for war.

And he was watching her.

Still. Unmoving. Utterly silent.

The helmet masked his face completely—smooth, featureless, and jet-black—but

somehow, she could feel his gaze. It bore into her, unrelenting. Cold. Curious. Calculating.

Sylvia felt her breath catch in her throat. The air inside the chamber felt thinner suddenly, harder to breathe. Her stomach twisted.

What was he waiting for?

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself, standing in the center of the transparent cage, suddenly hyperaware of every inch of bare skin exposed by the humiliating outfit she'd been given. Her heart thudded so loudly it seemed to echo in her ears.

He didn't move.

He didn't speak.

He didn't even seem to breathe.

Her nerves stretched tighter and tighter with every second of silence... until she couldn't take it anymore.

"What do you want from me?" she snapped, her voice hoarse with fear and frustration.

No reply. Just the silence, oppressive and unbreakable.

She slammed her palm against the transparent wall of her cage. "Let me out!"

Still... nothing.

But then, he moved.

It was like watching a shadow come to life. Smooth, fluid, too fast, and too silent for something his size. He didn't stomp or stride. He glided, like a predator in complete control of his environment. She stumbled back without thinking, fear spiking in her chest.

And then, with a hiss, the cage vanished.

The wall that had enclosed her dissolved into the air, leaving her exposed and breathless. Her instinct screamed to run. To bolt. But she didn't. Couldn't. Because he was approaching.

Up close, he was even more overwhelming.

He towered over her. His presence filled the room like a stormcloud, heavy and dark and full of pressure. She could feel the heat radiating off him through his armor, a strange warmth that brushed her skin and made her knees weak.

He raised a hand.

She flinched.

The fingers of his gauntlet unfolded: six of them, long and elegant, but clawed at the tips, menacing even in stillness. He beckoned to her.

Then, he spoke.

One word.

Alien. Deep. Resonant.

“Raa'shurr.”

She didn't know what it meant, but the sound of it rumbled through her chest like distant thunder. It wasn't just a word, it was a command wrapped in a growl. Something primal. Something ancient.

She knew, instinctively.

Come.

Every part of her body screamed against it. Her muscles were tight with fear. Her legs felt like jelly. But her feet moved anyway, trembling steps across the cold metal floor.

She stepped out of the cage.

And into his world.

He loomed in front of her now. Closer than ever. His head tilted slightly, as if inspecting her.

She realized something then: if he wanted to hurt her, he could do it without effort. Snap her in half like a twig. Crush her like a doll. And no one would stop him.

The thought sent shivers down her spine.

But he didn't touch her.

Not yet.

She stopped just short of him. Close enough to be able to touch him. Close enough to feel the faint shimmer of heat rising off his body. She stared up at the blank helmet.

And he watched her.

No words. No gestures.

Only that terrible, imposing presence that wrapped around her like a vise.

She was free of the cage.

But not of him.

And somehow, that was even more terrifying.

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CHAPTER 9

She stood frozen.

Not from cold, but from fear. Raw, visceral fear, the kind that clawed up her throat and wrapped icy tendrils around her spine. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't blink. Could barely think.

Like a rabbit before a wolf... or something worse.

The being loomed above her, still and silent. She didn't know what to do. What to say. What could she say? Would he understand her? Would he even care?

Then, he moved.

Slowly. Deliberately.

One of his arms lifted, the armored gauntlet rising toward her. Sylvia flinched, instinctively bracing for impact. But the armor shimmered, then vanished, peeling away from his forearm in segments, but fluidly like liquid shadow, revealing bare skin beneath.

Her breath caught.

His hand was large—inhumanly so—fingers longer than a man's, more elegant, more dangerous. His skin was a deep, vivid blue. Smooth and unblemished, faintly iridescent under the ship's low lighting. And then...

He touched her.

Just above the shoulder.

The contact was gentle, feather-light. But it felt like a jolt of electricity shot through her skin, into her blood. Her nerves lit up. She almost pulled back. Almost.

But she didn't.

Because somehow— terrifyingly —he wasn't hurting her. The pressure was soft, almost... reverent. His fingers glided across her skin like he was tracing something precious. Something fragile.

Something that was his .

His hand traveled slowly across her collarbone. Down the curve of her arm. The sensation made her shiver, and she hated how her body reacted to it—how her skin warmed under his touch despite the horror clenching her chest.

Then he reached for her face.

She held her breath.

His fingers brushed her cheek, trailing down the side of her jaw. She could feel the calloused pads of his fingertips—textured and alien, but warm. Real. Present. The hand of something that wasn't supposed to exist outside of fiction. Her breath came out shakily.

She didn't dare move.

He didn't speak. Not a sound.

Instead, he reached for her hair.

Sylvia stood like a statue as he gathered a section of it between his long fingers, letting the strands slip slowly through his hand. His touch was slow, deliberate. Curious.

She couldn't stop staring at his skin. That deep, otherworldly blue. Beautiful and terrifying all at once.

And then, through the smooth mask of his helmet, he inhaled .

A sharp breath, like he was drawing her in.

Smelling her.

Her stomach twisted.

Like a collector appraising something new. Like she was a rare find, something exotic to be tasted, studied... kept .

It filled her with dread.

He hadn't spoken a word. Hadn't made a sound. But somehow, this quiet, unhurried inspection was worse than shouting or threats. Because it told her everything.

He was treating her like something precious.

Something valuable.

And that meant he wasn't going to let her go.

Ever.

CHAPTER 10

K yhin remained still, a hulking shadow in the dim blue light of his ship's chamber, watching the human girl as she stood before him. Her name, he had not learned. Her species—humans—originated from a distant, irrelevant planet called Earth. A primitive place, from what little he'd gleaned. Isolated. Unaware of the galaxy that churned and burned around it.

Yet somehow, it had produced this. Her.

She was small: pale-skinned with a flush to her cheeks that signaled either fear or anger. Or both. Her golden hair caught the low light and gleamed like something precious. Her limbs were slender, her posture tight. She was afraid—he could smell it—but there was something more in the set of her jaw, in the way she glared up at him through those impossibly blue eyes.

Defiance.

It stirred something in him. A heat. A discomfort he didn't understand. He shifted slightly, his muscles coiling under the sleek armor that still clung to his frame. She was trembling. Fragile. Soft. The softest thing he'd ever seen in the universe.

He didn't know what to do with her.

He'd never bought another living being before. Never cared to. But something about her at the auction... He'd seen the way the others looked at her—like meat. And without thinking, without planning, he'd spoken. Claimed her. Just like that.

An indulgence. His first.

His people would have scoffed. If any of them remained.

Vokar. The memory struck him like a blade through the ribs. His home—gone. Reduced to scorched stone and radioactive ash. His kind—warriors, kings, killers—slaughtered by their own pride, their own arrogance. They had turned on one another, consumed by infighting, hoarding their deadly weapons like children with poison toys. And when the weapons ignited... there had been nothing left to save.

He had not been there. He had been finishing a contract. A clean job on Kroll, a simple execution of a merchant turned rebel informant. When he returned, Vokar was dust.

He might be the last Hvrok.

And now, here he stood—staring at a frightened human female with no knowledge of the galaxy, no language in common, and a fire in her eyes that warned she might not submit easily.

Good.

He didn't want a simpering pet. But he also could not allow rebellion. Not here. Not when he had no time, no patience, and no second chances.

He would have to train her.

Teach her.

Yes. That was how he would approach this.

She was his now. She belonged to him. That meant care... and discipline. He would be kind. Gentle, if he must. But firm. The human would learn her place. She would understand the rules of the civilized universe, and his rules above all.

He stepped forward, his armored feet making no sound. She flinched—but didn't back away.

That pleased him.

He raised a hand, letting the armor recede at his command. The nanostructure slid back into his skin, revealing his bare palm. Carefully, slowly, he reached out and touched her shoulder.

She stiffened. Her skin was warm. Delicate. He could feel the tiny tremble that ran through her, could sense the way her heart quickened in response. Not just fear. Something else.

His fingers slid up, brushing over her neck, her jaw, her cheek. Then to her hair. He let the strands run through his fingers like water.

She smelled of Earth. Of salt and wind and something vibrant he couldn't name.

He inhaled through the vents of his helm. A low, guttural hum stirred in his chest.

He would keep her safe.

He would keep her close.

But she would learn. Starting now.

CHAPTER 11

The silence in the room wasn't empty. It pulsed with unspoken things.

Sylvia stood just inside the threshold of the chamber, the soles of her bare feet cold against the smooth alien floor. Her pulse throbbed in her throat as she tried to steady her breath. The dark metal walls curved slightly inward, like she was standing in the belly of some living creature. Lights embedded in the ceiling pulsed with a faint bluish glow—enough to see, but not enough to feel comforted.

And him.

The being who had purchased her. Who had taken her from the horror of the auction block—only to trap her here.

He stood near the far wall, a silent monolith in black armor. Broad, tall, impossibly powerful, with a presence that sucked the air out of the room. She hadn't heard a single sound when he moved, hadn't felt the floor tremble under his weight. He was too controlled for that. Too precise.

Her fingers toyed unconsciously with the edge of the collar around her throat. The one placed there by the slavers. Uncomfortable. Too tight. It pinched when she turned her head, and the strange metal left her skin itchy, burning faintly in places. She hated the feel of it. Hated what it meant. But she hadn't dared try to remove it—she didn't know how, and the last time someone had tried to assert control through it, pain had followed.

Now, her captor reached toward the wall—didn't touch it, just... hovered his palm there. A panel hissed open, as if responding to an unspoken command.

He retrieved something from within.

Something small. Compact.

Another collar.

But not like the one she wore now.

This one was beautiful.

Black and silver, but speckled with pale gemstones—like stars trapped beneath the surface. Aquamarine-hued jewels gleamed faintly as they caught the shifting starlight streaming through the nearby window. It was shaped to encircle the throat with a kind of alien elegance, more like a regal adornment than a restraint.

It stunned her into stillness.

Her stomach flipped.

He turned to her with it in hand. His blue fingers—bare again—curved around it like it was a sacred thing.

She took a half-step back.

No words. No questions. Just the silent offering of a new chain.

She couldn't help the swell of resentment rising in her chest.

Another collar? What difference did it make how pretty it was? Did he think making it glitter would make it feel less like ownership?

Her jaw clenched.

And yet... he didn't move closer. Didn't force it on her. Just held it, studying her through the inscrutable black visor of his helmet.

She couldn't read him. She didn't even know if he could understand her language. But something about the moment stretched and settled like a fragile truce. A strange, charged pause.

Eventually, he turned and set the new collar gently on the low table.

A choice.

It stunned her.

Sylvia swallowed hard, unsure what to do with the tangle of emotion rising in her chest.

The fact that he hadn't simply removed the slavers' collar and snapped on his own without asking—that he had stopped, paused, left it there for her to see—meant something.

But what?

He faced her again, unmoving.

She couldn't see his face. Couldn't tell if he was angry, or waiting, or even thinking. His armor betrayed nothing. Only his hand remained bare, the blue of his skin a vivid

contrast against the shadows of the room. That hand had touched her before—her hair, her cheek. Strangely gentle, like he was trying to learn her through touch.

Sylvia turned her face away.

Her eyes landed on the window.

Stars.

So many stars.

Beyond them—beyond that endless stretch of darkness—was Earth.

Home.

Her parents. Her friends. Her coworkers. Her life.

She bit her lower lip to stop its trembling. The collar at her neck felt heavier than before. As if it had tightened in response to her thoughts. She wanted it gone. Gone forever. But to accept a new one? Even a beautiful one?

She wasn't ready.

The stars blurred in her vision, but no tears fell. Not yet.

She straightened. Lifted her chin.

"I'm not yours," she whispered, even though she knew he wouldn't understand.

Still, he didn't move.

She walked to the window and sat on the narrow bench beneath it, curling her arms around her knees.

Behind her, the glittering collar waited.

But for now, she ignored it.

Because she wasn't ready to decide.

And for some reason, he seemed willing to let her wait.

CHAPTER 12

She stood there like a statue carved from defiance.

Kyhin didn't move. Not yet. He had learned long ago—on a hundred battlefields and a hundred blood-soaked planets—that stillness was more powerful than force. And now, here in the quiet chamber of his ship, he wielded that stillness like a weapon.

The human's blue eyes were wide, but they did not dart or flinch. Instead, they fixed on the collar in his hand, then on him, as though daring him to explain what this was.

She didn't like it. He could see that plainly.

The current collar around her neck—the slaver's device—sat heavy and raw against her skin, clearly designed for pain and obedience. It clashed jarringly with her soft form. Even standing tense, guarded, she was still the softest thing he'd seen in a universe made of blades and plasma.

This new collar was different. Deliberately so.

The gemstones embedded in the black alloy caught the light filtering through the viewport, refracting pale blue sparks across the walls. He had chosen it the moment he saw it in the Dukkar trader's inventory. Not for aesthetics—though it was beautiful—but for what it symbolised.

Power. Ownership. Protection.

And now, the human stood there, breathing shallowly, her jaw clenched. He could see her thoughts racing behind those ocean-bright eyes. Rage, confusion... and fear.

But not terror. Not the kind he was used to seeing.

He wondered if she knew what she looked like—standing barefoot on the dark metal floor, hair tousled from stress, arms tense at her sides, her golden skin flushed with emotion. Her very presence stirred something beneath his skin, something ancient and possessive.

He let the silence hang.

The Hvrok had always known the value of silence. Spoken words were the weapon of the lesser races. Silence was command. Silence was challenge. Silence broke down barriers faster than any threat.

And now, it worked its way into her bones. He could see her shifting slightly. Her lips parted as though she might speak—only to close again. She was not used to being ignored. Her species, he had learned, were noisy. Restless.

But she must learn.

He made a slow, deliberate gesture—one gloved hand rising to tap his own throat. The other held up the new collar. Then he shrugged, tilting his head. A simple message. One or the other. The choice is yours.

Her face twisted. Not in fear. In fury.

She spoke then—a sharp, guttural sound in her alien tongue. A curse, perhaps. He didn't know the words, but the tone was unmistakable.

Then, without another word, she pointed at the collar in his hand. Her chin raised, her shoulders squared in challenge.

It amused him.

The chuckle escaped before he could stop it—low, deep, edged in something primal. Her reaction was so human. So raw. So... alive.

She would be a handful. But he hadn't expected less.

He stepped forward, silent as death, the collar still in hand. And as he approached, she didn't back away. Her defiance remained etched into her posture, but there was something else now—something hesitant flickering behind her stare.

Curiosity.

Good. That, he could work with.

He would train her. Gently, if she allowed it. Firmly, if she did not.

But one thing was already certain.

She was his.

And every being in this galaxy would know it.

CHAPTER 13

This was messed up.

Sylvia stared at the ornate collar in his hand: beautiful, alien, glittering with soft-blue gemstones that shimmered under the light spilling from the view of space beyond the window. It looked like it belonged in a royal treasury, or a museum, or maybe around the neck of some alien aristocrat—not on her.

And yet... that was exactly where it was about to go.

He was giving her a choice, in the most twisted way possible. This, or the ugly, heavy, too-tight collar that still chafed her skin and reminded her of the slavers. She could keep wearing the symbol of her captivity, or she could willingly take the thing he offered—the one that screamed ownership in an entirely new way.

She didn't like either option.

God, who did this bastard think he was?

She wanted to spit, to curse, to throw something—anything to show him she wasn't some docile pet to be adorned. But a glance at him cooled that fire. He stood like a statue carved from shadow, his powerful form radiating calm... but not kindness. Control. Power. Restraint.

Barely.

She didn't want to find out what would happen if that restraint snapped.

And still... when he chuckled, something hot and unfamiliar coiled in her belly. Like this whole thing amused him. As if her anger, her defiance, pleased him. Was that it? Did he get off on this?

Arrogant bastard.

But... there was something else in her, too. Something traitorous. The tiniest, most awful flicker of dark fascination. Because despite everything—his terrifying silence, his armor, his hulking strength—there was something thrilling about the idea of being chosen. Possessed.

She hated the thought. Hated that she felt it.

And then he moved.

Fast. So fast she barely registered it. One moment, he stood across the room. The next, he was there, right in front of her. Towering. Imposing. She flinched, instinctively stepping back, heart pounding.

But he didn't raise a hand. Not like that.

Instead, he reached out, fingers closing around the collar at her throat—the old one, the one that had been there since her capture.

With a sickening crunch, he crushed it. The tech sparked and twisted beneath his armored grip, mangled into scrap. It split open with a hiss and clattered to the floor in ruined pieces.

Sylvia gasped, swallowing hard.

Then, to her surprise, he brushed the broken shards from her skin. Carefully. Gently. His touch, even through the armor, was measured and precise. Like he was... being delicate with her. Like she was fragile.

Because she was.

Her breath caught again as he raised the jeweled collar. Slowly, almost reverently, he clasped it around her neck.

It fit. Too well.

Warm, smooth, impossibly light—and far too intimate.

She hated it. She hated how soft it was, how it hugged her skin like silk. She hated the idea that it had been made for her, sized to her exact dimensions. That it was beautiful. That it looked good.

That it felt like it belonged there.

He said something in his own language then. Just a word. Deep and gravelly, vibrating from somewhere in his chest. She didn't know what it meant.

But she knew what it felt like.

Final.

Then his eyes—if she could even see them behind the helmet—dragged over her. Slow. Measuring. Possessive. She felt it like a brand.

Naked.

He didn't touch her again. Didn't have to.

He simply turned. Gestured. That same motion again. Follow.

Her collar shimmered faintly in the starlight.

And she followed.

Not because she wanted to.

But because now... she had no idea what choice meant anymore.

CHAPTER 14

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But because now... she had no idea what choice meant anymore.

CHAPTER 15

The room was an operating theater. That was the first thing that struck her—how unnaturally clean everything was. Too bright. Too precise. No shadows. No seams. No flaws. Just blinding white walls and gleaming floors that turned her skin to something pale and foreign. She felt flayed open by the light, laid bare without even having to remove her clothes.

Kyhin stepped to the side, graceful as always, his movements disturbingly fluid for someone so massive. His six-fingered hand swept in a silent command toward the center of the chamber.

She followed the motion.

A recessed alcove gleamed at the far end. Mist drifted lazily from invisible vents, curling like ghostly fingers in the air. Drops of water clung to smooth vertical panels—silver on silver. There were no taps, no nozzles. Just a strange, metallic beauty. Minimal. Alien. Clinical.

A shower.

Her stomach dropped.

Then, his gaze. Sharp. Direct.

And the motion of his hand.

Down.

No words. No need for them.

Undress.

Something in her snapped.

Her arms clamped around herself with a jerk, breath punching out of her lungs. “Are you serious ?”

He didn’t respond.

“Absolutely not.” Her voice was louder than she intended—raw, furious, scraping. “I’m not doing this.”

His head tilted—just a fraction—but it felt like a slap. Like he couldn’t comprehend why she was resisting. As if her refusal was a variable outside the scope of his programming. Or maybe he did understand—and just didn’t care .

“I said no,” she bit out, more forcefully this time, her fingers digging into her arms. “No. No. I don’t know what kind of sick expectation you’ve got in that shiny death-head of yours, but I’m not your plaything. You can’t just—gesture at me like I’m a damn doll and expect me to drop my clothes.”

Behind him, his wings gave a faint twitch.

And then he stepped toward her.

Sylvia’s mouth went dry. Her limbs vibrated with panic, but she didn’t back away this time.

“You think I’m afraid of you?” she spat, trembling. “Is that what this is? You loom a little, and I’ll fold like one of your pretty little acquisitions? You think I don’t see what you’re doing?”

He said nothing.

He just kept walking.

One step. Then another. Slow. Intentional.

Her heart pounded like it was trying to escape her chest. Rage boiled beneath her skin, hot and dizzying. Not fear— fury . She hated how quiet he was. How untouchable. How unreadable beneath that dark, faceless armor. She couldn’t see his expression. Couldn’t measure anything. Couldn’t find a single crack in the wall he presented to her.

It made her want to scream.

“Show me your face ,” she snapped, breath ragged. “If you’re going to humiliate me like this, at least have the decency to look me in the eye while you do it.”

Still no answer.

The air shifted as he closed the final distance. He stopped just short of her—close enough for her to feel the quiet hum of his presence, close enough to drown in it.

Her entire body shook. Adrenaline surged. Her throat ached from holding back the scream rising inside her.

She glared at him. Defiant. Unmoving. “You don’t get to have all the power here.”

But she knew— felt —how precarious that claim was.

Because she hadn't run. She hadn't fought. And the collar still sat warm and snug against her throat, betraying her.

He hadn't touched her.

He hadn't forced her.

And somehow, that made it worse.

He was waiting.

Not for permission.

For her to break.

Her eyes burned. Her body ached. And still, she stood there, clothed, furious, exposed in ways she hadn't known were possible.

She was still herself.

But that self was fraying.

And he knew it.

He didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Didn't even breathe , as far as she could tell.

He just stood there, massive and silent, like a black statue dropped from some alien god's war altar.

Sylvia's chest heaved. Her throat burned. The words she'd hurled at him only moments ago still echoed in her ears—useless, desperate noise. None of it had made a dent in him.

Not even a twitch.

He watched her, unreadable, faceless behind that obsidian armor and full-face helm. She couldn't see his eyes. Couldn't see anything human, anything soft. Just the brutal geometry of his body, the impossible bulk of him, the armored plates that shimmered faintly under the too-bright lights.

She wanted him to do something . To say something . Even a command would be better than this awful, consuming silence .

But he didn't.

He just waited.

And somehow, that was worse.

Sylvia clenched her fists so tightly her nails bit into her palms. Her whole body trembled with adrenaline, with rage, with raw, chaotic sorrow. She wanted to scream again, to shove him, to claw at that armor until she saw something real underneath.

But she didn't.

She couldn't.

Because even without a word, even without movement, he gave off a message clearer than anything spoken:

If you touch me, I will split you in half.

The thought wasn't metaphorical.

It was a truth. A fact. A law of nature, like gravity or fire. He didn't need to threaten her. His presence was the threat.

And yet... he let her rage. Let her burn. Let her unravel in front of him.

As if he knew she needed it.

As if that, too, was part of his plan.

Her voice cracked as she stumbled through more furious words, barely intelligible through tears. She cursed at him, at the room, at the collar around her throat, at the entire galaxy that had stolen her life away. She told him everything. That she was from Cronulla. That she'd managed a restaurant. That she had a mum in a nursing home, a dad who still remembered her name on good days, two older brothers who would kill anyone who hurt her.

She said it all, knowing he couldn't understand a word.

Maybe that made it easier.

Eventually, the words turned into sobs. Ugly, gasping, full-body sobs that she couldn't control. Her knees buckled slightly, and she caught herself, legs wide, shoulders hunched. She didn't collapse. But it was close.

And still, he didn't move.

She hated him.

God, she hated him.

And yet... what she hated more was the aching, bottomless need inside her.

The need to be held . To feel someone . A human body. A human face. Her mum's perfume. Her brother's teasing laugh. The smell of salt and suncream and hot asphalt from a Cronulla summer. Her flat. Her car. Her phone. Anything.

She would've given anything, in that moment, to feel familiar arms around her.

But all that stood in front of her was a wall of alien armor.

Cold. Unflinching. Terrible.

He watched her the way one might watch a weather system—observing the storm, waiting for the eye to pass.

And finally, it did.

Her breath came shallow. Her body sagged.

She was spent.

She didn't look up when he moved.

But she felt it.

The soft whirl of shifting plates. The whisper of movement across the sterile floor.

She looked up just as he reached her.

Both hands came forward—gloved this time. Black, armored, impersonal.

Not the warm, blue-skinned hand he'd touched her with before. There was no softness now.

He laid both hands gently—almost reverently—on her upper arms.

And even though the pressure was light, the meaning was unmistakable.

If you will not undress yourself... I will.

Her breath caught.

The collar at her throat pulsed with heat—not from the device, but from her own racing blood.

He didn't tighten his grip. Didn't pull.

He just stood there.

Waiting again.

The message was as clear as sunlight through glass.

There was still a choice.

But not for much longer.

CHAPTER 16

She broke.

Not with silence. Not with tears.

With fury .

Kyhin stood motionless as she burst, voice rising, ragged and raw. A torrent of sharp, tangled syllables poured from her lips in that strange, stuttering language of hers. No translation reached him. The collar she wore was passive—only for containment, not communication. Her meaning was locked inside her throat, sealed in a language he did not speak.

And still, he understood.

Emotion.

So much of it. Wild, unfiltered, spilling out of her like blood from a wound.

She was vibrating with it. Face flushed, limbs tight with tension, eyes bright with fury. Her hands clenched as if they wanted to strike. Her stance—defiant. She did not retreat. She stood in front of him and howled.

He didn't flinch.

If she had been Hvrok, she would already be dead.

He had ended warriors for less than the challenge now echoing from her lungs. Insubordination. Disrespect. Insolence. Among his kind, those were not words. They were death sentences.

And yet...

He watched her.

And felt no anger.

Only fascination.

The sounds she made—loud, chaotic, rapid-fire—were nonsensical. But they were also... vivid. Alive. She shouted in a voice too high-pitched for his hearing to fully relax into, a shrill burst of vowels and consonants that clashed against the sterile silence of the chamber like a weapon she didn't know how to use.

It was absurd.

It was undignified .

It was human.

And something inside him responded.

She had no understanding of her position. She didn't grasp the insult she offered him with every uncontrolled gesture, every word hurled in his direction. She didn't know the laws of the galaxy. That her life was his to claim or end. That she stood before a weapon wrapped in a name.

He had no obligation to tolerate her.

And yet, he did.

Because she was his . And because she didn't know better.

Not yet.

The scent of the trading station clung to her, sour and thick. Worse— Dukkar residue . It crawled over her skin, layered in the fabric of that offensively thin clothing. Kyhin could smell them—every hand that had passed too close, every trace of their sickly pheromones. The reek of the auction cage hadn't faded.

He wanted it gone.

The clothes. The scent. The memory of what had touched her before he had.

She needed to be cleansed. Stripped. Scrubbed raw if necessary.

That garment—if it could even be called that—offended him. Not because it exposed too much. But because it spoke of weakness. Of a world that did not value its own.

He would burn it the moment it left her body.

He imagined her washed, scented properly, dressed in garments of his choosing. Something dark. Sharp. Worthy.

She had not earned it.

But he would grant it anyway.

She raged on, body shaking with every breath. Her voice—a sound without shape, meaning, or logic—struck him like storm wind. Loud. Pointless. Beautiful.

She was trying to fight him.

With sound .

She didn't understand.

But she would.

This was a test.

For her, yes—but more so, for him.

Could he make her yield without breaking her?

Could he force her to accept what she could never defeat?

Could he hold this flickering, irrational fire in his grasp— without snuffing it out ?

He didn't move.

He didn't speak.

He simply waited.

She would tire. Eventually. And when she did... the lesson would begin.

Because she was human.

And soon, she would understand what that meant.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

CHAPTER 17

Her breath hitched, but she didn't move.

He stood before her, silent and armored, hands still resting on her arms like weights she couldn't shake. Not painful. Not cruel. Just inevitable .

Her skin crawled beneath the outfit she wore—not her own clothes, but the ones the Dukkar had forced onto her after the auction. Gauzy. Insultingly sheer. Meant to flaunt rather than protect. She hated every thread of it.

It didn't belong to her.

None of this did.

Her throat burned with defiance.

“If you want me naked so badly,” she whispered, voice hoarse, “then do it yourself .”

She thought, for one wild moment, that he might react. That maybe—just maybe—he'd respond like a person.

But no.

Only a tilt of his helmet. Barely a movement.

A silent agreement .

So be it.

Then he began.

His gloved fingers slid from her arms to the edge of the thin top she wore—more veil than fabric. He lifted it slowly, as if the sheer scrap were something heavy. Her breath caught as the cool air hit her skin, as the fabric peeled away from the salt of dried sweat and tension.

She didn't help him.

She didn't resist, either.

Let him do it .

Let him see what it meant to strip away the last thing someone could call theirs.

He dropped the garment without care. It landed in a soft pool on the floor. Worthless. Like trash.

Then his hands returned, lower this time.

To the loose skirt. The flimsy fabric the Dukkar had tied around her hips like a giftwrap for sale.

He started slow. Trying, perhaps, to maintain some illusion of control.

But it didn't last.

The cloth tangled.

And without hesitation—without patience—he tore.

The sound of it unraveling was like a gunshot in the quiet.

She flinched, just barely.

Another yank. Another rip. The last strips of fabric tore under the pressure of his hands, shredded like wet paper.

A gasp left her throat. She bit it back.

Not in pain. Not from injury.

But from the sheer, violent ease of it.

As if everything that had been forced on her—everything she hadn't chosen—meant less than nothing to him.

And then...

It was done.

She was naked.

Utterly exposed.

The air felt foreign on her skin. Too bright. Too sharp. Like light could cut.

She wanted to cover herself. To sink into the floor. To disappear.

But she didn't.

She stood.

Her spine rigid. Her fists clenched. Her body trembling—but upright.

He stood before her, still clad in full armor. Untouched. Unrevealed. She was the only one bared. The only one vulnerable. And he didn't even blink .

Not a whisper of flesh.

Not a glimpse of face.

Just black metal, towering and expressionless.

Her voice cracked as it left her.

“ Bastard. ”

He didn't react.

Didn't speak.

Didn't offer any sign that her nakedness meant anything to him at all.

He just watched.

And that—somehow—was worse than anything else.

CHAPTER 18

For the first time, he saw her.

Truly saw her.

Not clothed. Not half-shrouded in the filth of the trading station. Not flailing with fury or cloaked in pride.

Just her.

A human. Naked.

He had seen the species before, of course. In files, in containment, at auctions. He had studied their skeletal structures, their physiology, their limits. But no document, no scan, no datafeed could have prepared him for the reality of this human female standing before him now.

She was small. Soft. Round where Hvrok were angular. Vulnerable in a way that bordered on unthinkable. No armor. No carapace. No defensive ridges or protective scales. No claws. No fangs.

And no wings.

She was utterly defenseless.

And yet, she stood tall.

Defiant.

She was the most exposed thing in the galaxy right now, and she still glared at him, unflinching. As if she had power here.

Courage without armor. It defied logic.

He scanned her without moving, recording every curve, every detail. Her skin was a soft, warm brown, smooth and supple, unblemished except where faint marks from the collar and bindings remained. Her breasts were full and high, round and pert in a way he had not expected. Between her thighs, a delicate tuft of pale hair. Her legs, her belly, her hips—she had curves his kind did not possess. Not like this.

Hvrok females were built for combat. Hard muscle. Dense bone. Function over form.

But this human?

She was made for softness.

For touch.

Golden hair clung to her shoulders and neck, tousled and damp from sweat and tears. The color struck him anew— gold . Not pale like some humans, not yellowed or bleached, but rich, warm gold. Like starlight.

He'd never seen a shade like it in the breeding cages.

Rare.

Precious.

And beautiful.

The thought struck him unexpectedly. Beautiful .

He wanted to touch her.

Not just out of curiosity. Not even out of dominance.

He wanted to run his hands over her soft, strange skin. To trace the curves of her hips, to feel the shape of her breasts beneath his palms. To learn how she responded .

And then another thought followed, unbidden.

Would she feel pleasure, if I touched her?

The question stunned him.

He had considered her as a source of his pleasure, of course. It was natural. He was dominant. She was his. Her body existed to serve him—her resistance a phase, nothing more.

But her pleasure?

Why should that matter?

Why did the idea stir him?

Her scent distracted him again—a reminder of the station, of Dukkar filth and captivity and fear. It clung to her like oil. It offended him. She smelled wrong . Her body, her skin— his property —still carried traces of others.

That would not do.

And yet— still —she glared.

Her fists were clenched at her sides. Her chin tilted up. Her eyes blazing.

As if she wasn't naked.

As if she wasn't his .

How strange. How impossible these humans were.

And suddenly—shockingly—he felt it: the barest slip of his composure.

Interest had become something sharper. He was losing the cool distance he prided himself on, the detachment he used to remain unshakable.

He stepped back.

Out of reach.

Out of the spray zone.

Control. Reassert control.

He raised one hand and gave a quiet command in his native tongue.

The shower hissed to life.

Jets of calibrated mist burst from the wall, adjusting automatically to her physiology—cooler than a Hvrok would require, calibrated to her resting body

temperature. Clean, sterile, and softly pressurized.

Water cascaded over her body in sheets.

She startled—but then, slowly, her shoulders eased. Her eyes fluttered closed. She tilted her face into the stream and inhaled deeply, water gliding over her cheeks, down her neck, across her collarbones and breasts.

He watched it slide over the slope of her stomach, down the inside of her thighs.

For a moment—just one moment—she forgot him.

The anger slipped.

Her defiance paused.

And in its place was something simpler.

Peace.

Enjoyment.

Just a breath. A flicker of it. But he saw it.

And he felt it, deep in the pit of something unnameable inside him.

It fascinated him.

She could still find pleasure, even here. Even under his watch. Even after everything.

Perhaps... that was the key.

Perhaps pleasure would bring her to heel faster than fear.

Perhaps, if he learned what made her feel good , she would break more beautifully.

But for now, he simply watched her.

Small. Soft. Slick with water and defiance.

And to his own surprise, he thought...

Magnificent.

CHAPTER 19

The water had been warm .

That was the first surprise.

Not scalding. Not freezing. Just... pleasant . The kind of warmth that soaked into her skin, melted her tension for a moment, and made her forget where she was. Made her almost feel human again.

And there were scents. Not harsh chemical stinks or antiseptic sting, but soft, sweet, oddly familiar notes—something like vanilla and citrus, like the boutique shampoo she'd once splurged on during a particularly bad week. Liquids had dispensed themselves into her hands—some kind of soap, rich and foaming—before being rinsed away in another cascade of heat.

She'd washed herself.

Under his gaze.

She'd tried to pretend he wasn't there. Closed her eyes. Focused on the sensation of the water, the scent, the slippery glide of clean against her skin. She imagined her apartment back in Cronulla. Her little blue-tiled bathroom. Her shampoo caddy rusting in the corner. The window cracked open to let the salt air in.

For a heartbeat, for the space of one breath, it had worked.

She wasn't here. She wasn't naked and collared on a spaceship in some distant, impossible part of the galaxy. She was home .

And then the water stopped.

And the moment shattered.

A rush of warm air struck her from all sides—some kind of drying system. Efficient. Thorough. It left her skin tingling, her hair already dry and faintly scented like warmth and spice. Her body felt clean, weightless, a little too light.

She opened her eyes.

He was still there.

Waiting.

Watching.

Still clad in that same unrelenting black armor, still faceless, still him . And now, in his hands—something new.

A garment.

Blue.

Cobalt, almost. Rich and deep, a few shades darker than her eyes. Her favorite color.

Her heart skipped.

Coincidence. It had to be.

Her mouth tightened. He couldn't possibly know that . He couldn't. There was no way he could read her mind. Right?

She shivered.

No. He was just playing another game. That was what this was. Another careful move in his quiet little war. A psychological maneuver. Every gesture was a way to steer her where he wanted her.

He lifted the garment slightly in his hands.

A motion.

Come.

She hesitated, jaw clenching, but... what choice did she have?

She was naked . And he knew it grated on her. Knew it pierced deeper than any weapon could. That bastard. He used her own modesty, her humanity, against her.

Sylvia forced herself forward, one step at a time, each footfall like a surrender.

He didn't touch her immediately.

He waited until she was close. Then, he moved with the same slow precision she was beginning to recognize as his default. Deliberate. Exact. He draped the garment over her shoulders—not pulling, not forcing. Just... dressing her. As if she were a doll.

It wasn't just a wrap.

It was a dress .

The fabric—or whatever it was—settled against her body like liquid, then molded. It hugged her, smoothing over her arms, sliding down her torso, curving over her hips like it had been tailored just for her.

She gasped softly as it sealed at her back—not with zippers or buttons, but something seamless, the material drawing itself closed with a quiet hum. She didn't understand the mechanism. It didn't matter.

It was on.

Thick, but soft. Flexible. Somewhere between leather and silk, but neither. It moved with her, like a second skin. A beautiful second skin.

Her hands slid instinctively over the fabric. It was strange... but comfortable. It clung to her breasts, her waist, her thighs—but not indecently. Not like the Dukkar's outfit. It was, in its way, elegant .

She was still barefoot. The collar still hugged her throat.

And now this.

This dress.

She hated that it looked good on her.

Hated that it made her feel warm, and safe , even for a moment.

Because it wasn't a gift.

It was a leash.

A sign of ownership.

She belonged to him.

And he was dressing her accordingly.

Sylvia swallowed hard, forcing the lump down.

Then he turned, as if nothing had passed between them at all.

And she followed.

Clean. Clothed. And walking once more at the heels of the one who had taken everything from her.

CHAPTER 20

She followed.

Clothed now.

Clean. Scented. Wrapped in something far more fitting than the filth she'd arrived in.

He allowed himself a slow, measured breath—filtered through the helmet's respirator.

She looked good .

The sheath dress she wore—deep cobalt, sleek and fitted—was cut from mydhin fabric, sourced directly from the Dukkar archives. He'd selected it during the transaction, knowing they would offer such options. They always did. Outfitting the newly purchased was one of their many profit angles—an entire business in pleasing the owner with finely crafted garments, exotic accessories, curated scents.

This particular piece had caught his eye.

Sleek, understated, and elegant. It clung to the human's curves with a kind of reverent precision. Flexible, adaptive, soft enough to comfort her—but structured enough to remind her of her place. The color—a blue just darker than her eyes—pleased him deeply.

She was... pleasing to look at now.

It stirred something inside him that he didn't fully trust.

Her scent lingered faintly even through the helmet's filters. His respirator was tuned to suppress environmental distractions—smells, ambient air pressure, molecular noise. But her scent had pierced it. Subtle. Clean. Now laced with one of the Dukkar's neutral finishing oils—vanilla and something floral. But underneath that...

Her.

And it was intoxicating .

Dangerously so.

He kept his distance. Not out of fear.

Out of discipline.

His kind had highly sensitive olfactory systems. A quirk of Hvrok biology that made emotion, pheromone, and chemical fluctuation dangerously potent in close proximity. It was why most of his kind did not go unmasked for long in the company of others.

His armor stayed on.

His helmet stayed on.

It was the only way to think clearly.

He led her through the Lyxai —his ship. His personal stealth cruiser. No crew. No surveillance systems beyond the ones he personally controlled. Every mechanism was manual. Every circuit calibrated to his patterns alone. He flew it, maintained it, lived inside it.

Alone.

It had been that way for many cycles. He preferred it. Others were a distraction. No one slowed him down. No one questioned his methods. No one contaminated the air.

And now...

Now there was her .

He glanced back once—just once—and noted again her posture: upright, alert, taut with silent fury. That defiance again, folded tight now into her frame. She was no longer lashing out, no longer screaming. But it was there beneath the surface, like a second pulse.

He found it endearing .

She could be controlled, yes—but she could also learn . Her emotional outbursts were chaotic, unpredictable. But once spent, she regrouped. She adapted. That was... smarter than he'd expected.

Perhaps she was more intelligent than the average human.

He paused at the sealed door to her quarters. The corridor was dim here—lit by narrow lines of bioluminescence embedded in the walls. Quiet. Secure. These rooms had no windows. They locked from the outside.

He placed his palm against the panel. The door slid open with a whisper.

A single bed. Sanitation unit. Nutrition module. Climate controls set to Terran standard. No sharp objects. No access to navigation. The necessary accommodations.

He gestured.

“ Vral'in seh. ”

You stay here.

She didn't move.

He waited.

Then pointed—more firmly this time—toward the room's interior.

“ Vral'in. ”

She understood the tone, if not the words. She obeyed. Slowly. Resentfully. The tension in her spine was visible with every step she took inside. Her bare feet made no sound on the soft flooring. The dress clung to her like a second skin as she walked.

He watched her. Studied the line of her shoulders, the set of her jaw. That stubborn tilt to her chin. She was furious again.

Good.

It meant she still had fire left.

He stayed in the doorway, not following her in. Not yet.

He couldn't.

The scent of her clung too close now. Even suppressed, even filtered—it stirred something low and hot inside him. Something unwelcome. Something distracting .

His hand flexed at his side, fingers curling into a fist.

Control yourself.

He gave a final command—this time with a tone that carried weight, unmistakable.

Then the door sealed between them.

He stood there for a moment longer in the corridor, alone again.

Only... it didn't feel like it used to.

CHAPTER 21

The door sealed with a hiss.

She was inside.

Alone. Contained. His .

He remained outside.

At first, simply to listen. Just for a moment.

But then, he heard it.

At first, it was nothing. Shifting fabric. The soft patter of bare feet on composite flooring. A breath.

Then another.

But this one hitched.

Strange , soft sounds followed: fragmented, rhythmic. Gasping. Moaning.

He stilled.

His body went still in the way only a Hvrok warrior could still—utterly locked, breath suspended, senses sharpened to surgical focus.

What was she doing?

A quiet wail slipped through the sealed door.

Then sniffing.

Then—moaning again. But not like before.

He did not believe it was pleasure. No, this was something else. Something deeper. Sorrowful .

The sound grew louder. Raw, ragged.

Then softened. Faded.

Until at last, it stopped.

He stood unmoving, pulse steady, trying to make sense of the storm he'd just heard from the other side of the wall.

Was that... sadness?

Was that what sadness sounded like, to a human?

He'd never heard one mourn like that.

Not even on the auction floor, where bodies were sold, minds broken, lives extinguished by bids and numbers. He had seen them scream. Seen them rage. Even seen tears.

But this?—

This hurt .

It carried a resonance that touched something he could not define.

She wasn't in danger. He would have known.

She was not afraid.

Not anymore.

She was grieving.

Processing.

And suddenly, impossibly, part of him wanted to go to her .

To open the door. Step inside. Place a hand on her shoulder. Speak in low tones, even if she would not understand them.

Comfort her.

The word lodged in his chest like a foreign object.

No creature had ever compelled him toward such a gesture. Not comrade. Not ally. Not lover.

No one.

And yet...

His hand drifted to the panel.

No.

He clenched his jaw.

This was not how it was supposed to be.

He was her master, not her solace. He would not harm her—but he would not coddle her, either. She would learn that discipline and obedience could bring stability. Safety.

He was not cruel.

But he was firm .

And still, the thought returned?—

Go to her.

Touch her. Let her know she is not alone.

He stared at the door, caught in the moment.

And then?—

The comm alert chimed sharply in his helmet.

A priority code.

He blinked. Refocused.

A flashing sigil strobed across his visor.

Kroll.

Pursuit vessels. Now .

He exhaled once through the respirator, purging the soft scent of her from his filters.

The air turned cold again. Sterile. Sharpened by the scent of duty.

He turned.

And stalked toward the cockpit.

CHAPTER 22

The cockpit sealed with a soft hiss behind him, and Kyhin moved with precision, every step measured, every motion honed by instinct and repetition. The air inside was cool, filtered, laced with the sterile scent of alloy and fuel.

He seated himself in the command cradle and pressed his palm to the console.

The holo flared to life, an array of translucent symbols and three-dimensional projections rising from the interface like ghost-light. Enemy signals blinked red in a wide arc behind the Lyxai, converging fast. Kroll interceptors. A dozen of them.

He had been found.

It could only mean one thing.

The Orokin—the bastards who had paid him to eliminate Ambassador Erkin—had sold him out. Leaked his location to the Kroll for a higher price. Kyhin had always known the Orokin were honorless profiteers, but he hadn't expected betrayal this soon—not while he was still within the same galaxy as the trading station.

He clenched one gloved fist on the throttle lever.

No matter.

He had no intention of dying today.

The Lyxai wasn't a warship—it was a stealth cruiser, designed for infiltration, extraction, and evasion. Light, fast, and nearly invisible in the right hands. His hands.

He disengaged auto-navigation and took full manual control. The ship responded instantly, humming beneath him like a living thing.

The chase began.

He pushed the ship into a dive, hurtling toward the fractured terrain of a nearby asteroid field. It was a gamble—raw metal and drifting debris could shred them just as easily as a plasma beam—but it was better than open space.

The ship rocked as it twisted between spinning rocks, threading a razor-thin path through the chaos. The Kroll followed, relentless. Adaptive. He could feel them tightening formation behind him like a vice.

He issued a vocal override.

“Divert all power to the hyperdrive. Initiate charge.”

A confirmation tone pulsed in his helm.

The hyperdrive began to warm—its systems drawing energy from every reserve, every auxiliary system, lights dimming around him as the ship channeled everything into escape.

It would only take a few heartbeats.

But it felt like eternity .

Then...

Impact.

The ship shuddered violently as a plasma beam slammed into the aft hull. Sparks burst from the interface. Alarms screamed.

He gritted his teeth. Rolled the ship to port. Another blast grazed the ventral fins—this one harder, sharper. Shields failed. Warning sigils bloomed across the holo.

Damage sustained.

Too much.

Another hit, and the core might crack.

Come on.

The hyperdrive neared ignition. The charging sequence was seconds from completion.

A final burst of pursuit fire streaked past the cockpit—so close it singed the outer plating.

Then—

The console flashed.

Hyperdrive: READY .

He slammed the trigger.

The Lyxai lurched forward as hyperspace engaged. Space twisted. Light bent. Time distorted.

And in a blink, the Kroll were gone .

He exhaled, slow and deep.

They'd escaped.

For now.

But as the ship bled out of hyperspace, returning to normal speed, the holo filled with new alerts. Critical systems damaged. Hull integrity compromised. Cooling systems at maximum output.

He scanned the readout with quick, precise movements.

The Lyxai was wounded.

Severely.

He couldn't outpace their pursuit a second time in this state.

No choice.

He called up the star chart. Filtered for habitable worlds.

One option pulsed into focus.

He called up the star chart. Filtered for habitable worlds.

One option pulsed into focus.

Anakris.

A shadowed, storm-laced world on the edge of the Korth Expanse.

Dense atmosphere. Harsh terrain. Hostile.

Inhabited.

The Nalgar.

He knew them.

Blood-drinkers. Warlike. Highly dangerous. A species built for endurance and battle, known for tribal hierarchies, brutal internal conflicts, and a taste for violence that bordered on ritual.

They wouldn't welcome him.

But there was a chance they wouldn't question his presence, so long as he didn't provoke them.

And Anakris had breathable air, fresh water, and enough obscurity to disappear into for a time.

He set the course.

As the Lyxai turned toward the dark, mist-wreathed planet, Kyhin allowed himself one last thought of the human girl still sealed in her quarters.

She had no idea what kind of world they were descending upon.

Neither did he.

Not really.

He set the course with a final command.

The ship turned toward the dark blue orb in the distance.

And Kyhin leaned back in the seat, his mind already drifting to the human girl sealed in quarters behind him.

She would be afraid. Confused. Perhaps injured from the impacts.

But alive.

And now they were heading toward a world just as dangerous as what they'd left behind.

And maybe, he thought grimly, even more dangerous still.

It didn't matter. He was Hvrok, and not just any Hvrok.

He was Iskari —an elite warrior, feared throughout the galaxies, and... quite possibly the last of his kind.

Amongst the Iskari, he'd developed a reputation for single-mindedness, for stubbornness. Iskari were tough and fiercely independent by training and nature, and of them all, he was one of the most feared.

That's why the ruling council had always chosen him for the most dangerous missions, sending him to the remotest worlds, where resourcefulness and ruthlessness were necessary for survival—and success.

Now, once again, his skills and strength would be put to the test.

This was what he'd been made for. To defend. To kill.

Once he was on the ground, he had no doubts about his ability to survive—and protect his human.

But he had to get them there first.

CHAPTER 23

She lay on the bed-thing, staring at the unbroken stretch of metal ceiling above her.

The room was quiet. Too quiet. No hum of traffic. No soft rustle of trees outside a window. Just silence and the occasional low pulse of the ship's systems—a mechanical heartbeat she couldn't decipher.

The dress the alien had given her clung to her like a second skin. Too soft, too warm, too damn comfortable—which only made her angrier. She hated how good it felt against her skin. Hated that it didn't scratch or constrict or suffocate. It moved when she moved. Shifted like liquid.

She wanted to tear it off just to feel like she had a choice.

The walls were seamless. No door handle, no control panel she could see. No windows. Just smooth curves and pale lighting, like the inside of some quiet, endless machine.

She was alone.

Locked away like a possession.

Owned.

Her stomach turned at the thought of him—that towering, armored figure who radiated danger and control without speaking a single word. He hadn't hit her. Hadn't

even raised a hand. And compared to the other creatures—the ones who'd ripped her from Earth, who'd pawed at her, appraised her, auctioned her—he'd treated her well.

But that didn't mean he saw her as equal .

Not even close.

No attempt to communicate. No gesture of understanding. Just silent commands and that terrifying stare behind his helm. He wanted obedience, nothing more. Just another object to carry out his will.

Sylvia clenched her fists against the bed. Anger pulsed under her skin, stronger than fear now.

Fine. You want a fight? You'll get one.

She wouldn't let this break her.

She would adapt. Learn. Endure. That's what she'd always done. She was pragmatic. Rational. Grounded. Even if her world had cracked in half and spilled her into the stars, she could survive this.

There are aliens. Whole civilizations. It's all real.

It still felt impossible. But it was happening.

She would need to find a way to communicate. To show him she was more than just a body. More than something to be fed and dressed and controlled.

She would change the game.

Somehow.

She was just beginning to feel the first flicker of determination reassemble itself in her chest when the ship shuddered.

The bed beneath her vibrated. The floor lurched. A deep, groaning sound echoed through the walls like something ancient being torn apart.

She sat up— “What the ? —”

The ship jerked , hard.

Then—

The bed came to life.

Seamless restraints emerged from the frame, wrapping around her wrists, her ankles, her waist. Smooth and silent. Alien tech. No sharp edges. No locks she could see.

Just grip .

Firm. Absolute.

She screamed. “ Hey! No—no, no, no! Let me go! What the hell is this?*”

No answer.

The restraints held her tight.

Not painfully—but completely. She couldn’t even twist her wrists.

Was this him? Did he do this?

But no—he hadn't appeared. No masked figure. No silent motion through the door. She was alone.

Then why the restraints?

The ship groaned again. Somewhere above, something boomed . A distant impact. Metal rang with the sound of stress—of shields failing, maybe.

“ Oh god— ” She thrashed, panic slicing through her thoughts. “ Is this how I die? ”

No one answered.

She was alone. Strapped to an alien bed. No idea what was happening. No idea if the ship was going to rip apart. No idea if that monstrous, armored brute even knew she was restrained like this.

She'd been angry.

Now, she was terrified.

She pulled against the restraints—futile, desperate.

Her voice cracked as she cried out again, “ Please... someone... ”

But there was no one.

Just the tremble of the ship.

And the sickening knowledge that she had no control at all.

CHAPTER 24

The Lyxai was dying.

Smoke hissed from a cracked console as Kyhin wrestled with the controls, his armored hands flying over the interface, rerouting systems that were collapsing faster than he could stabilize them. The cockpit lights flickered and surged in violent bursts, casting jagged shadows over the curved black metal.

Outside, Anakris filled the viewport: looming, massive, hostile. Its thick atmosphere churned with violet and grey storm clouds, and below, the land was a cracked, volcanic maze of ash-black stone and jagged mountains. The red sun was sinking fast, its last angry light bleeding across the sky like the end of a war.

The holo screamed warnings: structural failure, engine core breach, atmospheric re-entry too steep.

He ignored them all.

The right engine was aflame. Plasma residue had eaten through the primary shield array. Emergency thrusters sputtered, then failed altogether.

He could feel the ship slipping from his control.

He growled, deep and low, locking the auxiliary dampeners and kicking the stabilizers into override. It jolted the ship hard, metal groaning, lights flaring, everything shaking as though the vessel itself was trying to tear apart in midair.

Too fast. Too hot. Too low.

He fired the reverse thrusters—nothing.

“Eject,” he barked, slamming the emergency command.

With a deafening crack , the burning engine detached, spiraling in a trail of fire. Seconds later, it exploded high above the atmosphere, a burst of light and debris that momentarily lit up the sky like a second sun.

Even without the failing engine, the descent was brutal.

They clipped the edge of a mountain, tearing through rock, ripping hull plating in a scream of metal. Sparks and smoke filled the cockpit. The ship pitched hard to the side—Kyhin slammed against the seat restraints as alarms wailed through his helm.

He gritted his teeth and dragged the Lyxai back under control, pulling her nose up with a force that strained the entire frame.

Outside, the terrain rushed up at them—black cliffs, narrow ravines, sharp stone spires reaching like claws.

There was no time to think.

Only act .

He rotated the ship into a controlled spin—blades of stone shearing along the hull—and aimed for the flattest surface he could find: a rocky basin wedged between two cliffs. He lowered landing struts manually, half-melted mechanisms groaning in protest.

And then— impact.

The ship slammed into the ground with bone-shattering force, skidding, dragging, and bucking against the earth. Metal screamed. Fire burst from a ruptured panel. One of the forward struts snapped, and the entire vessel listed hard to the side, almost flipping.

But it held.

Barely.

Smoke curled into the cockpit. Systems went dark.

The only sound was the deep, pulsing moan of the cooling core as the ship finally—mercifully —settled into stillness.

Silence.

Kyhin remained strapped in place, muscles tense, heart pounding with a rhythm that matched the dim emergency lights. Through the haze of smoke and the cracked forward glass, he could see Anakris in full now—its dark surface stretching into a hellish, mist-wreathed expanse. Thunder rolled in the distance.

The Lyxai was wrecked.

Maybe beyond repair.

And now they were on Anakris.

He knew the world by reputation alone— Nalgar territory . Blood-drinkers. Warlike. Highly dangerous. Creatures that moved in packs and tore apart anything they didn't

recognize.

He had no illusions.

If they'd seen his descent, they would come. Curiosity first. Hunger after.

But let them come.

He would destroy them if they stepped one foot near his ship.

Near her .

His thoughts turned sharply to his human. Still locked in her quarters. Still strapped to the emergency restraints. Fragile. Soft. Her fear would be rising now, sharp and hot, pouring into the air like a signal flare.

She was utterly defenseless.

But she was his .

And he would kill anything that touched her.

She would be frightened. She would cry. But he would go to her. He would comfort her. Touch her gently. Let her know: she had nothing to fear —because the most dangerous thing on this world had already claimed her.

He unstrapped himself, rising from the command cradle as the floor groaned under the strain.

He would send a signal. Contact his most trusted. Offer a fortune for retrieval and silence.

But until then...

They would survive .

And no one— no one —would take her from him.

CHAPTER 25

The world ended in a scream of metal.

One moment, she was curled on the alien bed, fuming, muttering oaths under her breath. The next, the ship convulsed around her as if it had struck something immense and unforgiving at full speed.

The restraints clamped tighter.

Not crushing. Not painful. But firm—adaptively firm. Flexible enough to shift with her body as it jolted, hard enough to keep her in place while the room around her howled .

The lights strobed violently, red and white, flickering as the bed jerked with the force of the impact. Somewhere beyond the walls, she heard a deep, grinding sound, like something ancient being torn in half. The ceiling quaked above her, groaning. The air felt thick. Too thick.

She couldn't see anything. Couldn't do anything. She just lay there, bound, helpless, while the room shook around her.

Her heart was trying to claw its way out of her chest.

We're crashing. This is a crash.

Her breath hitched. “ Shit! ”

She twisted against the restraints, instinct driving her even though part of her— damn it all —knew they were the only reason she wasn't being flung across the room like a rag doll. The smooth alien harness flexed with her, held her tight, kept her spine aligned as the ship hit... something.

It slammed hard. She screamed.

It was deafening.

And then, all of a sudden, it stopped.

Not all at once. Not cleanly. The ship groaned to a halt like a dying beast, metal moaning, lights flickering out, and then...

Silence.

A silence so total, it made her ears ring.

Sylvia lay there, panting. Eyes wide, heart pounding hard enough to hurt.

Did we land?

Was this an accident? A system failure? An attack?

What the hell is happening out there?

She didn't know. Couldn't see. Couldn't move .

Panic began to bloom.

He hasn't come.

The armored brute. Her captor. Her silent, shadow-wrapped tormentor.

Is he alive?

A coldness sank into her limbs.

What if he wasn't?

What if the ship had crash-landed on some hostile alien world and he —the only thing that could keep her alive out here—was dead? What if he'd been thrown from the ship? Or trapped somewhere? Or...

What if he abandoned her?

What if no one ever finds her?

Terror swelled like a tide. Her throat tightened. Her breath shortened, coming in erratic gasps. Too shallow. Too fast. Her chest heaved, lungs screaming.

“No,” she panted, writhing in the restraints, every instinct kicking into survival mode. “Let me out—let me out! ”

She thrashed. Screamed. The sounds bounced back at her from the metal walls, too small, too contained. She was suffocating.

She didn't want to die here. Not like this . Not on some alien ship, locked in a cage, alone.

Her breath broke down into messy, primal sobs. Her hands clenched into fists. Her muscles trembled. Her skin flushed hot, then cold.

No one knows where I am.

No one is coming.

And just as her thoughts reached the ragged edge of total collapse...

He appeared.

The wall to her left rippled open as seamlessly as water. No sound, no warning.

Just there .

The alien.

Still armored. Still silent. Winged and as intimidating as ever.

And... alive.

She stared at him, trembling, her chest still rising and falling in short, panicked bursts.

And without a word...

The restraints released.

They hissed softly, folding away into the bed frame, leaving her flushed and shaking, her limbs too heavy to move.

She didn't say anything.

She couldn't .

She just looked at him: this silent, hulking shadow standing in the doorway of her prison.

And for the first time... her anger didn't surface. Not straight away, anyway, even though she still thought he was an asshole.

Instead, what came before it was raw, unfiltered relief.

He was alive.

And for better or worse...

That meant she might survive too.

CHAPTER 26

She bolted upright the second the restraints released.

The hiss of their retreat barely registered before she was on her feet, heart slamming in her chest, her entire body tight with aftershock. Her breath still came in gasps, too fast, too shallow, her limbs aching from the strain of being held down.

He just stood there.

Motionless.

Silent.

Like a statue carved from black metal and nightmare.

The fear, the helplessness, the confinement... it all snapped. The tight coil of control she'd held since the moment she'd woken up in this hell... it finally unraveled, shredding into something hotter. Wilder.

She screamed at him.

“You asshole! You fucking bastard! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

She knew he didn't understand her. Didn't care. He made no move. No sound.

“Do you enjoy this? Is this fun for you?! Huh?! Is it?!” Her voice cracked, throat raw.

He didn't flinch.

Didn't even tilt his head.

He just stood there. Unmoving. Watching.

It was the same as always. That silent, suffocating stare. The control. The cold.

Something snapped .

She charged him.

Before she could think—before the part of her that knew better could catch up—her fists were beating against his chest.

Hard.

Again. And again. And again .

She pounded at him, her palms slapping against the matte black armor with a useless, hollow thud.

“Say something! Say something! ”

She struck him again, harder. The jolt shot pain through her wrist. She didn't care.

“Fucking do something! Don't you have a voice? Don't you have emotions? What the fuck are you... a robot?”

Another hit.

Ow.

Pain bloomed, sharp and immediate, radiating down her forearm.

She gasped, her momentum faltering.

Then he spoke.

Just one word.

Low. Resonant. Strange.

Alien.

But somehow... she understood .

Stop.

And then, she saw his hands.

His bare hands.

Large, blue-skinned, six-fingered. The dark armor was gone from them—she hadn't even seen him remove the gauntlets. His fingers were tipped with black, claw-like nails that should have been terrifying.

But the way he touched her...

His hands closed around her wrists with slow precision. Not rough. Not violent. Firm.

She couldn't move.

But she wasn't hurt.

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared down at his hands—his real hands—holding her like something precious instead of dangerous.

The heat of his skin soaked through her own.

The strength in his grip was immense . She couldn't even twitch.

But it was the gentleness that undid her.

He wasn't crushing her. Not even close. He was... restraining her. Quietly. Calmly.

And for the first time...

She stilled.

She stopped screaming.

Her fury collapsed in on itself, folding beneath the shock, the exhaustion, the weight of too many feelings she hadn't had time to process.

That was a breakdown for the ages. Considering everything she'd gone through, it was perhaps too tame.

She should have been wilder, more furious.

If not for him.

She looked up at him.

He still hadn't moved.

He didn't utter another word.

But his touch...

It said more than his silence.

And Sylvia, for the first time since she'd been taken, felt...

Strange.

And it occurred to her that he might not be all bad.

CHAPTER 27

He held her until the storm passed.

Until the trembling in her limbs faded. Until her breathing slowed from panicked gasps to shallow, ragged exhales. Until her fists, so pathetically small against his chest plate, stopped trying to strike him and simply... hung there, limp and useless.

Such an extreme reaction.

It was almost disturbing to witness.

He had seen fear before—had smelled it, tasted it in the air of battlefields and auction houses alike. But this—this messy, unfiltered release —was something else. Something uniquely, maddeningly human .

A collapse of control.

At first, he was repulsed. Disgusted, even.

That a being could come apart so easily. That she had so little mastery over her own emotions. Over her own mind.

Weakness.

Feebleness.

But then...

He didn't stop her.

He should have.

Anyone else who dared touch him—strike him—would have been broken for the offense. Decapitated, even.

But this wasn't anyone else.

It was her .

And something inside him had registered her actions not as a threat, but as a flare of desperation.

She had needed to burn.

And he had let her.

He didn't know why.

He still didn't.

But he could see now—her fear was more than just noise. She had no knowledge of the crash. No knowledge of where they were. No understanding of the ship, or the planet, or even him . She had been strapped down in darkness while the world tore itself apart around her.

Perhaps... this was what fear did to such creatures.

He didn't have to like it, but now that it had passed, she was different.

Calmer.

Quieter.

Her limbs trembled faintly beneath his grip, but she didn't pull away. Her skin was warm. Her pulse fluttered through the slender bones of her wrists. And through his filters, he caught another trace of her scent—faint, but persistent.

Still tinged with fear.

But beneath that...

Something else.

Something sweet .

She was beautiful, in her strange, alien way. Golden-haired. Pale-skinned. Those eyes, unnervingly vivid—a kind of blue that shimmered with nuance, softer than his own but no less striking.

He had never touched anything like her.

She was soft . Yielding. Her form was curves and heat and fragility.

And now... she was letting him hold her.

Not resisting. Not pushing away. Not screaming.

He found he liked it... more than he should.

His hands tightened ever so slightly around her wrists, not in dominance, not in warning—but in contact . A silent reassurance. He didn't know if she could interpret it that way, but... she didn't flinch.

A part of him wanted more.

To remove the rest of his armor.

To remove his helm .

To look at her with nothing between them.

But that... that would be dangerous.

He couldn't afford it. Not now. Not here.

Everything had changed.

They were on Anakris—a hostile, predatory world. The ship was damaged. Resources were limited. The Nalgar could discover them at any moment. And the Kroll might still be hunting.

Survival came first.

He released her wrists slowly, deliberately. Her arms lowered, heavy from the emotional crash. She looked at him now with eyes not filled with fury—but something else. Uncertainty. Wariness. A tremble of trust, perhaps, though he dared not name it.

He would need her to stay calm.

While he left to scout.

Food. Water. Salvageable materials. The Lyxai 's reserves would not last. And until help came—if it did come—they were alone.

He would have to lock her in again.

It was not cruelty.

It was necessity.

He could not risk her panicking, hurting herself, damaging what remained of the ship's infrastructure. He could not take her with him either—not yet. She would be a target, an anchor.

And if the Nalgar found her alone...

No.

They wouldn't.

Because they wouldn't touch her.

He would rip the planet apart before he let that happen.

But she needed to understand.

She needed to trust him.

And he... needed to communicate.

His gaze lingered on her face for one final moment.

I will protect you, he thought. Even if you don't know it yet.

But this time, he didn't leave her behind.

Instead, he released her fully, stepped back, and gestured for her to follow.

To come with him.

He led her through the corridor in silence, toward the cockpit—toward the heart of the ship—where he would try, for the first time, to show her something . To see if the nav system could translate even the barest scrap of information—just enough to help her understand.

And as they walked, he heard everything.

Her footsteps—soft, hesitant, barely audible against the corridor floor. The faint rustle of her strange, body-clinging garment. The shallow rasp of her breathing as she followed behind him, quiet but alert.

She was afraid. He could smell it.

But she still followed.

He supposed, for such a defenseless creature, she was... brave. Not suicidal. Not reckless. But not broken either. Even now, collared, captured, and stranded on a hostile world, she kept herself upright. Kept moving. Kept watching him with those wary, jewel-toned eyes.

It was unexpected.

And strangely... admirable.

Under different circumstances—during the predictability of a quiet, stable journey—he would have begun her conditioning already. Not force, but training. Gentle correction. Controlled exposure to his expectations. Letting her adapt slowly, until they reached Ivokka—his home.

A planet forgotten by most. Wild. Unspoiled.

Where his pod-dwelling waited among the verdant meadows and low stone hills. Fortified. Hidden.

Safe.

But now... none of that mattered.

Now they were marooned on Anakris .

He needed her to comply. But not blindly. Not out of fear. That would only invite panic later, when he wasn't there to restrain it.

She had to understand .

No running.

No defiance.

And above all, no fear that would drive her into the wilds where the Nalgar would scent her blood before the snow even stopped falling.

A low growl vibrated from his chest, audible only to himself beneath the helm.

This was ridiculous . Unplanned. Inefficient.

She wasn't supposed to matter this much.

They reached the cockpit.

The door opened with a dry hiss, revealing a dim command center lit by the pulsing amber of damage alerts. Holo projections flickered across the console—power failures, depleted reserves, a dozen systems offline.

He stepped aside to let her enter, watching the way she hovered near the threshold.

Then she stepped forward... and saw it.

The window.

The world outside.

Snow-swept peaks stretched endlessly in all directions, jagged mountains rising like white knives. Mist coiled between the cliffs, heavy and slow, and through it, the red sun sank low on the horizon, casting a blood-tinged glow across the landscape. It bled through the vapor like an open wound, staining the snow in shades of rust and crimson.

The light was dying.

Shadows lengthened across the cockpit. The sky deepened into black and violet, swallowing the sun one slow heartbeat at a time.

Darkness was coming. Night on a blood-soaked planet.

He heard the breath leave her lungs.

“Crashed,” she whispered. The word was bleak. Resigned.

He didn’t understand the syllables, but he understood the tone.

She got it.

That scrap of comprehension stirred something deep inside him.

He motioned toward the nav, trying to show her the internal scan. Limited radius. Energy grid failing. Too much interference. No precise coordinates. No clear knowledge of where they were on Anakris, or how close they might be to Nalgar territory.

He needed food. Water. Heat sources. He needed to scout. Soon.

He turned to her again, gesturing to the seat by the wall. Then, he placed his palm against his chest, then against hers—slowly, deliberately.

Stay.

You will be safe here.

He didn’t know her word for safe, but he hoped she would feel it.

Her expression shifted. Still cautious. Still tense.

But... she nodded .

A small motion.

A flicker of understanding.

And that— that —made his body react in a way he hadn't expected.

The scent of her had changed again. Softer. Warmer. And even through the mask, it coiled into his awareness like heat curling through ice. His pupils narrowed. His hand curled into a fist.

His cock twitched.

He stiffened.

No.

This was not the time.

But her nearness. Her scent. That flicker of comprehension, her willingness to trust him, even just a little ...

It was maddening.

Kyhin decided. When they were out of this mess, he would certainly use her for pleasure.

He stepped back from her, forcing space between them.

He would have to hide the ship. Camouflage it against the rock and ice. Lock down the access hatches. If the Nalgar were nearby, they would smell metal, power, warmth. Her.

He would have to move fast.

But first, he had to ensure she wouldn't panic again.

She had to be calm when he returned.

And if that meant showing her more, teaching her, touching her to soothe instead of command... he would do it.

CHAPTER 28

He touched her.

Not with a shove or a grip, but with a hand. His bare hand.

Warm. Heavy. Pressed gently between her shoulder blades as he guided her down the corridor, back toward the place he'd locked her in before.

The contact sent a jolt straight through her spine.

Not pain.

Not fear.

But something stranger.

She shivered. Goosebumps rippled along her arms despite the ambient warmth of the ship. Her breath caught in her throat. Because there was something in the way he touched her: firm, but not cruel. Gentle, but not quite tender.

It wasn't affection.

It was control.

He wanted her to walk.

And she did.

Because the pressure of his hand said she should, and it told her—quietly, unmistakably—that if she didn't, there would be consequences.

She wasn't ready to test what those might be.

Besides, she wasn't fighting him anymore.

Not right now.

How could she? After what she'd seen? A world of jagged snowcaps, firelight bleeding through mist, and the realization that they were stranded. There were no roads, no ships in sight. No help.

No hope.

Just her. And him .

She couldn't even speak the language, didn't even know what planet they were on until he'd shown her. She was completely, helplessly cut off from everything she knew. Every flicker of resistance inside her had nothing to hold on to.

And so she walked.

She could feel him behind her. Hear his footfalls. Sense the weight of his presence—tall, armored, silent. But his hands... his hands were bare.

Why?

She hadn't seen his fingers without gloves since he'd first collared her. Six-fingered.

Deep blue. Hard but strangely beautiful. Alien and terrifying—and yet, somehow, reassuring. They'd held her earlier when she broke down. Held her like she was something he didn't want to break .

How did he know?

That she needed that ?

Not commands. Not glares. Not cold silence.

Just... contact.

It was the only thing grounding her right now.

The door to her quarters slid open with that low mechanical hiss. The room looked the same—windowless, smooth, inhuman—but her perception had changed. She understood now. She wasn't just being kept in here to be controlled.

This was protection.

A cage, yes.

But one meant to keep the monsters out .

She stepped inside.

He followed.

She turned, expecting him to retreat, to vanish again behind that seamless door the way he always did. But he didn't.

He stayed.

His hands were still bare.

She stared at them for a moment, irrationally fixated on the shape of them. The lines. The dark nails. The fact that he hadn't re-gloved them. That he hadn't stepped away the moment he could.

That meant something.

Didn't it?

She couldn't ask. Couldn't speak to him in any meaningful way. But she clung to that detail like it mattered. Like it proved he wasn't just a brute in armor, but something more.

Something that could learn .

He looked at her—no movement, no sound. Just that intense, unreadable gaze behind the helm.

And still... he didn't leave.

A heartbeat passed.

Then another.

And somehow, in that strange, tense silence, she didn't feel afraid.

Not exactly.

Because he wasn't leaving her alone.

And maybe... just maybe... that was what she needed most right now.

She stood there, breath caught in her throat, as he remained in the doorway.

Watching her.

Still helmeted. Still unreadable.

And then... he stepped closer.

Her instinct was to retreat—but she didn't. Couldn't. Her feet stayed rooted, her muscles taut, her mind caught in that strange limbo between apprehension and something she couldn't name.

And then... he touched her.

Not roughly.

Not to control her, but to comfort her.

His hands—bare, warm, alien—rose to her upper arms and stroked down in a slow, measured pass. Again. Then again. Smooth. Gentle. His fingers spread lightly as they moved over the soft fabric of her dress, barely pressing, like a whisper across her skin.

It wasn't sexual.

It wasn't forceful.

It was... unfamiliar.

And yet, somehow, it was so clearly intentional .

A gesture of reassurance.

Of care.

Her body tensed in response, unsure how to interpret this. Her first instinct was indignation.

What did he think this was?

Some kind of manipulation?

Did he think he could tame her with a few well-placed strokes, like she was a frightened kitten and he was trying to coax her into purring?

She clenched her jaw. Her pride bristled.

But the fire didn't last.

Because reality came crashing back: the cold image of the cockpit, the broken systems, the frozen mountains, and the bleeding sun vanishing into storm-misted cliffs.

This wasn't Earth.

And he wasn't human.

He could have locked her away again without a second thought.

He could have ignored her, as he had at the beginning.

But he hadn't.

Instead, he'd shown her the damage. Let her see the world outside. Tried— actually tried —to make her feel safe.

And now... he was touching her like she was something that mattered. Something worth soothing.

Her breath shuddered in her chest, emotion knotting behind her ribs.

She didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Just let herself feel the quiet heat of his hands as they passed over her arms once more. Not clinging. Not claiming. Just being there.

Present.

And when he finally drew back, she looked up at him.

The helmet remained in place. No face. No expression. Just that sleek, black mask and the low sound of his breath behind the filters.

She nodded, her voice low.

"I'll wait," she said softly, knowing he wouldn't understand the words.

"But whatever it is you need to do out there, you have to come back."

Because despite everything—despite the terror, the fury, the helplessness—he was her only hope now.

Her last thread of connection to anything stable. Anything alive .

He didn't respond.

Didn't speak.

Didn't even nod.

He just turned.

Moved toward the door in that same impossibly smooth, quiet way, faster than any human had a right to move, despite all that armor.

And then... he disappeared through the wall.

Gone, like a shadow swallowed by silence.

She stared at the seamless surface he'd vanished through, her heart thudding in the quiet.

She was alone again.

Trapped.

But this time, it was different, because now, she wasn't just holding onto fear.

She was holding onto certainty .

That he'd come back, and that as long as he did, she would be safe.

“You'd better fucking come back, metalhead,” she whispered, both hating him and appreciating him.

And for the first time, she wondered— really wondered—what he looked like underneath that sinister black mask.

CHAPTER 29

The wind over the mountains bit at his armor, thin and sharp, cutting through the seams like teeth. The air was colder here than he preferred—but he welcomed it. Cold sharpened the senses. Heightened focus. Made everything clean.

He stood at the edge of the jagged cliff, the Lyxai concealed behind him, cloaked in rock and shadow. His helm adjusted the light spectrum in the thickening dark, translating the falling dusk into layers of color, heat, movement. Below, the valleys were already drowning in night. Mist clung to the stone like old skin.

With a thought, he deployed his wings.

They unfolded with a mechanical hiss, the armored panels separating and rising on thick hydraulic joints. Beneath the metal plating—tightly coiled and protected—lay the true structure: webbed, leathery, powerful. Built for maneuvering in vacuum, for slicing through the sky like a blade.

He launched.

The wind caught him instantly, a familiar rush. His legs tucked in, wings flaring outward, catching the current as he dove low, then tilted, rising again on an updraft. His body moved with practiced ease, every calculation seamless. The wings hissed as they adjusted, sweeping in closer as he narrowed his descent.

Calm.

Steady.

Resolute.

He had done this a thousand times before. On Vokar. In enemy airspace. On blood missions over the deep worlds of the Dead Zone.

This was just reconnaissance.

Below, the land opened into sparse ridges and fractured forest. Remote. Isolated.

A blessing.

Less chance of detection. Fewer Nalgar.

The settlement came into view—half-carved into stone, its buildings angular and brutalist. Square windows glowed faintly from within, the light yellow and flickering. Crude radiant coils, not plasma-based. Primitive tech by galactic standards.

He zoomed in.

Two Nalgar moved through the open courtyard—fast, deliberate. He could see their long limbs, their broad, cloaked forms. Their speed was uncanny. Every motion coiled with potential violence.

But he wasn't afraid.

He was Hvrok.

One of the only species that could match the Nalgar in direct combat.

Once, their peoples had been bitter enemies—brutal wars waged over blood rituals and trade routes. But that was before Vokar fell. Before his own kind obliterated themselves in a final act of madness.

Now, Hvrok and Nalgar shared an uneasy neutrality. A truce of silence.

He circled lower, wings retracting slightly, then dropped into a field on the edge of the settlement, folding them tight to his back.

He moved like a shadow.

Across the stones, into a narrow alley.

Hunting.

The dwellings here weren't sealed. Why would they be? Nalgar didn't fear intrusion. Their hearing was sharper than any alarm. Their bloodlust meant most didn't risk entering their domain.

But Kyhin was not most.

He slipped into an empty structure, silent.

His armor's sensors swept the space—nothing. No heat, no movement. The quiet hum of the radiant coil in the corner. Stone walls, metal shutters. A spartan bedroom and a crude common room.

No food. Of course. Nalgar drank blood. Sustenance in the literal sense.

But there—on a hook near the entrance—was a coat. Thick, pale, fur-lined. Bigger than her size, but close enough. He grabbed it. It would do.

Maybe... she'd like it.

He didn't let himself linger on that thought.

He moved to leave.

And then— voices .

Low. Laughter. Two Nalgar. Male and female. Coming closer.

He stilled.

Footsteps followed—light ones. Slow. Human.

His nostrils flared behind the mask. That scent. Undeniable.

Human.

The Nalgar keep humans here? As blood sources?

He considered the possibility for a moment, rage flickering behind his thoughts. They were close—ten spans, maybe less. He could kill them before they screamed.

But then what?

Others would come. This wasn't Vokar. He had no backup. No second escape ship.

And she was still up there, waiting.

Sylvia.

He clenched his fists, every instinct demanding violence. But reason held firm.

He slipped out the rear exit, into the alley. Darted through shadows. Scaled a wall, then dropped low again, moving past the edge of town.

Once clear, he opened his wings again.

They flared wide with a hiss of metal and membrane.

He leapt skyward, catching the wind in a powerful thrust, shooting up into the night.

Snow flurried below. The wind screamed over the cliffs.

But his mind wasn't on the cold.

Not anymore.

He found his thoughts drifting—unwelcome, but persistent—back to her.

To the small shape wrapped in blue, those jewel eyes fixed on him with a flicker of trust. The scent of her skin. The feel of her pulse beneath his fingers. The fact that she hadn't pulled away.

He should be focused.

This was survival.

But still?—

As the Lyxai came into view again, perched against the dark rock, half-shrouded by mist and shadow, he felt it rise in him like heat.

He wanted to go back.

Not to the ship.

To her.

And he would.

He folded his wings in and dropped fast, vanishing into the mist.

CHAPTER 30

The silence was louder than any scream.

She sat curled on the strange alien bed, knees hugged to her chest, trying not to imagine the worst. The walls around her were too smooth, too seamless, like being swallowed by a machine. There was no sound. No ticking clock. No hum of power.

Just stillness.

And cold.

It crept in slowly at first, like an afterthought. The ambient warmth that had once filled the room was gone. Whatever tech kept this place liveable had faltered, and the temperature had begun to drop, subtle at first, then steep.

She rubbed her arms.

Her dress—if it could be called that—was thin, designed for aesthetics, not function. For display, not protection. It clung to her skin, offered no resistance to the air that was steadily chilling with every breath she exhaled.

Her thoughts spiraled with it.

What if he doesn't come back?

She told herself she didn't care.

She told herself she hated him.

And yet...

Her thoughts drifted— again —to the feel of his hands. Bare. Strong. Warm. Stroking her arms like she was something precious. Something that mattered. Not a thing. Not property.

She remembered the sensation more vividly than she wanted to admit.

That gentleness.

That strange flicker of calm it had sparked in her, just for a moment.

No. No.

She couldn't let herself go there.

Couldn't let herself romanticize the touch of a being who had bought her. Who had watched her at auction, who had collared her, who had taken her from her planet and never spoken a word.

She was supposed to be angry. She was angry.

She clenched her fists.

"I hate him," she whispered to the walls.

But the walls didn't care.

And the cold was getting worse.

Her breath misted as she exhaled. Her hands trembled. Her toes burned, then went numb. Her jaw ached from the relentless chattering of her teeth. She curled tighter into herself, trying to conserve heat, but it wasn't working.

“Goddamn you,” she hissed. “You indestructible , terrifying bastard. You don't even know what this feels like, do you? You don't even get cold?—”

She was starting to lose feeling in her fingers.

Vision fuzzing.

Was this what hypothermia felt like?

The room spun slightly as she sat up, blinking fast, trying to stay conscious. If he didn't come back—if he didn't know, if he hadn't thought?—

The wall shimmered.

She flinched.

He was there.

Towering. Armored. And holding something in his arms.

A coat.

But not just any coat.

It was impossibly soft-looking, pale and golden, thick and luxurious. It looked warm. God , it looked warm.

She didn't know what kind of creature had died to provide a pelt like that. Didn't care.

Because he held it out to her, beckoning.

And she, shaking and half-numb, rose on unsteady feet and went to him.

He draped it around her shoulders without a word: carefully, gently, reverently.

For a moment, in the way he moved, in the way he fastened it at her chest and smoothed the fur down her arms, she felt like...

No. Don't think it.

She wasn't a queen. She wasn't anything but a captive.

A shivering, helpless, grateful captive.

And that was the worst part.

Even wrapped in the fur, her body still shook. Her skin burned with the icy fire of returning sensation, and the tremors wouldn't stop.

She looked up at him, wanting to curse him again, wanting to scream.

But she couldn't even speak.

And then, without warning, he bent, scooped her into his arms.

She gasped, startled by the sudden lift.

His grip was solid. Immense. Effortless. And her weight—nothing to him.

He carried her with ease, one arm beneath her knees, the other at her back.

She blinked, dazed. What—what is he doing now?

And then, his armor began to retract.

It hissed and folded in on itself, vanishing into hidden panels, collapsing inward like living metal. The smooth black hardness dissolved from his chest, his arms, his legs.

Leaving behind dark blue skin. Bare. Muscular. Radiating warmth.

But the helm remained.

Still faceless.

Still unreadable.

She didn't know whether to cry, scream, or melt into the heat of him.

And for now, she could do none of those things.

Because he was holding her.

And despite everything, despite all the reasons she had to despise him...

She let him.

CHAPTER 31

He couldn't believe what he'd just done.

With a single whispered command in the ancient tongue, his armor had begun to retract segment by segment, folding into itself like fluid steel. The system whirred softly, powered by the kinetic charge stored from flight and combat, the plates slotting away with quiet precision into the compact node at the base of his spine, just above where his wings connected.

It was instinct.

Stupid, reckless instinct.

And now...

His bare skin was pressed against hers.

He could feel her.

Really feel her.

Soft. Warm. Fragile.

So fragile .

The fur coat he'd brought was draped over her shoulders, but the front of her

body—save for that thin, supple dress—was bare. And that small barrier meant nothing to him. Her warmth, her tremors, her heartbeat... they all came through.

His body, always running hot, adjusted naturally, rising slightly as he cradled her. He was certain his internal baseline temperature exceeded hers. She needed heat. He could give it.

But still she shivered.

Still, she trembled against him like a leaf in a storm.

Why?

He adjusted his hold, trying to steady her, to absorb the cold from her skin into his own. He had no biological imperative to do this. This was not survival protocol.

This was... something else.

He tightened his arms around her, cradling her with care he hadn't even known he possessed. She was so small . His body could crush hers without effort. But right now, every fiber of him was tuned to protect. To soothe .

He'd never felt this way. Not even with his kind.

She shifted slightly in his arms and tapped him, her hand soft against his chest.

Then she pointed down.

He followed her gesture.

Her feet. Bare. Pressed against the freezing floor.

Of course.

The ship's internal climate regulators had entered low-energy mode, diverting power to critical systems. And she, being what she was—delicate, fleshy, human —was paying the price.

Without hesitation, he adjusted his hold, drawing her up higher into his arms. He wrapped the fur coat down over her legs, tucking her feet beneath its thick folds and pressing them close to his side.

He felt her curl inward.

He held her tighter.

And slowly... she began to settle.

The tremors dulled.

Her breathing steadied.

A soft sigh escaped her lips, relief, perhaps, or contentment. He didn't know what it was exactly, didn't know what human sounds meant— yet.

But she was better than before.

She wasn't warm yet, but the worst of the cold was retreating.

Good.

He inhaled softly behind the mask.

And there it was again.

Her scent.

It clung to her like a second skin: warm now, a little spiced from the lingering adrenaline, but still uniquely hers. Something floral. Something human. Something that was beginning to etch itself into the memory centers of his brain like a hunting mark.

He should've adjusted his filter mode to block it.

But he hadn't, because on some level... he wanted it.

He wanted more of it.

He closed his eyes, just for a second, and let the scent curl through his senses like intoxicating smoke. A strange feeling tightened low in his gut, where discipline warred with something more primal.

It would be easy.

A simple command, and the helmet would retract.

He could look at her. Smell her fully. Know her.

But...

What if he lost control? She was so fragile, and he could easily break her.

He opened his eyes.

No. Not now.

He had to be logical.

Had to keep the barrier.

Because if he removed the helmet and let the full flood of her scent hit him, he wasn't certain he'd be able to stop himself.

And if he hurt her...

He couldn't.

He wouldn't .

He didn't want to lose his precious human. Not now, not ever. With the destruction of Vokar, he'd lost everything that was familiar to him in an instant. His entire world.

She was something else. A promise of something beyond. Tenderness and warmth, in a universe where almost everything was cold, hard, and vicious.

He'd known honor. He'd known discipline. He'd even known affection and camaraderie—before he'd become Iskari.

But he'd never known anything like her.

Maybe the crash had affected his judgment. Normally, he would be cold and logical.

But he was alone now, and if this was somehow wrong, he no longer cared.

He could feel her slowly relaxing against him, the tension flowing out of her limbs.

Bit by bit. Slower. Better.

That's it. Rest, little one. I won't harm you.

She was his, yes, and that meant he had a responsibility to keep her healthy and safe, even in the harshest of conditions.

So he did the only thing he could.

He held her.

Let her body rest against his, wrapped in golden fur, as her heartbeat gradually aligned with his.

But he kept the helm in place... for now.

CHAPTER 32

The alien held her until the shivering stopped completely.

Until her muscles, clenched for what felt like hours, finally relaxed. Until the cold stopped biting at her skin, until the chill left her fingers, her toes. Until she was warm again— toasty , even—from the top of her head right down to her bones.

He was hot .

Not just warm, but radiating heat like a furnace. Like something carved from flesh and fire. She could feel it through the fur coat, through the thin fabric of her dress. The heat pulsed off him in steady waves. He was a living heat source made of muscle and silence and unfathomable strength.

She dared a glance.

Just a peek.

His armor was still retracted, and in the soft orange cockpit light, she saw him— truly saw him—for the first time.

He was broad.

Impossibly broad.

His chest was massive, his pectorals sculpted and defined in a way that seemed

almost unreal. His shoulders were wide, deltoids thick and powerful. His arms— god , his arms—were corded with muscle, biceps and forearms so large they looked like they'd been carved from solid stone. Smooth deep-blue skin, like dusk incarnate, shimmered faintly under the light. There was a sheen to it, like oil or silk.

Alien.

Perfect.

And his scent?—

She caught it when she inhaled, eyes fluttering closed for a moment.

Spicy. Warm. Earthy. Undeniably male .

It curled around her like a drug, subtle and strange and deeply, maddeningly comforting.

What the hell is happening to me?

She opened her eyes again and stared straight ahead, forcing herself not to look at him. Not again. Not now.

Because this was madness.

He bought you , she reminded herself, biting the inside of her cheek. He collared you. You're only here because of him. He wants to own you, nothing more. Don't you dare think otherwise. Don't you succumb to this madness.

But her heart didn't want to listen.

Not when he'd held her like that.

Not when he'd warmed her without a word, without force, without cruelty.

Not when she was now sitting— of all things —in his lap just moments ago, trembling in his arms and finding comfort there.

It made her feel insane.

But it was getting harder to cling to her fury when he touched her like she was fragile. When he carried her like she mattered.

And worst of all?—

She hated to admit it.

Being held like that, enveloped by his heat and strength, pressed against a wall of chest and muscle, and that smell ?—

It was... arousing.

Oh, God.

Even with the helmet still on—even when she couldn't see his face, couldn't guess at his expression—her body reacted to him. And that scared her more than anything else.

She wished they could speak.

Just talk . Ask him why. Ask what this was. What had changed.

But they had no language between them, only gestures and grunts. Silence and proximity.

And somehow, that felt more intimate than words ever could.

At least he wasn't cruel. Not yet. Not like the others.

When he finally rose, still bare-chested and silent, he took her with him, carrying her like she weighed nothing, one arm steady at her back, the other beneath her knees. She didn't protest. Couldn't.

He brought her to the cockpit.

It was slightly warmer there. Lights buzzed quietly overhead. The forward panel glowed, showing warnings and readouts she couldn't decipher.

He sat her down in the command chair, the one he'd occupied earlier. Then he made a simple motion with one hand.

Wait.

She nodded, blinking at him.

And there he stood, tall and still, armor peeled away to reveal a body designed for power and endurance.

She tried not to stare.

Failed miserably.

He wasn't just muscular. He was colossal . His waist was lean, tapering into powerful

legs encased in the remnants of his suit. His abs were impossibly chiseled. She counted— ten . He had a ten-pack , as if that was even a thing.

And his body was laced with scars.

Long, narrow slashes. Jagged edges. Circular burns. Old and silvery, pale against dark skin. They were everywhere—his chest, his abdomen, his arms. Signs of violence. Of survival.

He wasn't beautiful in the traditional sense.

But he was... formidable .

She didn't know how much time had passed. Minutes, maybe. Or longer.

He'd disappeared into one of the rear compartments without a word, still shirtless, his massive form swallowed by the ship's dim corridors. The fur coat remained wrapped around her shoulders, enveloping her in softness and lingering heat. It smelled faintly of him now.

She hated how comforting that was.

And then... he returned.

He carried something in one hand. A canister. Metal. Sleek. Alien.

Food?

He set it down on the console beside her and activated a small panel on the side. It hissed faintly. A lid slid open.

Heat curled into the air.

With it came a smell .

Her stomach turned instantly.

She knew that smell.

That was the slop they'd fed her while she'd been kept in that horrible facility. Bland and sour and gelatinous, like someone had boiled old socks and sadness together and then sealed it in a vacuum for freshness.

He must've brought some of it with him. Was that what he thought humans ate?

Her face twisted involuntarily. The memory hit too hard. Her body reacted before her brain could catch up.

She shook her head.

Hard.

"No," she said firmly, pushing the container away with the back of her hand. "I'm not eating that."

Her voice cracked. Her throat was dry.

But the words were crystal clear. Final.

The reaction was immediate.

He went still.

From one breath to the next, the air in the cockpit thickened. Tensed. His body didn't move, but something in him did—some unseen current, some shift in energy. He loomed. The muscles across his bare chest flexed subtly, as if preparing for something.

She froze.

Her fingers curled tighter into the fur coat.

For a second, she thought: Shit. I pushed him too far.

He could force her. Grab her jaw. Shove the food into her mouth.

What if that's how he solved problems?

Her heart hammered against her ribs. Her breath caught.

But he didn't move, didn't strike, didn't react.

Instead, he made a low sound. A rough, questioning grunt deep in his throat, followed by a few slow words in that strange, growling language of his.

He didn't sound angry.

Just confused, curious...

Tentative, even.

Like he was trying to understand.

She stared at him, shocked.

He'd asked something. She could tell by the tone, the upward lilt at the end of his speech. It was a question.

But she didn't have the answer. Not in a way he'd understand.

God, if she could just talk to him.

Explain.

It's not that she didn't appreciate the gesture. Not that she was being stubborn. But that food— that food—she couldn't stomach it. It had become symbolic now. Of everything those horrible green aliens were. Of her captivity. Of the pain.

"I can't," she whispered, more to herself than to him. "I can't eat that stuff."

She looked up at him again.

His posture had eased.

He wasn't tense anymore. He just... watched her. Intently. As if trying to read her face. Her body. Her breath.

As if he wanted to understand.

It threw her completely.

He didn't turn away. Didn't shove the canister back into her hands. Didn't give up, either.

He just stood there, silent, thinking.

And the strangest thing of all was that... he wasn't angry.

Not in the slightest.

He didn't force her.

Didn't bark, didn't loom harder, didn't even try to press the container closer.

He just stood there, still shirtless, broad and silent, as though he was waiting for her to decide.

And something about that cracked through her stubbornness.

Because he could have made her—so easily.

But he didn't.

And then, for the first time, she saw it— really saw it. He wasn't trying to dominate her in this moment. Not trying to make her submit or punish her or even win. He just... wanted her to eat.

That was it.

For sustenance.

Because they were trapped on a hostile, freezing world. Because her human body wouldn't survive otherwise. And because, for all his terrifying size and the fact that he could probably tear apart an enemy with his bare hands, he was trying.

She sighed.

"Fine," she muttered to herself. "You're trying. I'll try too."

She pulled the coat tighter around herself and looked at the canister again, suppressing another grimace.

It still smelled like death and despair, but her stomach had started to gnaw at itself in protest.

She needed food.

She'd be an idiot not to take what she could get.

So she raised her hand.

Gestured.

Come on then.

He moved instantly: smooth, quiet, obedient to her signal. That surprised her, too.

She expected him to pass her the canister, or maybe just place it in her lap and step back. But instead, he did something she didn't anticipate.

He knelt beside her.

Right there in front of her, massive and dark and strange, the golden cockpit light catching the faint shimmer of his blue skin and the glint of old scars across his chest, his wings looming like shadows made metal-and-flesh.

Then he reached into the container with a spoon-like utensil: three-pronged, long-handled, functional.

And lifted a portion of the slop toward her.

She blinked.

Stared.

“Are you—” her voice died in her throat.

He was going to feed her?

Like she was... helpless?

Or...

No.

Not helpless.

Not mocked.

It wasn't derision she saw in his posture.

It was... something else.

Care.

It hit her square in the chest like a blow.

Not the kind of feeding you give to livestock. Or prisoners. Or playthings.

No. This was gentle . Intentional.

He was nurturing her.

The shock of it rooted her to the seat, mouth dry.

She glanced up at his helmet, at the faceless mask that still kept him hidden from her, even now. But his body—the warmth, the steadiness, the absolute stillness as he held that strange alien spoon out to her—spoke louder than words ever could.

He's feeding me.

She should've refused.

Should've pulled away. Shaken her head. Asserted herself somehow.

But she didn't.

She opened her mouth.

And let him feed her.

As if in a daze, she leaned forward and took the first bite.

The taste hit her instantly—faintly metallic, gluey, the barest hint of something vegetable, but mostly, it was sludge. It wasn't revolting so much as empty . Like eating memory. Like swallowing ghosts.

But there was something else happening. Something she didn't understand.

Because he was kneeling.

Kneeling .

Beside her. Towering, dangerous, otherworldly—and he'd lowered himself.

She hadn't expected that. Hadn't expected him to descend from that impossible height, to reduce the power imbalance by choice. She'd thought he would always loom, always command, always remind her that she was below him. A possession. A pet.

But this?

This was something else.

And it should have felt humiliating.

It didn't.

It felt... mesmerising. Forbidden .

She took another bite.

And another.

There was insistence in his feeding—something almost forceful in the way he brought the utensil to her lips, not rushed, not aggressive, but steady. Like he'd decided she was going to eat, and this was how.

There was no option but yes .

But even that—his determination—didn't feel cruel.

It felt protective. Intentional.

And damn it all, she let him continue.

Bit by bit, the food became less offensive. The taste dulled. The texture stopped bothering her. Maybe it was the heat in her belly, the slow easing of hunger, or maybe it was the way he never once made her feel small, even as he fed her, spoon by spoon, like she mattered.

Bit by bit, those awful, green-skinned, slave-trading aliens began to fade from her memory.

Bit by bit, she reclaimed the act of eating .

By the time the container was empty, she felt... full.

Full. Not just of food, but of something she hadn't had in days.

Strength.

Warmth.

Hope.

She exhaled slowly, not realizing until that moment that she'd been holding tension in every part of her body. Her shoulders slumped. Her head dipped slightly, heavy with fatigue.

Outside the window, nothing but black. The sun—what passed for one on this strange planet—was long gone. The world had slipped into deep, all-consuming night. She couldn't see the mountains anymore, only the faint reflection of herself in the glass and the occasional shimmer of snow catching the wind.

And the wind ?—

It was howling now.

A low, rising keen that made her skin crawl.

Without him here, she would've been terrified.

But he was here.

And he didn't look worried at all.

He stood, collected the canister, and moved with that eerie, fluid grace toward the console. He disposed of it soundlessly, no clatter, no wasted motion. Every movement was precise.

Then he turned.

Motioned to her.

Up.

She rose slowly, muscles still stiff beneath the coat, unsure what he was asking, until he sat.

In the command chair.

And then, reached for her.

She didn't resist as he pulled her into his lap. This strange, ritual dance between them... of gentleness, restraint, and power forgone—it had completely melted her

resistance in a way she'd never expected.

Again, she thought she must be going insane.

But what did it matter now?

Her life as she'd known it was over, anyway.

Her heart thudded once, loudly, but her limbs moved without protest, and she curled herself into his lap. He settled her there, his chest a wall of heat at her back, his arms coming around her without hesitation. She felt small against him, swallowed whole by strength and silence and something she couldn't name.

God, he's so warm.

She felt like a cat. Like he wanted her close . Curled.

A cat in a villain's lap. Ha.

She should've resisted, should've reasserted herself.

But she didn't.

Because there was something deeply tempting in this. Something subversive and strange. Something Earth-dweller Sylvia would have rejected instantly, derisively.

No human would have drawn this kind of reaction out of her.

But she wasn't on Earth anymore.

And here, in this cold, death-still night, in the arms of a faceless monster who had just

fed her, clothed her, warmed her...

She let it happen.

And thought: Maybe... maybe this is easier than fighting.

Maybe getting him to be gentle —to be this —was a kind of power all its own.

CHAPTER 33

She had eaten.

Unwillingly, reluctantly, but she had eaten—all of it.

He'd watched every motion of her mouth, every shift in her expression as she forced down the bland protein slurry, and he'd seen the moment... when something in her had changed. When her memories gave way to present necessity. When survival instincts overrode disgust.

Good.

That impressed him. And, with his changing impression came a curious sense of pride. She was a clever being, and she was his.

She was more intelligent than he'd initially assumed. More rational. Her emotions flared brightly, but she adapted. She endured. She was frightened, yes, but not paralyzed by fear. And not too proud to do what was necessary.

She hadn't needed to be forced.

He was glad for that.

And when the light returned—if this planet had light in the morning, if Anakris obeyed any kind of reasonable solar cycle—he would find her something better. There had to be game in the mountains. The scanner had picked up heat

signatures—fast-moving, four-limbed, warm-blooded. Hunttable.

He would bring her meat, roasted over flame. Seared as his people had always prepared it. That would sustain her. Maybe she would even like it.

And now...

She lay curled in his lap.

Soft.

Warm.

Content.

Her breathing was steady now. Her body relaxed against his. The fur coat cradled her form, but it was her nearness—her scent—that kept his attention locked in place.

Not fully scented, not enough to trigger the physiological spiral he feared. His helm still filtered most of it, but enough passed through to stir something.

A faint spike of heat.

A slow, building pressure in his abdomen.

He didn't look down at her. He stared past her, out into the black storm-torn void beyond the cockpit windows, watching the snow dance like ash.

And yet in the periphery of his senses, all his attention was on her .

How small she was.

How fragile.

And... how much pleasure her presence gave him.

It was... unfamiliar. Not carnal. Not yet. Well, perhaps not fully, only slightly. And warm. Dangerous in its softness. He'd never experienced this kind of stillness before. This quiet contentment that came not from dominance, but from simply being .

He flexed his hand lightly on her hip, noting the soft give of her form, the way she didn't flinch, didn't draw back.

She liked his touch.

He felt it. Knew it.

And worse, he wanted to explore it. To draw more out of her.

But he held back, because he knew .

If he removed his helm, if he took in her scent fully—if he let his senses become saturated with her—there was a high chance he might fall into heat, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop himself if that happened.

Because this human...

She had pheromones.

How, he didn't know.

No species other than Hvrok could trigger the biological spiral. But his body was reacting. Just faintly. A whisper of it.

And that was enough to make him wary.

He shifted slightly, one arm steady around her, the other reaching out to the interface panel. He activated the ship's systems with a low command.

The main power grid flickered.

The ship was uncloaked, visible to any who happened to come across it.

He expected that.

There wasn't enough reserve energy to engage it.

There was a chance the Nalgar would find them. And if they did... he'd be ready .

He always was.

But now came the most important task.

He opened a channel: low-frequency, encrypted.

His voice was quiet and precise as he encoded the signal: strings of identification codes, old passwords, backchannel pings designed only for a specific class of recipient. The kind of people who knew who he was. What he could pay. What he'd done .

A contract killer as infamous as he was didn't get retrieved for free.

He would offer something better than the bounty on his head.

He would offer wealth .

Real wealth. Not credits in the public ledgers, but what he kept hidden, stored deep in black-market drives at his fortress on Ivokka. No one knew about those places. Not even his enemies.

The message went out.

There was no response.

Yet.

He hadn't expected one immediately.

He would wait. They would come.

And in the meantime...

He looked down at her.

Still, soft, her breath brushing against his bare chest, her fingers curled slightly against the fur draped across her lap.

The storm howled outside, but here, in this chair, in his arms, she was calm.

And he...

He was curious.

She wasn't afraid now. Her body had accepted his touch. Her mind was quiet.

Perhaps, now, he could entertain her.

Perhaps... he could see what other reactions he could draw from her.

Not because he needed to, but because, for the first time ever...

He wanted to.

CHAPTER 34

His hand moved: slowly, deliberately.

At first, it was just the press of his palm over the thick fur at her side. A steady, grounding weight. But then his fingers shifted, brushing lightly against the back of her neck, just below the collar.

She tensed, not in fear, but in surprise .

Because the way he touched wasn't rough. Wasn't threatening. His fingers were large, thick, and roughened with the calluses of a thousand battles... but the pressure? It was gentle. Like he knew what skin could take. Like he was measuring her responses with each pass.

Maybe she shouldn't be surprised anymore. This is how he'd touched her back in her chamber, when he was trying to warm her, to soothe her. Well, it was similar, but different.

What is he doing?

She didn't pull away.

Couldn't.

He moved again, just slightly—his knuckles grazing the side of her throat, dragging slowly over the fine hairs there, sending a shiver right down her spine.

She closed her eyes for a breath, overwhelmed.

He thought this calmed her.

And it did.

It shouldn't . But it did.

It was bizarre— alien . Yet, somehow, he touched her almost like a human would. Like someone who wanted to soothe, not dominate. She'd expected something cold and mechanical, but this... this was almost tender.

And worse...

The pleasure he gave her... his touch there —it was better than that of any man she'd ever known. Better than fingers that had been too soft, or too selfish, or too unsure. There was nothing unsure in his touch. It was strong. Possessive. Deliberate.

Her breath hitched as he traced a path down the slope of her neck to her shoulder.

"You're really something, aren't you?" she murmured, her voice a little breathless. She shook her head, her lips twitching in disbelief. "You big, bad fucking metalhead. Asshole. What do you even want with me?"

She laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was insane. And because he couldn't understand a word she was saying. She could say anything right now, and he wouldn't understand a thing.

In her laughter was tension and release, and awareness of the sheer absurdity of this moment—of being curled on the lap of a faceless alien warrior in the middle of a storm on a distant, unknown planet where the skies were red like blood.

She wasn't screaming. She wasn't crying.

She was laughing.

And melting.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Was this a dream? A hallucination?

Was she still on Earth, unconscious on a beach, her brain filling the void with this ridiculous, elaborate fantasy? What did this say about her, about her psyche?

She let the thought hang, then fade, because his hand was still moving.

Downward.

Slow.

Measured.

She stiffened again, but didn't stop him.

Didn't want to.

His touch was reverent. Curious. But certain. He knew he was crossing a boundary, but it wasn't as if he was asking permission. It was more as if he was reading her

permission from the rhythm of her breath and the lack of resistance in her body.

His hand reached the edge of her dress—the strange alien garment clinging to her like liquid fabric. His fingers traced the top swell of her breast.

Just like that.

No hesitation.

Did he even know what he was touching?

Did his kind have breasts? Did their females look like human women?

She didn't know.

Didn't care.

Because now his thumb slid across the curve of her nipple—still covered, still protected by that sleek material—and her body betrayed her.

Her tender nub stiffened. Tightened.

A soft, involuntary sound escaped her lips—a moan, barely there. She wished he didn't hear it, because she didn't want to betray her weakness, didn't want to give him anything he could exploit.

But she knew he heard, because he stilled.

And she could feel him listening, every muscle in his body coiling like a predator scenting movement.

He hears everything, doesn't he?

And still, his hand kept moving downward, over the soft, alien fabric that clung to her skin like a second layer of thought. The material wasn't like anything on Earth—sometimes it felt cool and fluid, like water rippling under pressure. Now, under his palm, it felt warm, reactive. Almost alive .

She swore it shifted with his touch.

A strange shiver passed through her—part anticipation, part confusion.

His hand was so warm.

Too warm. Not human.

It made her quiver, her breath catching in her throat.

She wanted to hate this.

Wanted to claw her way back to righteous indignation, to the moral clarity of fury.

But she couldn't.

She just... couldn't.

Not with the cold storm clawing at the edges of the ship.

Not with the black void pressing against the windows like an ocean of night.

Not when she was curled up on an alien's lap, held in arms that could kill and cradle in the same breath.

In this moment, in this cabin full of silence and strangeness, she craved something .

Closeness.

Comfort.

Even from him .

The one who'd bought her.

The one who took her from her world.

The one whose touch now made her stomach clench and her skin burn.

This is fucked up.

She stared blankly into the darkened cockpit, watching snow swirl like ash against glass, her heart thudding so hard she thought he might feel it.

She was terrified of what this meant.

Of what she might be giving up if she let herself enjoy this.

Her autonomy . Her power. Her refusal.

It was dangerous— terrifying —to imagine surrendering that.

Letting him claim that last inch of her.

But it was also...

God help her.

Seductive.

Because he wasn't just touching her.

He was learning her.

His hand passed over her belly, slowly, his fingers grazing the slight dips of her waist. She tensed again, but not in resistance. It was reactive .

He slid lower, over the curve of her hip, thumb dragging along the edge of her pelvis. Each movement was precise and intentional, like he wanted to feel everything. Memorise her.

And then...

His hand reached the swell of her thigh.

A breath hitched in her throat.

He didn't rush. Didn't grope.

He caressed .

Fingers trailed over the sensitive skin where fabric met flesh, his touch skating the border of something forbidden and intimate.

She clutched the fur coat tighter around her shoulders, the gesture not protective, but anchoring.

Her eyes fluttered shut.

And for the first time, she didn't think about escape.

Didn't think about Earth.

She thought only of this .

And somehow— before she even realised what she was doing —her legs parted.

It was only slightly—just a subtle shift of her knees.

But he noticed.

The moment she moved, his fingers followed.

They slid between her thighs, firm and hot— so hot she swore he must be made of molten metal under that skin. The fabric of her strange, alien dress stretched around his touch, pliant and accommodating, as if the material wanted this just as much as her body did.

And he found her.

Found that soft, aching place between her legs.

He pressed against her, just enough to make her breath stutter and her chest rise.

How does he know?

How could a being like him—silent, faceless, from another world—know exactly what would unravel her?

His fingers didn't fumble. Didn't hesitate.

He touched her like he knew her. Like he'd studied the fragile art of pleasure and applied it with absolute precision.

And her body...

Betrayed her completely.

Sylvia closed her eyes and gasped.

Heat unfurled inside her, coiling low in her belly, seeping into her limbs. Her skin tingled beneath the dress. Her nipples peaked, already sensitive from his earlier touch. She clenched the fur coat tighter around herself, half a shield, half an anchor.

But nothing could ground her now.

Not when pure power was touching her like this, so gently it made her tremble.

She went still.

Completely still.

Caught in a state of suspended anticipation.

Pleasure.

Mind gone blank.

The howl of the wind outside faded. The black glass of the cockpit vanished from her awareness. There was nothing left in the universe but the heat of his fingers, the slow,

unbearable drag of his palm as he slid her dress higher, higher?—

From the hem that circled her knees.

The fabric shifted like water, responding to his hands as if summoned. It lifted, baring her thighs to the air.

And still, he said nothing.

Made no sound.

Just held her.

Touched her.

Possessed her in silence.

What the fuck is this? What the fuck am I doing?

God, this was like a dream. A nightmare and a euphoric reverie.

His hands— six-fingered , she reminded herself in a dizzy kind of clarity—slid up her bare thighs.

Bare.

Because she wasn't wearing anything beneath the strange, clinging dress. No underwear. No protection. Nothing between her and him but a single breath of air and a line she hadn't even noticed herself crossing.

He was massive behind her, solid as stone, his bare chest like a wall of muscle carved

from deep blue marble. Everything about him was too much —too big, too strong, too alien.

“Oh, my god, ” she whispered, swallowing hard.

Right now, it didn't matter that she couldn't see his face.

It didn't matter that she didn't understand a word he said.

It didn't even matter that he had bought her.

What mattered was the feeling of his hand—callused, wide, hot-as-lava and impossibly precise —sliding higher.

Until he found her.

And still, he didn't speak.

Just breathed.

Just touched .

And she...

She let him.

Because she didn't know what else to do. It felt good. So good. Better than anything she'd had from the men she'd known on Earth.

He was responding to her.

To the way she arched into his touch, to the stifled gasps she couldn't control, to the way her breath hitched each time his fingers traced somewhere more sensitive.

He adjusted.

Teased.

His movements were maddeningly slow, like he was playing her: each shift of pressure, each pass of his fingers calibrated to draw out another tremor, another sigh—like she was an instrument and he'd already mastered how to make her sing.

And when his fingers finally found that most sensitive point, when the pads of them brushed, circled, pressed with devastating precision, her body betrayed her completely.

She gasped.

Soft. Broken.

Gone.

God.

She wanted to say something. Protest. Swear. Moan. Anything. Fuck.

But nothing made it past her lips because her whole body was humming, trembling, tuned to the rhythm of his hands and the steady, inescapable warmth of his body behind her.

She was so vulnerable. So helpless .

But it didn't scare her anymore.

Not with him.

He could've crushed her. Commanded her. Broken her.

But instead, he was coaxing something else out of her entirely.

Pleasure.

And she let him.

To hell with Earth's rules.

To hell with shame.

It felt good. So impossibly good.

He knew.

She could feel it in the way he moved, the way he paused just long enough to build tension, then soothed her again. Like he could hear every nuance in her breath. Feel every change in the beat of her heart. Smell every flicker of her response.

He knew.

And when it happened, when everything inside her coiled too tight and then snapped, wave after wave crashing through her...

She simply let herself fall apart in his hands.

CHAPTER 35

She had climaxed in his arms.

The soft, stuttering sound of it still echoed in the air between them: barely audible, but seared into his awareness like a brand. Her body had gone soft against him, boneless and shivering, tension melting into warmth. Her breath was uneven. Her pulse fluttered faintly beneath his fingertips.

He had felt it.

All of it.

And it changed something.

Not in her— in him.

He had begun with no intent beyond curiosity. Play. A test. A little game to satisfy his own interests.

He'd observed how she'd responded to his touch back there in her quarters, when she'd railed against him, when he'd used the feeling of his hands against her skin to calm her.

It had surprised him, the way she'd leaned into warmth. The silence when he held her, the tremor of her sighs. So he had wondered... what else might she respond to?

If his goal was to keep her compliant, calm, and warm, then perhaps he could also teach her to associate those feelings with pleasure . A reward, not a punishment. No fear.

That had been the logic.

But logic had abandoned him somewhere between the moment she opened her legs and the moment she shattered in his arms.

Because now...

Now he was gripped by something else.

He stared down at her—this small, soft human draped in fur and heat and trembling afterglow—and he could no longer convince himself she was just a curiosity. Just a possession.

She was exquisite.

Her hair, golden and fine, splayed over his forearm like silk. Her skin, warm and flushed from sensation, glowed faintly in the low light of the cockpit. Her eyes, though closed, he could see them—those gemlike shards of blue. Clear. Unique. Mesmerising.

Her scent, too, had shifted.

Still muted through his mask, but growing stronger.

More complex.

Enticing.

He flexed his fingers against her thigh, unable to stop himself from touching her even now. Her softness was maddening. Addictive. The contrast between her and the cold, brutal world he came from was stark—and soothing .

He had never known anything like her.

Never thought he could .

And yet...

She had let him.

Even when she cursed him under her breath—soft, spiked anger, confusion, disbelief—she had not resisted . Had not pulled away. Had not fought.

She had tensed. Briefly.

He had felt her hesitation.

He had sensed the animosity. The fracture in her trust.

And still... she let him go on.

Because she'd wanted it.

That knowledge settled deep in his chest. Heavy. Satisfying.

And dangerous.

Because he didn't just enjoy this. He craved it.

He enjoyed having her close. The sound of her breath. The rhythm of her heartbeat. The way she curled against him like he was something safe .

And now... now that he'd touched her like that— given her that—he wanted more.

Not just of her body.

Of her presence. Her attention. Her thoughts.

He wanted to see those jewel-blue eyes open again and look at him. At his face, uncovered, unguarded.

No barriers between them.

Not anymore.

But he still wore his helm.

He wouldn't remove it. Not yet.

Because if he did, if he allowed her full scent to reach him, if he exposed himself fully to her... he was no longer certain he would maintain control, and it was now that he needed control more than anything else.

When they were here, holed up in the mountains in the encroaching darkness, in the cold.

When the Nalgar could come from anywhere, could attack viciously, in packs—he would have to be ready.

When a communication could reach him at any time, and he would have to have his

wits about him, so he wouldn't get deceived.

He needed to be alert, not mad with lust.

For now, it was enough that she trusted him this far.

Enough that she had given him this.

And he?—

He would protect her, not because she was fragile... but because she was his.

No being in any system would take her from him now.

As he continued to study her quietly, she looked up at him.

He hadn't expected her to look at him.

Not so soon.

Not like that.

Her face was still flushed—cheeks tinted with the afterheat of release, her lips slightly parted, her skin warm where it pressed against his chest. But her gaze—when it lifted to his helm—was not soft. Not timid.

It was defiant .

Steady. Clear.

There was knowledge in her expression now. A silent challenge. A glimmer that said:

I know what I do to you.

How long can you resist me?

He stiffened slightly.

Because her scent had changed again.

It was no longer simply pleasant or intriguing. Now it was intoxicating. Rich. Potent. Layered with satisfaction and something deeper—something primal. The chemical aftermath of pleasure clung to her skin like a second pulse.

Through the helm's filters, he only caught fragments, and even that was almost too much.

He hadn't known humans could be like this.

So volatile. So reactive. So potent .

She reached up, hand trembling only slightly, her fingers brushing along the hard plane of his chest, up the center of his sternum—curious, exploratory.

And then...

Her touch found the edge of his helm. The place where skin met metal. The vulnerable seam between his collar and throat.

He froze.

She said something in her language, her words soft, almost coaxing.

He couldn't understand the words, but he didn't need to. Her meaning was clear.

She was asking him to remove it.

To show her his face.

He shook his head gently.

And behind the mask, for the first time in what felt like eons?—

He smiled. Because she wanted to see him. She didn't know what he was—not fully, not what he was capable of... but she would have sensed something.

And still, she wanted to know him.

If only...

But not now. Not yet.

Not while the sky outside bled black and the winds howled like beasts beyond the cliffs. Not while the Nalgar hunted the dark.

He reached up instead, letting his hand settle against the back of her head. Her hair was impossibly soft, like starlight caught in strands. He stroked it gently, slowly.

And murmured the words he hadn't spoken aloud in a long time. His voice was low, almost reverent in his native tongue.

“Ka'laa kahan.”

“Rest now.”

She stilled.

Her eyes widened. She didn't understand the words—not truly—but she seemed to understand him .

She blinked slowly, as if trying to stay awake, but exhaustion pulled at her. He could see it clearly now: the faint shadows beneath her eyes, the pallor behind the flush, the way her body sagged heavier against his with each passing moment.

How long has it been since you were allowed to rest, little one?

The thought twisted something cold and quiet in his chest.

He knew what the Dukkar were. What they did.

What they did to females.

The way they'd kept her—collared, objectified, dirtied—it made his blood run cold.

They'd treated her like livestock.

And he'd purchased her with the intention of using her for his amusement, his pleasure, without thought for whether she had free will or not.

He'd purchased her as an object, a toy, something to covet and possess.

And now...

Now she lay in his arms, breathing softly. No longer trembling. No longer resisting.

No longer just a possession. Now, he realized she was a living, breathing, intelligent

being, and he wanted to please her again.

And again.

To see her react like this, to have her look at him like this.

All of a sudden, it occurred to him that he didn't even know her name.

He could give her a name, a Hvrok one, as he'd planned on doing before—but now it felt distasteful to even consider such a thing.

He couldn't understand how she'd gotten to him so quickly—how she'd caused such a shift in him, to the point where he wanted to destroy the ones that had harmed her.

He would deal with the Dukkar. In time.

But not tonight.

Tonight, she had given him something far more valuable than submission— trust.

He tightened his arm around her as her breathing deepened. Her eyelids fluttered once, twice...

And then she was asleep.

Safe.

In his arms.

And that pleased him more than he would ever admit.

CHAPTER 36

She woke slowly, drifting up from sleep like surfacing through velvet water, feeling warm and thick and strange. Her body felt heavy: limbs loose, muscles languid, the kind of weight she only remembered from the rare nights she'd slept deeply and safely—before all of this.

The first thing she registered was the warmth.

She was still swaddled in the thick fur he'd draped over her. It cocooned her against the cold, soft as a cloud and impossibly plush and smelling of him. Beneath her, the pilot's seat cradled her frame, and despite its alien design, it was comfortable and supportive.

She was alone.

Her eyes fluttered open.

The cockpit was bathed in low amber light, the kind that didn't come from outside, but from the ship's internal systems. Outside, the view was black, mountains still hidden beneath a blanket of snow and mist, with the occasional gust of wind ghosting across the window like a shiver.

He wasn't there.

The enormous armored presence she'd grown accustomed to—silent, watchful, coiled in constant power—was gone.

But she could still feel him.

On her skin.

In her bones.

And somewhere deeper.

A faint tingle danced down the insides of her thighs as memory came rushing back: fingers tracing fire across her skin, the soundless dominance of his touch, the way he'd undone her with so little effort. Like he'd known her body better than she did.

Her cheeks flushed instantly.

God.

She hugged the fur tighter around her, burrowing deeper.

Had it been a dream?

For a wild, fleeting moment, she almost believed it.

But no.

Her body remembered.

Too clearly.

There was no mistaking the heavy warmth between her legs, the dull ache in her thighs, the hum still echoing somewhere low in her belly.

That actually happened.

And now she was... here.

On an alien ship. Somewhere on a godforsaken planet. Wrapped in the remnants of wild things, tingling from the aftershocks of being pleased by something that wasn't even human.

She swallowed hard.

What the hell was her life now?

She sat up slowly, still wrapped in the golden-white furs, the heavy warmth grounding her as her mind caught up with the waking world.

Outside, the view had changed.

The snow no longer drifted lazily across the cockpit window—it howled . Flurries whipped past in vicious, swirling currents, blotting out the distant peaks she remembered seeing before she'd drifted off. The mountains were cloaked in fog now, their jagged edges softened by snowfall and distance, the air thick with blowing ice.

A full-on storm.

Shit.

She leaned forward, brow furrowing as she tried to peer through the thickening blur beyond the glass.

The wind was screaming now. A constant howl that rattled faintly through the metal bones of the ship. Somewhere beneath the fur, goosebumps prickled over her skin.

She was still alone.

Where is he?

The thought came quietly, instinctively. And... uninvited.

Surely, she wasn't concerned for him?

That goddamn metalhead?

She glanced around the cockpit, expecting, maybe, to find him standing silently in some shadowed corner, watching her with that unreadable stance of his.

But he wasn't here.

No armor. No footfalls. No presence.

Just absence .

Treacherous tendrils of worry began to curl through her thoughts.

He was massive. Lethal. Covered in weapons and scars. A walking fortress.

That big, stupid, infuriating metalhead.

Nothing could hurt him, surely.

But even so...

Even he wasn't immune to the elements... or whatever else lurked out there on this cursed planet.

She hugged the furs tighter.

Had he gone hunting? To scout? She remembered the holo-display—so many systems flashing frantically, indicating failure.

He had a plan of some sort: she remembered him doing something... sending a communication of some sort.

But what if something had happened?

The thought chilled her faster than the storm outside.

Don't be stupid. He's fine. He's built like a tank. He could probably survive anything.

He was probably out there now, wings slicing through the wind, a shadow among shadows.

Still—

Sylvia stared out into the storm,

For the first time since she'd collapsed in his arms, warm and sated and too tired to think, she felt small again.

Vulnerable.

And very, very alone.

Then, she saw it.

At first, it was just a blur—shadows shifting within shadows, the snowstorm slicing

violently across the cockpit window in sharp streaks of white.

Then, she saw him.

Tall. Towering. A dark silhouette cutting through the blizzard, unmistakably his: wings folded tightly, massive strides carrying him forward with startling ease. The storm seemed to part around him, as if nature itself feared his presence.

Her breath snagged in her throat.

He was back.

Relief surged through her chest, fierce and unexpected—but it vanished in the space of a heartbeat.

Because he wasn't alone.

Shapes emerged behind him—indistinct at first, mere distortions in the violent swirl of white. But then they sharpened, resolving into figures: faceless, armored in silver, moving swiftly, low to the ground with predatory grace. Her pulse quickened, dread slithering through her veins like ice.

Who were they? Where had they come from?

Inhabitants of this planet, or pursuers from space? The ones that had attacked this ship?

There were more than she'd first thought: ten, maybe twelve, possibly more hidden in the blinding chaos.

And they weren't merely trailing him.

They were hunting him, closing in fast, flanking from all sides, eerily silent even as they approached. Blades ignited in their hands, glowing swords of blue-white light that sliced through the darkness, illuminating the shadows like veins of lightning.

Energy blades?

Fear tightened her chest, trapping her breath as she sought his large figure in the maelstrom. She wanted to warn him, to shout through the glass, to run outside... but she couldn't move, couldn't do a thing.

The storm would destroy her. The aliens would kill her.

The ship... she probably couldn't even get the doors to open if she tried.

And... the male she wanted to warn...

She didn't even know his name. What a ridiculous situation.

Still, the attackers advanced, but he had already stopped, his entire body going rigid. He knew.

He sensed them even before he saw them.

She watched as everything shifted: his posture, the muscles rippling beneath dark armor, his stance widening. Wings unfurled in a sudden, breathtaking rush, powerful limbs stretching out and up, spreading like the terrifying silhouette of an ancient war-god, ready to wreak destruction.

This wasn't the silent guardian who had held her close, who had touched her with quiet reverence.

No, this was something primal.

Something dangerous.

A predator.

Her pulse raced in panicked bursts as she stared at him—this alien, who had touched her so gently—transform into something utterly deadly.

His armor shimmered, weapons she hadn't even noticed before now emerging into clear view. Blades glinting ominously, guns and strange devices secured against armored plates. He raised one large weapon with effortless confidence, a sleek gun that crackled menacingly with energy.

Her blood ran cold.

Oh god, what's happening?

One of his wings snapped outward like a battle cry, and the armored figures charged, moving as one lethal unit. He didn't retreat, didn't hesitate.

He lunged forward.

In a flash, brilliant bolts of red energy exploded from his gun, streaking through the blizzard. She gasped sharply as two attackers dropped instantly, helmets shattering, bodies flung back into the snow. They collapsed, lifeless or unconscious—she couldn't tell—but her protector was already pivoting fluidly, wings slicing through the blizzard like sharpened blades, momentum unbroken.

Deadly precision. Terrifying speed.

Another attacker fired back, wielding a weapon that erupted with vibrant blue blasts of electric force. Two bolts slammed into his armor, crackling violently. She watched in horror as he reeled backward, staggering slightly, a hiss of pain audible even through the howling storm.

No! she gasped, shocked by the terrible violence unfolding before her.

But just as quickly, he recovered, steadying himself, unfazed by the sizzling burns across his armor. His wings flared wider, snapping aggressively, sending a wave of snow and ice blasting outward.

He advanced again, fury radiating from every deadly step.

Several more armored figures surged forward, a pack of four moving with terrifying speed, their forms blurred by the driving snow. They attacked simultaneously, coordinating their strikes from both front and rear.

He countered instantly. His wings became weapons, whipping out like bladed edges, slamming brutally into those approaching from behind, sending them sprawling through the snow. In the same breath, he shot the advancing front attackers, red bolts piercing the storm, striking them down with lethal precision.

It was like witnessing a battle between gods or demons. Outnumbered yet relentless, he handled them with frightening efficiency.

Sylvia's heart hammered painfully as a grim realization seized her: If these beings ever discovered Earth, humanity wouldn't stand a chance. Her family. Her friends. All the innocent people, oblivious to the terrifying potential threat lurking beyond their world. The thought made her feel utterly powerless, completely vulnerable.

Yet, amidst that suffocating fear, another realization sparked fiercely in her mind.

This fierce, deadly being fighting out there—he was fighting to protect her.

And she could do nothing but stare helplessly, heart hammering, as the fight unfolded, knowing her fate rested entirely in the hands of a dangerous being whose name she didn't even know.

These strange, silent attackers... it was clear they were dangerous: that they intended to kill him, and probably her, too—or worse.

But now, he was gaining the upper hand. His wings were a clear advantage, his massive form matching their speed blow for blow. Their blades couldn't penetrate his armor, making her wonder what it was made of, why it was so impossibly strong. What was its true significance? Why had he never removed his helm?

What was he?

A killer.

Out there, amidst the blizzard and battle, the dark armor suited him perfectly—he was death incarnate.

Suddenly, he drew a sword—gleaming silver-white metal, so pale it nearly vanished against the snow. A crimson shimmer streaked down the blade, and then he attacked, his movements a mesmerizing dance of lethal precision. To Sylvia's shock, his sword sliced effortlessly through their gleaming armor, cutting them down without pause.

He was brutal.

Blood flew, gushing from wounds, crimson and shockingly human-like, staining the snow around them. The attackers staggered back, stunned by his relentless fury. He didn't flinch, didn't hesitate.

She shuddered, wondering just how dangerous he really was—what he was truly capable of. It made sense that he was alone; he didn't need an army.

The tide was turning.

Despite the death and terrible violence surrounding her, relief surged sharply through her. These attackers wouldn't take her.

He would keep her safe.

The intensity of the relief she felt—it bothered her. People— aliens, whatever they were— were literally dying before her, cut down by her captor as if they were made of styrofoam, blood spurting everywhere.

She should have been horrified. If she was back on Earth, she would have.

But out here, in the wilds, on a strange planet, the rules of survival were different.

This really was survival of the fittest, the dominant one reigning supreme, and all of that. And the being that had claimed her as his truly was the dominant one.

At last, the final attacker fell, collapsing face-first into the snow.

Down.

Dead.

Holy crap.

Sylvia's heart thudded loudly in her ears. Her lips were parted, her breaths coming in short, sharp rasps.

The alien— her alien—turned to look at the cockpit window.

As if looking straight at her.

He was a dark silhouette amidst the snow and the flurry of the white-flecked wind. She swore she saw a faint red glow where his eyes should be in his featureless helmet.

With a fluid movement, he sheathed his sword.

And... her heart beat faster.

Her body was heating up again. Why now? It wasn't the time nor the place. And yet... her attraction to him was undeniable.

She was so screwed.

He started walking toward the ship, and Sylvia watched in fascination, mesmerized by the sheer power radiating from him.

Suddenly, the strange console before her flashed, alien characters spilling rapidly across the screen, and a panel on the instrument dashboard started glowing urgently, pulsing with light.

It had never done this before.

Sylvia felt a stab of anxiety. Was this something important? Would he miss it? What if it was a communication—a chance to escape?

She hesitated, glancing out the cockpit window. He had disappeared from view. She had no idea what she was doing.

"Hey!" she shouted, hoping he'd appear, but there was no response. No sign of him.

Heart pounding, driven by a surge of urgency, she did the only thing she could: she reached out and pressed several of the flashing buttons.

Instantly, the screen flickered, resolving into an image. Sylvia froze as a face appeared: alien, stern, and utterly unfamiliar.

CHAPTER 37

Sylvia stared in shock at the figure appearing on the screen, her breath catching sharply.

The alien looking back at her was unlike anything she'd seen before: definitely male, imposing, his features reminiscent of something she'd glimpsed in movies. For a brief, bizarre moment, she thought of Chewbacca, but this being was far more intimidating, distinctly wolflike, with a long snout, sharp white teeth, and dense, glossy fur of rich, dark brown covering his face. His eyes, intelligent and dangerous, narrowed with suspicion. Atop his head, sharply pointed ears twitched once, emphasizing the predatory alertness radiating from him.

He wore a sleek, high-tech suit of dull grey, perfectly fitted to a muscular frame. The room behind him looked like the interior of a spaceship: cold, sterile, futuristic, complete with a high-backed chair in which he sat imperiously.

Initially, the alien blinked, obviously startled to see her. Surprise quickly melted into a chilling, hostile expression, eyes narrowing dangerously.

He began to speak, a harsh torrent of guttural sounds that filled Sylvia with unease. It was an alien language, completely unintelligible to her ears, yet the tone conveyed unmistakable anger. She caught one repeated word amidst the rapid speech:

"Kyhin."

Sylvia's pulse quickened. Kyhin? Was that the masked alien's name? If it was, it

suited him.

Kyhin. It sounded powerful, dominant, and dangerous.

She wanted it to be his name.

She swallowed hard, knowing there wasn't a chance in hell this creature would understand her. Still, desperation pushed her to try.

"Do you... speak English?" she stammered, her voice wavering.

Predictably, he showed no sign of comprehension, only deepening suspicion.

She tried again, pointing insistently toward the cockpit window and repeating, "Kyhin," indicating the masked alien was elsewhere. Then she motioned urgently toward the screen, trying to make a gesture that was universal, that he might understand.

Come. Rescue us.

"Come here. Here!"

Surely, she reasoned, this had to be an ally. Kyhin wouldn't have left communication lines open for an enemy, would he?

Yet, doubt crept in swiftly, cold and insidious.

What if this creature was an enemy?

The wolf-like alien leaned forward, baring his teeth slightly as he spoke again, each word clipped, fierce, and demanding. His claws tapped impatiently on an unseen

surface, the clicking sound reverberating ominously.

Suddenly, Kyhin appeared, startling her—she hadn't heard a sound. He stood fully armored behind her, bringing with him the sharp scent of fresh snow, something burnt, and the unmistakable coppery tang of blood. Strangely, it smelled exactly like human blood. Sylvia briefly wondered how that was even possible, given how alien they were.

Kyhin's weapons were sheathed again, but he still radiated dark energy and menace. It crackled around him, potent and undeniable. Yet, instinctively, she sensed he posed no threat to her.

Instead, he moved protectively in front of her, facing the screen, and spoke in a low, cold tone to the wolf-like alien in the same alien language.

The figure on the screen visibly subdued, responding with a respectful nod—a universal sign of compliance.

Relief flooded Sylvia as she witnessed the interaction. The alien wasn't an enemy, after all. Whatever Kyhin had said had clearly established dominance.

The screen flickered off.

Kyhin turned slowly to face her, towering in his black-armored glory. His wings folded calmly behind him, weapons bristling from every angle, intimidating as ever. But now, Sylvia saw the cracks—literally cracks—in his armor.

His armor bore scorch marks and thin fractures, still smoking faintly from the energy blasts he'd endured. And his helm, which had always seemed impenetrable, mysterious, and menacing, now revealed noticeable damage at the edge along his jawline.

Still wrapped tightly in her furs, trembling slightly from both the cold and the sudden intensity of his presence, Sylvia felt a rush of heat surge through her body. Her heartbeat quickened, warmth pooling between her legs. Every nerve ending felt on fire as she looked up at him, breathlessly uttering one simple, powerful question:

"Kyhini?"

CHAPTER 38

K yhin froze, utterly shocked.

His name echoed softly from her lips, spoken in her delicate, breathless, unmistakably human voice. The sound vibrated deep into his core, unsettling him profoundly. She said his name with a hopeful cadence, almost like a plea, a prayer whispered into the darkness.

No one had ever uttered his name that way before.

It unraveled something inside him, something he'd fiercely locked away.

He stood rigid, acutely aware of his damaged helm, its fractured edge leaving him dangerously vulnerable.

There it was.

Her scent.

At last, it hit him in its full glory, entering through the cracks in his helm.

It nearly undid him.

Rich, intoxicating sweetness enveloped him, stirring something primal, fierce, and demanding. His pulse quickened as desire, raw and feral, clawed at his senses.

He shouldn't have come to her. Not yet. Not like this.

But he'd had no choice but to confront Dulahath. He'd heard her frantic voice from outside the ship, and he'd heard the other voice—the male voice—coming from his communication console.

The Rovok mercenary had answered his urgent call, appearing unexpectedly on the comm screen, undoubtedly drawn by the promise of substantial credits. Kyhin trusted Dulahath; the Rovok were notoriously reliable and honorable, their loyalty bound by the strict terms of payment. But Dulahath had laid eyes on Sylvia, his Sylvia, wrapped in furs and fragile, painfully vulnerable in her innocence.

That alone ignited a possessive rage within him.

None should gaze upon her but him. None should even know of her existence.

Dulahath was just fortunate he hadn't been there physically, for Kyhin surely would have killed him.

The human didn't know what she had done.

She shouldn't have touched the control panel.

If she were better trained, she would have known better.

Yet, in her desperate attempt to communicate, she'd unwittingly secured their safety. She'd somehow managed to maintain Dulahath's attention long enough for Kyhin to arrive. The Nalgar hunting party had found them first, an ambush swiftly thwarted by his ruthless counterattacks, but they would not be the last. Their location was compromised, and soon, more enemies would descend upon them. They needed Dulahath's swift extraction.

If she were better trained, he might have missed Dulahath's vital communication altogether.

Perhaps it would be better... if he simply allowed her to be.

But now, in this tense, charged moment, all rational thought dissolved beneath the scorching wave of her scent and the lingering fury of battle still coursing through his veins. She stared up at him with wide, innocent eyes, her breath uneven, her face flushed in ways he found irresistibly enticing.

Her soft utterance of his name nearly brought him to his knees.

He couldn't resist any longer.

Kyhin stepped closer, looming over her trembling form, noting the flush that deepened on her cheeks. The hunger surging through him intensified, uncontrollable. Slowly, deliberately, he reached up, removing the damaged helm and casting it aside with a low growl.

She would see him now.

All of him.

CHAPTER 39

The air inside the ship was cold, filled with the faint scent of metal, smoke, and something darker—blood, maybe. Sylvia sat motionless in the pilot's chair, still wrapped in the furs he'd given her, her body tense, every muscle coiled.

And then, without a word, he removed his helm.

Her breath caught sharply; her lungs forgot how to work.

Nothing could have prepared her for the impact of seeing him like this.

His skin was a rich, deep blue, catching the low light like silk-drenched shadow. His eyes—burning red—glowed with a steady, unsettling intensity. They didn't blink. Didn't waver. Long, obsidian-black hair spilled past his shoulders, tousled and windblown, surprisingly soft-looking despite the harshness of everything else about him. And his face was both elegant and brutal. All sharp lines and angles. Too alien. Too striking.

Her gaze fell to the faint parting of his lips, where she saw fangs. Real, gleaming fangs. His nostrils flared again—as if taking in her scent, as if he couldn't get enough of it, his chest rising and falling in slow, controlled breaths.

He looked like something from a dream—or a nightmare.

Everything about him radiated danger and barely held restraint. Fury simmered just beneath the surface.

His armor—cracked, scorched, still faintly steaming in places—only made him seem more formidable. And yet, he didn't lunge. Didn't shout. He just stood there, watching her.

Was he angry? Had she misstepped?

She'd said his name. Maybe too softly. Too personally.

But then, slowly— deliberately —he lifted a hand to his chest and pressed it flat, a gesture that indicated himself . "Kyhin."

The way he said it—his voice hoarse, cracking slightly—rippled through her like a current. It wasn't just sound. It was resonance.

Kyhin.

It was a declaration. Of intent. Of familiarity.

It was as she'd hoped.

His name. That's his name. Kyhin.

He pointed to her.

She blinked, slow to understand.

"Oh," she breathed, hand rising to mirror his gesture. "Sylvia."

He repeated it: slowly, his deep voice teasing out each syllable. "Sylvia."

The way he said her name: it wasn't just recognition. It was reverence.

Her skin prickled with awareness. Heat bloomed low in her belly.

The helm clattered to the floor, a final severing of distance.

And then he moved. Slowly. Silently. Like a storm held just at bay.

Each step toward her was deliberate, steady, as if he was giving her a chance to run—or surrender.

She didn't move.

Couldn't.

Breath caught between her ribs, eyes locked on him, Sylvia braced herself.

Something had shifted.

Standing in the quiet with his broad shoulders rising and falling ever so slightly, he drew in a long breath through his nose, sharp and deep.

His nostrils flared.

His eyes closed.

And a great shudder coursed through him.

It passed through his entire body, a ripple of tension breaking like a wave over stone. For someone who had always carried himself with absolute control—silence, mystery, armor—this sudden, visible vulnerability was staggering.

Sylvia stared, struck by the power of his reaction.

Something shifted between them then—something monumental. They couldn't communicate with one another in any form of spoken language, but the language of their bodies was undeniable.

His crimson eyes narrowed, glowing faintly as he opened them again. He was still scenting the air, nostrils flaring slightly, a faint tremor rippling through him. It was instinctive, animal. Like a wolf.

A predator.

And suddenly, it struck her. Was this why he wore the mask? To shield himself from her?

Another shiver ran through her. Was it possible that her scent... affected him?

Because he seemed different now. Raw. Unmasked. Still powerful, but more volatile. And something about that change—something about the way he looked at her—sent a thrill up her spine.

He knew her name now, and she had his.

Her body reacted as if it remembered something her mind was still too dazed to fully grasp. The way he'd touched her last night—the way it had undone her... it was imprinted in her memory and onto her body like a searing brand.

Was he going to take it further?

The thought should have scared her, but for some reason, it didn't.

It felt inevitable. Like standing at the edge of a dream.

This creature—this warrior who had just annihilated a squadron of vicious aliens as if it were nothing—was staring at her like she was the only thing in the Universe.

Tension coursed through her, winding tighter and tighter, mingling with the thrill of anticipation.

This was insanity, but she didn't care anymore.

She was beyond everything she'd ever known, cut off from her past, her safe, familiar life, and she didn't know if she could ever return.

All she knew was that this male, this alien ... was before her, and right now, he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Hard face, cruel eyes, features so aloof and beautiful he could have been a godlike sculpture, cheekbones so sharp they could cut, skin of pure cerulean blue.

Mythical wings.

Strange, alien armor that both protected him and enhanced his beauty, for the contrast of his vividly-hued skin and striking features against the black, now-damaged surface was otherworldly.

And... he was looking at her with pure, unrestrained hunger, like he wanted to devour her.

He looked like he was on the very edge of control, like he was about to lose it.

Is he going to hurt me?

But even as the question passed through her, she knew the answer.

No.

He wouldn't. Not her.

That knowledge only made the tension inside her worse. It coiled into desire, sharp and urgent. He wanted her, and something inside her wanted to be wanted like that.

He stepped closer, saying something low and guttural in his native tongue, his voice all gravel and strain and heat.

A strange realization bloomed inside her. She had power here. Over him.

He was fighting himself, and it was because of her.

Her scent. Her presence. Her.

And in a flash of reckless abandon, she acted.

She rose slightly, just enough to meet his eyes. "Come here," she whispered, knowing he wouldn't understand the words.

But the tone, the meaning... those were unmistakable, surely.

Some things were universal.

That's when it happened.

Something inside him broke.

The growl that slipped from his throat wasn't human. It wasn't gentle.

Taw. Possessive. Unmistakably his.

And then he was on her, scooping her into his arms with a forceful, desperate grace. Holding her tightly to his chest, his strange armor still warm against her skin.

She gasped, clutching at his shoulders as he carried her swiftly through the ship, down dark corridors until a set of doors slid open, then sealed them in.

The room was quiet. Spartan. Cold light filtered in through a narrow window overlooking the snowstorm.

A bed sat in the corner. There were no sheets, no pillows. Just a thin mattress, the kind made for utility, not comfort.

It didn't matter.

It was enough.

He set her down gently. The floor was cold beneath her bare feet, but the furs kept her warm.

Her gaze locked onto his.

The air between them pulsed with heat.

She raised her hand and pressed it lightly to his chest. "Take it off," she said, motioning with her hands. "All of it."

He understood. He had to. Because with a low command, his armor began to retract, just like before—bit by bit, like a living shell, peeling away to reveal the full, impossible truth of him.

And what she saw took her breath away once again, for he was unlike anything she could've imagined, and seeing him up close, she couldn't get enough of him.

She drank him in with her eyes: carved muscle, a form both terrifying and beautiful. Even his wings were bare now: without the deadly layer of metallic armor, and she realized they were covered in soft, leathery feathers, thousands of them.

His wings were folded tightly behind him, as barely restrained as the rest of him.

How magnificent.

How astonishing.

The soft, imperfect realities of Earth felt more distant than ever.

Then... she looked down, and her breath caught— again.

She saw him. All of him.

He was huge. Hard.

And... his cock was covered with small, writhing, tentacle-like protrusions that moved with a strange grace: flexing, waiting.

Oh, god.

Heat surged through her cheeks as she imagined him—his alien hardness— inside her.

She was certain she was beet-red right now. And her mind was white-hot with lust.

With a large, trembling hand, he reached for her face. Brushed his six fingers through her hair, slow and reverent.

Breathed her in.

Once. Twice.

Then, he pressed his forehead to hers.

Whispered something fierce and low in his language.

And then?—

"Sylvia."

Just her name.

A promise, wrapped in reverence and hunger.

And she knew—she was his.

This creature intended to possess her completely.

He always had.

There was no point in fighting it. She could influence him, perhaps, change his mind on small things, gradually convince him that he should treat her the way she wanted to be treated...

But for him to let her go?

To return her to Earth?

That would never happen.

And now, with him standing before her like this...

She wasn't sure she wanted him to.

CHAPTER 40

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in, and she melted into his heat. He was warmer than a human—blazing almost, she knew that already—but not unpleasant. His muscles were granite-hard beneath his smooth, scarred skin, and she could feel the hum of restrained strength beneath her palms. A dangerous, deadly living weapon, and yet he held her like she was something precious.

She didn't resist as he lifted her again, cradling her effortlessly in his arms. She was small beside him. Fragile.

And yet she had never felt more claimed.

He carried her to the bed, and when he laid her down, his movements weren't rough. They were deliberate. Possessive. Reverent.

The furs slipped from her shoulders first, and he spread them beneath her like a nest. Then, his hands moved to the alien dress clinging to her skin. It resisted at first—fluid, strange, almost alive—but he peeled it away slowly, drawing it down over her breasts, her ribs, her hips, his touch hot and maddening.

The dress slithered free down her legs, and he cast it aside.

She was naked beneath him. Exposed.

And he just looked.

Looked at her like she was the most impossible thing he'd ever seen.

Then he prowled forward, and his hands—those six-fingered, callused hands—swept over her body, gliding over her shoulders, reaching her breasts. He paused there, teasing with slow, deliberate strokes, coaxing breathless little sounds from her as he toyed with her nipples, brushing, circling, lightly pinching.

Her belly. Her hips. Her thighs. Every movement was a claim.

She couldn't speak, didn't need to. His intent was carved into every motion, every breath.

He owned her.

And then he grinned.

A dark, feral thing: knowing, dominant, edged with heat.

She barely had time to draw a breath before he slid lower and pressed his face between her thighs.

The first stroke of his tongue made her arch off the bed.

Hot. Silken. Expert.

He devoured her slowly, thoroughly, and she couldn't stop the helpless moans that spilled from her lips. His mouth was relentless—tasting, teasing, claiming—and he knew exactly what to do. Exactly how to undo her.

The pressure built fast. Too fast.

She gripped the furs beneath her, her entire body trembling, helpless under the onslaught of pleasure.

And when release came...

It shattered her.

White-hot.

Bone-deep.

Her scream echoed against the cold walls, and he growled against her, a dark, primal sound of male satisfaction.

She lay there, boneless, gasping, quivering.

And then he rose over her.

He gathered her into his arms. Held her against his chest.

And entered her in one slow, possessive thrust.

Her breath caught. Her mind blanked.

He didn't rush. He filled her completely, utterly, and stayed there, motionless for a moment, forehead pressed to hers once again.

The storm outside raged.

But in that room, there was only them.

He was still inside her, buried deep, as her climax continued to pulse through her, shudders rolling over her skin in waves.

And then he moved... just slightly at first.

And ecstasy slammed into her again.

Because he wasn't like anything she had ever known—wasn't human. His length was covered in those alien, writhing filaments: hundreds of them, soft and supple, yet firm and insistent. They caressed her from the inside, stretching her, stroking every part of her that had ever known pleasure, and places that had never been touched before.

Sensation exploded through her. She knew nothing but him. His touch. His heat. The thick, perfect length of him as he began to move.

He owned her.

He claimed her.

And her body answered without hesitation, spiraling up into another series of climaxes: harder, faster, building with every thrust, every pulse of sensation. The pleasure peaked again and again until she screamed his name— Kyhin— wordless, helpless.

He growled, low and rough, his hands tight around her waist as he held her in place, unrelenting.

He took her again and again—no hesitation, no mercy—just pure dominance, overwhelming and ferocious.

She lost time.

She lost herself.

The sound of the storm outside, the cold walls, her own thoughts—all disappeared. There was only his body. His heat. His rhythm. The shocking pleasure of those writhing filaments driving her mad.

He moved even faster— inhumanly fast—slamming into her with a rhythm that was devastating and precise. Every stroke sent her higher, into a realm beyond anything she'd ever imagined.

Her body convulsed. Another climax. Then another.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. She was his.

And then... at last, he stilled.

A long, guttural groan tore from his throat. Deep. Raw. Primal.

And he claimed her fully.

Sylvia cried out, her arms wrapping around him as her final climax broke, dragging her down into sweet, perfect oblivion.

She didn't know where she ended and he began.

Only that she had never, in her entire life, been more completely possessed.

CHAPTER 41

Sylvia slept.

Her cheek rested against his chest, her breath warm against his skin. Kyhin lay still, arms wrapped around her, wings draped loosely over the furs like shadows. The sleeping chamber was dim and quiet, the storm outside finally beginning to ebb, the worst of it spent.

And still, he couldn't believe it.

This human. This fragile, beautiful creature.

He had planned on training her. Taming her. His first impression had been that he could mold her into something manageable, perhaps entertaining at best.

Instead, she had undone him.

It was inevitable, he supposed. What male—what creature—could resist a scent like hers? It was intoxicating, maddening, a drug that clung to his skin and infiltrated his thoughts. A blessing he had never anticipated from a species he had considered laughably simple.

And she had been willing. Eager, even. Her body had sung for him, welcomed him. Taken everything he gave... and begged for more.

Now, with her warmth tucked against him, he didn't know what came next.

Was he her master?

Or something else?

He repeated her name silently in his thoughts. Sylvia.

A mere human. And yet, she had brought him to his knees. On a forsaken planet. When he was vulnerable, armor cracked, escape uncertain.

She had even secured their way off this rock.

Somehow, she'd accessed the comms and contacted Dulahath—the Rovok mercenary who owed him just enough favors to answer. Kyhin trusted him more than most. The Rovok were brutally honest and loyal when paid, and Dulahath knew Kyhin would pay.

Now they only had to survive until pickup.

More Nalgar would come. He knew it in his bones. And when they did, he would be ready. But not before he got her to safety.

Sylvia was his.

His sweetness. His prize.

And he would have her again. Again and again. He would make her sing for him, cry out like she had, shattering against his touch, completely his.

He would give her a home. His home.

He would build her a space that pleased her, and fill it with things to make her smile.

He would teach her his language: no more guessing, no more silence between them.

For now, he would find a translator device, perhaps from a Majarin trader, but eventually, she would speak to him in his tongue. Freely. Clearly.

And he would understand every soft thing she whispered in the dark.

He lay in perfect stillness, stroking her hair slowly, reverently. Content. Victorious. The battle outside had faded into nothing beside the triumph of claiming her.

And yet...

Her scent still surrounded him, driving into every nerve like fire. He could take her again. Easily. But she was spent, and he would not break what he wished to worship.

So he waited.

Let her sleep.

He would be her shield. Her sword. Her bed of warmth.

She wasn't afraid of him anymore. That pleased him.

She wasn't fighting him.

Even better.

He would show her that she never needed to yearn for her distant Earth again. Not when she had him.

They lay like that for a long while, long enough that he began to match his breathing

to hers. Even when she stirred and shifted, curling more tightly against him.

And then, faintly, the ship's system chimed.

An incoming signal.

He didn't move at first. Only listened.

Yes.

A Rovok frequency.

Dulahath had arrived.

Relief flickered across his features.

They would leave this forsaken world.

And once she was safe on Ivokka in his fortress, his domain, he would raze every threat that had ever dared touch her.

The Dukkar. The Kroll. The Nalgar.

All of them would burn.

She had awakened the storm inside him.

And he would become a god of vengeance in her name.

CHAPTER 42

Sylvia stirred to the brush of warm fingers against her cheek.

Kyhin.

He knelt beside her, still blessedly naked, motioning to her with a briskness that cut through the haze of her post-pleasure exhaustion. She blinked, bleary but obedient. His urgency needed no translation.

They had to go.

Of course they did. They'd crashed on an unknown winter planet in the middle of nowhere—why would she argue?

He moved with brutal efficiency, helping her dress. The same strange alien dress clung to her skin again, drawn tight by his deft hands. Then came the furs, rewrapped around her frame with surprising reverence, as if he were armoring something precious.

And then she watched.

As he rose and activated his armor.

Even damaged, it was a sight to behold.

It shimmered over his body in pieces, dark plates shifting and locking into place

around his muscled form. He stood there like a war god: deadly, poised, beautiful.

Fuck.

This male was lethal.

And he'd decided to focus his astounding alien intensity solely on her.

She shook her head, breath catching in her throat. He turned and lifted her into his arms again, and this time she didn't protest.

Why would she?

Her limbs still buzzed with the aftermath of what they'd shared, and there was something lazy, warm, and satisfied curling through her. Despite the sudden pace of action, the alarm in his posture, she felt safe.

That was the problem.

She felt too safe.

She should be alert, thinking critically, calculating the risk, worrying about terrible things she had no control over.

But she wasn't.

Because this male made her feel like nothing could touch her.

She tried to remind herself that he wasn't her salvation. That lust and pleasure weren't the same as trust.

That he could still do bad things to her.

After all, he owned her.

But god —she hated to admit—she liked it. Liked the fucked-up fantasy of it all.

There was a part of her that still ached for Earth, for her people, her familiar world, her things .

Her old identity.

But then there was this other side, wilder and raw, that she hadn't known was buried deep inside her. A part that had lain dormant for years as she folded herself into something practical and manageable.

Kyhin had shattered that.

And now he filled the void she hadn't realized was there.

They reached the cockpit. The display flickered to life, casting alien light across the dark panels.

She watched as a ship descended through the sky: an angular shape, all sharp edges and thick plating. Not sleek like Kyhin's vessel. No, this one was built tough and sturdy.

She knew instinctively: they'd be leaving his wrecked ship behind.

Then...

She saw it.

In the snow, glowing under the blood-tinged rays of the red sun.

“Oh, my god,” she gasped. It was an entire army. Silver-armored figures, marching in formation.

A hundred, at least.

“Holy shit,” she breathed.

Kyhin didn’t flinch. He stepped forward, silent and deliberate, and donned his helm once more, the black faceplate sealing away the strange beauty of his alien features. He said something to her, in strange, lyrical words she couldn’t understand... but she understood the intent, for his tone was steel.

Final.

Then, he moved around the room, retrieving weapons from the walls: guns, blades, and other things she couldn’t name, massive tools of war designed for a being like him.

And then, unexpectedly...

He returned to her.

He touched her face so gently with his armor-gloved hand—a contradiction. He whispered something low in his language: something she couldn’t decipher but somehow understood.

He would protect her.

She nodded, even though her throat was tight.

And she would wait.

Wait for the ship to descend, to take them away from this ruined world.

To where?

She didn't know.

Didn't care.

Because she was undone now.

CHAPTER 43

The cold bit at his exposed skin as Kyhin stepped through the hull breach, the wind slicing like knives through the jagged remains of his once-proud ship. His armor sealed tight around him, helm in place, systems flickering with half-power. His breath came steadily.

He wasn't tired at all. Any hint of fatigue had been erased by the triumph of discovering her.

And the rage he felt at the possibility that someone might dare take her away from him.

The red-tinged snow crunched beneath his boots as he moved forward, each step deliberate, heavy with purpose. Ahead, the Nalgar approached—silver-armored, efficient, uniform. An army.

They thought to take him? Who knew why? Nalgar were vicious and bloodthirsty by nature. Maybe they wanted to claim the bounty on his head. Maybe they wanted to kill him for sport, for vengeance. Or perhaps some high-ranking Nalgar simply wanted to try Hvrok blood.

His earlier estimation of their wisdom—of the possibility they would leave him alone—had been way off.

These Nalgar were stupider than he thought.

He was Hvrok, or had they forgotten?

And they thought to take what was his?

Unthinkable.

His vision sharpened. Bloodlust surged. But this time, it wasn't just for survival or vengeance. It wasn't for credits. It wasn't for pride, or honor, or the faded memory of a homeland long turned to ash.

It was for her.

Sylvia.

She had awakened something inside him. Something he didn't know could exist within his war-hardened body. Resolve unlike anything he had felt in all his cycles with the Hvrok. Not when he'd fought alongside his brothers. Not even when he'd carved his way through enemy ranks to complete a contract.

This was different.

This was his.

His to protect.

The thought of her face—soft, open, trembling with trust—and the way she had reached for him, whispered to him, clung to him... ignited a fire in his chest. He had to protect her. Would. No matter the cost.

The Nalgar dared to interrupt that. Dared approach. Dared to challenge.

His hands curled into fists.

A voice crackled through his helm's comm, faint, distorted by the damage it had sustained. "You have company, it seems," Duluhath's gravelled voice muttered, casual even now. So, the Rovok had seen his predicament. "Hold them off until I get within firing range. If anyone can... it's you, Hvrok."

Kyhin didn't respond with pleasantries.

"Understood."

The word was ice.

He stepped out into the red light, the sun casting the snow in hues of rust and blood. The wind howled around him, whipping his cloak and wings.

It was fitting.

He was about to deliver a massacre.

His weapons came to life: gun in one hand, blade sheathed at his back, pulse charges armed at his hips. His body thrummed with readiness.

They would not reach her.

He would paint the snow in Nalgar blood before they got within ten paces of his ship.

He walked forward.

Into the red.

Into the storm.

Into war.

The very thing he'd been built for.

CHAPTER 44

Sylvia pressed her hands to the cockpit glass, heart slamming wildly against her ribs as Kyhin strode out into the crimson-stained snow.

He looked like a shadow made real, his black armor glinting faintly under the strange red sun. A lone figure against a tide of silver.

The enemy.

She didn't know what they were. Didn't care. They moved with a terrible kind of coordination—too fast, too many. And they were here for him.

Or her.

Her throat closed. She swallowed hard, fighting the panic rising like bile.

He was walking into an army.

She'd seen him fight before—seen him tear through a dozen armed enemies like they were nothing more than training dummies. But a hundred? Maybe more?

He can't. He won't make it. They'll kill him.

And it wasn't just the thought of being taken that made her stomach twist.

It was the thought of losing him.

That brutal, beautiful creature.

She didn't want to admit it. But god, she felt it now.

Kyhin meant something to her. It was madness—she didn't know exactly what he was or where he had come from, didn't know much about him at all—but she actually cared about this strange, winged, alien male.

The army moved. Surged. Streaks of silver across the white, kicking up snow as they charged forward, silent and swift.

Kyhin flared his wings and rose.

She gasped as he took to the air, guns drawn, sleek and lethal. The Nalgar fired upward, shots cracking across the sky, but he soared higher, out of their range, turning into a blur of black against the bleeding sky.

What is he doing?

Was he trying to fight them from above?

Then she saw it.

A group of silver-armored figures breaking formation, veering toward the ship.

Toward her.

Fear gripped her.

Should she run? Hide in the room he'd kept her in? Lock herself in and hope?

But before she could move, a blur descended from above.

Kyhin.

He dropped like a missile, a black winged fury with twin blades drawn, moving so fast he became a blur.

He hit the ground, and a head went flying. Then another.

She choked, a horrified sound escaping her. She staggered back from the window, hand to her mouth.

Blood splattered the snow in arcs of deep crimson.

He rose again, wings slicing through the air, before diving once more.

Death. Precision. Fury.

He didn't stop. He didn't hesitate.

And all she could do was watch as her protector—her captor—became something more terrifying and awe-inspiring than she'd ever imagined.

An angel of war... or a demon.

He annihilated the ones that had dared approach the ship. None of them got within ten meters. He did it with such violence and fury that it sent a clear message to any who dared approach.

The snow was streaked red now, littered with broken bodies.

And that, his savageness... gave the rest of them pause.

The horde hesitated, their momentum faltering.

Kyhin used it.

He flew higher again, gaining altitude fast, wings stretching wide, a dark blur against the dimming sky. They opened fire—blasts of searing blue streaking upward, cutting through the cold air—but he climbed beyond their range.

Drawing their eyes. Drawing their attention.

A diversion?

Realization clicked through her like a bolt of clarity.

He wasn't just fighting.

He was buying time.

For the ship: the alien ship that was coming to retrieve them.

She could see it now, descending fast through the cloud cover, rectangular and brutal-looking, all hard edges and armor. A different kind of beast compared to Kyhin's sleek vessel.

Hope surged in her chest, mingling with dread.

Hold them off, Kyhin. Just a little longer.

Please.

All of a sudden, the rescue ship opened fire.

Explosions ripped through the snowfield, columns of flame and debris erupting like geysers. The ground shook with the force of it, and the sky flashed with red and orange bursts.

The silver army scattered like ants.

Kyhin veered hard, dodging the blast radius, soaring away from the bombardment, drawing the last of the firepower with him.

And then... he turned.

With impossible speed, he angled back toward the ship.

Toward her.

Her heart leapt as he descended, wings folding in as he dropped through the smoke, disappearing from view.

He was coming back.

CHAPTER 45

K yhin burst into the cabin with breathtaking swiftness, urgency radiating from every movement. Before she could speak, he swept her into his arms, wrapping her tightly in the furs. There was no chance to argue, no point in resisting. She understood.

He was getting her off this planet.

She clung to him, pressing her face against the warm metal of his armor as he carried her toward the exit. The air was frigid outside, the snow tinged pink by the otherworldly light of the red sun, the battlefield blackened and charred where the rescue ship's fire had torn craters through the earth.

At the hatch, he paused.

Held her close.

Then, he murmured something in that gravel-deep voice, words low and unintelligible through his helm—but the sound soothed her like a lullaby, filled with something fierce and unshakable. A promise.

It was terrifying in its surety.

And it was the most reassuring sound she'd ever heard.

Suddenly, he flared his wings and leapt.

They rose into the air with shocking speed. She stifled a scream, her breath snatched away by the sudden rush of wind, but his arms were like iron around her. There was no falling.

Only flight.

Heart in her mouth, she dared to look down.

The world spread beneath them: snow-covered plains, jagged mountains in the distance, rivers like silver ribbons glinting under the fading sun. The battlefield below still smoked, bodies strewn in the snow.

It was strange.

Surreal, like a dream.

Beautiful, in the most terrifying way.

How did she end up here?

From a beach on Earth... to this. A dark fairytale come to life.

Kyhin took them higher, soaring toward the ship hovering above. Wind lashed her face and tore at her hair, but the furs shielded her from the worst of it. The heat of his body kept her steady.

He landed with a solid thud atop the rescue vessel.

A hatch hissed open beneath them.

Warmth spilled out.

Safety.

Escape.

And she let him carry her down into the light.

CHAPTER 46

The interior of the Rovok vessel was utilitarian and dimly lit, humming with the faint vibration of powered containment fields and low-frequency drives. Kyhin strode through the corridors with Sylvia still in his arms, unwilling to part with her for even a moment.

He found Dulahath in the forward hold, where the merchant-mercenary stood waiting, arms crossed, surrounded by his crewmates: hulking beings armored in bone-white plating, each of them bristling with weapons but wise enough not to reach for any.

"You've always had a flair for theatrics, Kyhin," Dulahath said dryly, speaking in Urtia—the common trader's tongue. "But even for you, this is excessive."

Kyhin didn't respond to the jab. He simply shifted Sylvia more securely in his arms.

"You have what I asked for," he said.

Dulahath nodded once, the heavy beads woven through his coarse mane clacking softly. "Aye. No Kroll ships in orbit. They steer clear of Nalgar territories now. Anakris system's a graveyard to them. You're lucky, in your way. Crashed far from big population centers. The Nalgar here? Nothing compared to the true warlords."

Kyhin's jaw clenched behind his helm.

"They came for me. Or her. "

Dulahath's gaze flicked to Sylvia, and for a moment, his brow lifted in astonishment. "She's... human? I thought that was just a rumor."

Kyhin didn't answer.

Didn't need to.

He simply growled, low and deep. "She's mine. That's all you need to know."

His tone was final. Deadly.

"Anyone who tries to harm her," Kyhin said, "or take her, will learn what it means to be hunted by a Hvrok. To the ends of the universe, Dulahath."

The Rovok raised his hands in mock surrender, half-smirking. "Understood."

His crew wisely said nothing.

"I've ordered quarters prepped for her," Dulahath said. "Clean water. Food. Clothing. The dress she's wearing looks like it was spun from ornamental vines."

"I will accompany her," Kyhin said, glaring coldly through his helm. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have permitted the Rovok to get away with such insolence, but Sylvia was here, and he didn't want to show that side of him in front of her—not anymore.

There had been enough violence already.

She should be shielded from the harshness of the Universe at all times.

Dulahath inclined his head. "Of course."

Kyhin shifted his weight. "Do you have a translator?"

Dulahath grunted. "You want to talk to her. Properly."

Kyhin didn't confirm or deny it. He only stared.

"Latest model from the Majarin trade post," Dulahath added. "Expensive. I'll add it to your already absurd bill."

"Do it."

"A crew member will bring it to your quarters within the hour."

Kyhin gave a nod.

The other Rovok crew gave him a wide berth as he turned.

He could feel their fear. See it in the way their eyes flicked to Sylvia, then quickly away.

Good.

Let them fear.

It would keep them alive.

And now, with his human cradled against his chest, Kyhin would show her what it truly meant to belong to a Hvrok.

What it meant to be his.

CHAPTER 47

The quarters were utilitarian, undecorated, but spacious enough. Clean metal walls, bolted fixtures, a large bed with a simple spread. The lighting was warm, almost surprisingly pleasant—soft golden tones that diffused across the ceiling and walls, more reminiscent of Earth than Sylvia expected.

Almost familiar.

There was a basin with fresh water. Steam drifted up from a tray on a side table. Food. She didn't recognize it, not exactly, but it was hot and aromatic. Some kind of meat stew in a thick, dark gravy with a white, starchy substance alongside it, steaming and soft. It looked almost like mashed potatoes. Alien mashed potatoes.

It seemed... edible enough. Hopefully, it wouldn't poison her.

Kyhin carried her in and deposited her gently in a wide, cushioned chair.

He crossed to the food and brought the tray over.

Then, to her faint amusement, he picked up one of the utensils—a polished, metal tool somewhere between a spoon and a fork. A spork. Of course. Aliens had sporks, too.

And, with utter seriousness, he crouched before her and offered her the first bite.

Again with this, she thought. Feeding her. He insisted on it.

Warmth unfurled in her belly: not from the food, but from the act itself. From the tenderness buried in his domination. The way he controlled the moment, but made it feel like worship.

Still, she lifted a hand. Pointed to his helm.

"Take it off," she murmured. Her voice was soft, coaxing.

He tilted his head slightly and grunted.

Was that... amusement?

Then, obediently, he removed it.

The instant the helm clicked free, he breathed in, and she saw his nostrils flare wide. His pupils dilated. A tremor rolled through him. His chest rose with a sharp inhale.

His lips curled into a grin. Knowing. Possessive. Delighted.

God help her.

That reaction. He was imbibing her and showing her what her scent did to him.

He knew exactly what that little display did to her.

Then he fed her.

Bite by bite.

The stew was rich and savory, the starch velvety. Alien, yes, but nourishing, grounding. She let him control the pace—slow, deliberate—yet he waited for her cue

to move on, never pushing.

So patient. So maddeningly gentle.

When she was finished, a soft chime rang through the room. She looked up.

One of the Rovok crew stood at the door, hunched and uneasy. He said nothing, only extended an object into Kyhin's waiting hand.

Then he vanished.

The door slid shut.

Kyhin turned and approached, revealing what the crew had delivered.

A smooth silver object rested in his palm. Round, about the size of a large stone, polished to a mirrored sheen. It pulsed faintly, almost organically.

Sylvia stared at it, puzzled.

He held it out to her.

"What's this?" she asked aloud, English curling softly off her tongue.

To her shock, the sphere pulsed and echoed her voice, only now it layered it with something else, another language, the sounds strange and sharp, projected toward Kyhin.

Translating her words in real time.

Holy crap.

He grinned, eyes lighting with satisfaction.

Then he spoke. The translator shifted and replied in perfect English.

"I can understand you now," it said, in a tone eerily matched to his deep, commanding voice.

"Oh my god," she whispered.

"Not a god," he replied without irony. "But some fear me as such. And I will keep you safe. I swear."

Her heart stuttered.

"You're called... Kyhin," she said reverently. "What are you, exactly?"

"I am a Hvrok. Probably the last of my kind. The rest of my people were wiped out—by their own doing."

She let that sink in. The weight of his words. How lonely that must have been.

"Why did you buy me?"

He shrugged, unapologetic. "A whim. I thought you were beautiful. I wanted to have you."

"Oh." It stung. The simplicity. The selfishness of it.

"And you are going to keep me... as your creature, for your amusement."

He met her gaze steadily. "That was the beginning. But it has changed. I see what you

are now. You are precious. I will never let you want for anything. You will be safe. Pleasured. Cherished. You will be my queen."

"What if all I want is to go home?" she asked, her voice cracking slightly.

For the first time, his expression shifted.

Crestfallen.

And gods, it tugged at her heart.

"You cannot have that," he said quietly. "But I can give you contact. With other humans. Even visits, if you wish. I will accompany you. Guard you. I will use a holographic disguise. There are humans scattered across the stars—taken, like you. I can find others. You will not be alone."

Her world tilted.

Others?

Her mind reeled. And yet... she believed him.

She also knew, deep down, there was no going back. Not really. The beach. Her job. The monotony of her old life. She wasn't the same.

She would never be the same. She could never go back to what she had been.

But she could keep those bonds, those links with her past... if he allowed.

"Then promise me," she said. "That I'll see my people again. And that I won't be a caged pet. I need a purpose. Something real. I won't exist just to please you."

He leaned forward, voice low. "What if I wish to exist just to please and protect you?"

She opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came.

Only her body answered, heat blooming deep within, betraying her.

She shook her head in exasperation.

Again, that thought swirled through her: of being his.

And again, she didn't hate it.

He gestured lightly to the collar still circling her throat.

"Shall I remove it?"

Her fingers lifted, tracing the cool, jeweled surface.

Priceless. Alien. A symbol of his claim.

"No," she whispered, meeting his gaze. "Leave it. It's mine now."

CHAPTER 48

" L eave it. It's mine now."

The translated words echoed in Kyhin's mind, sharper than any blade he had ever wielded. She touched the collar with a kind of reverence, with ownership, and something in him broke open.

Did he own her... or did she own him?

The thought struck hard, devastating him.

His arousal came fast, as it always did around her, magnified by the full rush of her scent, thick in the air, unfiltered, glorious.

He would need his armor repaired, of course. But maybe... maybe he would have the respirator permanently modulated to allow her scent through. To live in it. To breathe it like oxygen.

It was part of him now.

She was part of him.

And he would do anything she demanded to keep her happy...

Except give her back.

But she didn't want that either. She'd said it. She'd claimed the collar.

His.

Her glorious neck was wrapped in the symbol of his claim. Her voice, her scent, her gaze... all sweet. Innocent. Brave. Too sweet for a being like him to own.

And yet, she was his.

He thought of Anakris. Of how she had trusted him there. Clung to him. Believed in him.

And he realized...

She gave him purpose.

An assassin's life was hollow. For cycles, he'd drifted, hunted, killed, merely... existing.

But now, he burned with direction. With intent.

Her.

The knowing of it took over. Devoured all coherent thought. Lust and reverence and something deeper—something almost sacred—rose up and shattered his control.

His armor peeled back at his command, segment by segment, even unfolding from his wings, and he dropped to his knees.

"Please," he said hoarsely, the translator catching the word, echoing it to her. "I need you right now."

She stood.

Crossed to him, slow and graceful.

Clad only in that damn dress—his choice. She was exquisite. Untouchable.

But she was his.

And he was going to ruin her again.

He reached up and tore the dress from her like it was nothing.

Her gasp was sharp, her eyes wide. And he saw it there: the desire. The heat. The hunger.

This creature wanted him.

It undid him.

He beckoned her to stand. And as she did, he leaned in and kissed her there: in her soft folds, the source of her sweetness.

He inhaled.

Let her scent destroy him once again.

Then he licked. Teased. Flicked his tongue over her most sensitive place, just the way he knew she liked. Her fingers gripped his hair, and he wrapped his hands around her slender waist, stroking up and down her curves, reverent and greedy.

He tasted her.

Again.

And again.

She climaxed. Shaking. Whimpering.

To his intense satisfaction.

But he wasn't done.

He gave her more.

Until her legs trembled. Until her voice cracked. Until her pleasure soaked his mouth and his hands.

And just as she reached the edge again, he rose, lifting her effortlessly. She was so light. So perfect.

He slid inside her with slow, aching precision.

His wings—bare now, no armor—wrapped around her, enclosing them in shadow and warmth.

And they moved.

Together.

He claimed her.

Fully.

And knew he would never be the same again.

But he didn't care.

This was meant to be.

She was his.

His human.

His Sylvia.

EPILOGUE

She stood on the balcony, bathed in golden light, staring out at a forest that could never exist on Earth.

Alien trees stretched toward the twin moons above, their leaves a luminous green-blue that shimmered faintly, even in shadow. Birds flitted through the canopy—beings with wings and crests and strange, sweeping tails—singing in warbles and whistles so close to familiar, yet undeniably other. The air smelled rich and alive, full of strange pollen and something sweet beneath it all.

It was beautiful. Remote. Utterly untouched.

No cities. No people. No noise.

Just the fortress behind her—Kyhin's fortress. Now hers, too.

A brutal structure of some alien, concrete-like substance, studded with mineral veins that caught the light like stars. Cold and unyielding once, but since her arrival, it had softened. A little. Subtle changes, additions. Textiles from across the Universe. Warm lighting. Even relics from Earth, scavenged from trader stalls and outposts. A record player. Woolen throws. Real coffee.

Kyhin brought them back each time he left—and he always came back.

Sometimes she was alone, surrounded by technology she didn't understand, protected by systems that could probably reduce an invading army to ash. At first, the solitude

had felt unbearable.

But not anymore.

Not when she knew he would return with gifts. With surprises. With his warmth and his hands and the low, rough voice that belonged only to her now.

She'd learned about him over time... through the translator and his increasingly fluent English, and now, through her growing grasp of his own language.

He'd once served an empire. Been one of the Hvrok elite, a blade in the dark, a tool of enforcement. And when the Hvrok turned on each other, when their legacy was burned down by their own hands, Kyhin had been left with no purpose but survival.

A killer without a cause.

Until her.

The thought struck her again, painfully intimate.

She was his reason now.

And if anyone tried to take her from him...

Her mind flashed to Earth. Her family. Her brothers. Her parents: aging, frail. Still alive, hopefully. Still waiting. Still wondering what happened to her.

She had disappeared from a beach. No trace. A car left behind. A case file, probably. A photo tacked to a corkboard somewhere, labelled: Missing.

God. The thought made her ache. How could she leave her family and friends with the pain of not knowing?

But Kyhin had promised. They would return. Soon. Once the ship was ready. Once his disguise was perfected.

She'd spent a long time thinking about it. Planning it. The lie.

A story about an abduction. About escape. About a mysterious man who helped her. She'd coach Kyhin in everything: his alias, his accent, his backstory.

They'd pull it off. Somehow.

And then, she'd say goodbye. Again. But properly this time.

Return here.

To him.

A flimsy plan, maybe, but what choice did she have? She couldn't go back to the life she knew. She wasn't that woman anymore. That life didn't fit. Not after this.

Not after him.

He who would never let her go.

Behind her, a breeze stirred... and then warm arms wrapped around her. Large. Inhuman. Familiar.

Kyhin.

She didn't flinch. Didn't tense.

Just leaned back into him.

"Is something wrong?" he murmured, the translator glowing faintly in his palm.

"Just thinking," she replied, a little stiffly, in Hvrok.

He chuckled. That low, pleased sound she'd come to know so well. Every time she made the effort to speak in his tongue, he looked so happy.

"If something troubles you..."

"I know. You'll move the stars to make it right." She smiled faintly. "I was just thinking about Earth. About what I'm going to say. It's... going to be complicated."

"You could tell them the truth."

"The truth would break them," she said softly. "They wouldn't believe it. And even if they did... it would haunt them. This is the kindest way."

"You lie out of consideration," he said thoughtfully, trying to understand.

"Sometimes, it's necessary."

"Would you lie to me?" His voice was gentle, but there was steel beneath.

She turned her head slightly. "No. That would be impossible."

"Good." He kissed her neck, slow and molten, and she felt her breath catch. "You don't ever have to lie to me."

"I know." And somehow, it was true. He was the only one she could be utterly unfiltered with. The only one who saw her— all of her —and wanted more.

"There is a Majarin," he said, almost shyly. "He is bonded to a human female. I've

made contact. If you wish... I can arrange a meeting."

Her heart stirred. "Another human?"

"Yes. I thought... perhaps it would please you."

"It would," she said, a little breathless. "Thank you."

He seemed impossibly pleased with himself, and again, she was struck by how much joy he took in making her happy. Fierce joy. Possessive joy.

His wings—bare now, always bare in this sanctuary—wrapped around her. Warm and leathery and secure.

She felt his arousal press against her back. Hard. Hot.

But he didn't rush her.

He never did.

And she was grateful for it, grateful for the tension he allowed to build, for the power she felt in making him wait.

She was aroused, yes. Her heart fluttered. Her body tingled. But she was content to let it simmer.

Because this moment—this stillness—meant something.

They stood like that for a while. Wrapped in each other. Surrounded by alien birdsong and the wind through luminous trees.

And for the first time since she'd been stolen from her world, she felt...

Like this was her place now.

Theirs.

Belonging.

Together.