



Primal Claim (MM Alien Scifi Romance) (Warlords of Vasz Book 1)

Author: *Leo Rivers*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Elian

I never planned to crash behind enemy lines, straight into the arms of an alien warlord. Rael — towering, muscle-bound, golden-skinned, with a set of horns that scream warrior king.

Our species are at war. He shouldn't look at me with anything but hatred.

But his touch is surprisingly gentle.

He could kill me. He should kill me.

So why doesn't he?

Rael

Humans are our sworn enemies, the cruel alien race warring with my people.

But then one fell from the sky.

Elian's resilience awakens a part of me I had sealed away — a need to bond, to care, to protect. Despite every rule, every vow, the beautiful human stirs a primal need deep within me.

I've claimed him in the name of war, yet he's claiming my heart.

And letting go? Unthinkable.

Total Pages (Source): 24

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:14 am

Elian awoke to darkness.

For a moment, he was still lost in the hazy world of dreams, half-remembered images slipping through his fingers.

Then reality slammed into him, hard enough to make his head spin.

With a groan, he sat up in his cryopod, the restraints automatically unfurling and sliding away at his command. The thick, reinforced glass of the pod's lid was already open, the thick, hot air of the ship filling his lungs.

He coughed, shaking himself awake. Hot air? The generation ship's air was usually cool, filtered, clean.

What was happening?

Elian looked around for someone else. His pod was the last of the row, furthest to the back. As everyone had been getting into their pods, he'd joked about having the worst seat on this trip.

From his position, he could look out over the long rows of cryopods.

They weren't opening. Their lids were closed firmly, their screens blank. The rest of the cryobay was dark, lit only by the frantic, pulsing flash of emergency lights.

The silence was absolute, the kind of deep, profound quiet that was almost its own presence. There were no hums of machinery, no distant echoes of human voices —

nothing.

The ship was dead.

Elian's heart began to race. He'd been told that the journey to his new home would be a long one, but he'd be asleep for the entire trip. He'd been told that he'd wake up to find his new life on the colony planet ready and waiting for him.

A place to belong, waiting to accept him. A place to finally call home. He'd counted down every day until launch.

But now something was wrong.

Elian winced as a shower of sparks rained down from a ruptured ceiling panel. The acrid stench of burnt circuitry stung his nostrils, setting his eyes watering. Red emergency lights flickered and strobed, casting the corridor in an apocalyptic glow.

He had to move. He stumbled to his feet, still clumsy from his long sleep.

Just... just get to the control room. You can open the pods from there. Wake the others.

The thoughts pounded in his head, drilled into him by training. He tried to remember all of those training lectures and information packets, running over those In Case of Emergency... procedures as a mantra to focus his mind against the growing sense of panic fluttering in his chest.

He staggered out of the cryobay, desperately heading toward the command center. It was... around here, right, down the hallway — hot, why was everything so hot?— and then you followed the emergency lighting...

Elian rounded a corner. The corridor opened up into a gaping void, the path ahead reduced to twisted and shredded metal.

The hull had been torn open.

They'd crashed.

Smoke billowed. The ship was burning. Elian coughed, waving a hand before his face as his eyes streamed. He fumbled for his shirt, yanking the thin fabric up to cover his mouth and nose.

This was insane. He was just a passenger, a nobody. He was supposed to be a colonist on a new planet, building quarters, planting food, securing safe water.

Not this. Nothing like this.

What the hell was he supposed to do if the others didn't wake up?

There! Through the smoke, he could see the door to the control center, illuminated by flashing emergency lights. There was just enough of the corridor remaining for him to get to it.

Gritting his teeth, Elian clambered over debris, shards of metal biting into his palms. When he brushed against some, squeezing past, it burnt, making him hiss with pain. An alarm blared, the piercing shriek setting his teeth on edge. Warning lights flickered erratically, painting the smoke in lurid shades of crimson.

Just a little farther. He had to wake everyone else. He had to...

Finally, he was there. Elian surged forward, scrambling over the debris, heart pounding in his ears. He slipped through the doorway, eyes wide, breath rasping in

his throat.

Most of the screens were off. The ship was running on backup power, only showing the essential panels. The flickering emergency lights cast an eerie crimson glow over the bio-readings of the cryopods.

Hundreds of them, all in a list.

And they all read the same thing: NO LIFE SIGNS.

No.

He didn't know how long the word echoed in his mind, hollow and numb. His legs felt like lead, rooting him to the spot. But the acrid stench of smoke soon stung his nostrils, jolting him back to reality. A curl of black vapor was drifting lazily from a ruptured console, the first tendril of flame licking hungrily at the plastic housing.

Elian's heart stuttered in his chest. He spun on his heel, shoes skidding on the deck as he fled back the way he'd come. Smoke now billowed in thick clouds, stinging his eyes, clogging his lungs with each ragged gasp.

He couldn't think, couldn't process. His mind reeled in terror and denial. It couldn't be real, it just couldn't. Not when he'd finally dared to hope that there was a place for him—

No. Stop it. Don't go there.

Focus. Survive.

The words were a lifeline, pulling him back from the brink as he scrambled over the twisted wreckage. Pain blossomed in his palms, in his knees, but he barely registered

it. Just keep moving. Don't stop. Can't stop.

There! The emergency lights led to what he needed: the emergency exit. It was just ahead of him, a thick, circular hatch built into the bulkhead.

Elian lunged for the manual release, yanking down on the lever with every ounce of strength he possessed.

Please don't be broken, too...

Please don't let me be trapped in here!

Finally, with a shudder and a groan of protesting metal, the hatch cracked open, a sliver of harsh light bleeding in from outside. Elian grunted, bracing himself as the hatch swung wide, the effort pulling the breath from his lungs.

Then he froze, eyes widening in shock at the sight that greeted him.

Not the lush, verdant fields of the colony planet that he'd been promised. Not rolling meadows and full blue lakes shimmering beneath an alien sun.

Just... desolation.

A vast, empty plain of rust-red rock and dust stretched out to the horizon. The sky above was a bruised, mottled canopy of sickly greens and burnt oranges, roiling stormclouds flickering with silent lightning.

Elian's breath caught in his throat, a hollow ache blossoming in his chest.

But there was no time to stare. The ship gave a violent shudder, the squeal of tearing metal echoing from somewhere deeper within its mangled interior. Smoke billowed

through the corridor, stinging Elian's eyes, forcing him to turn away with a ragged cough.

He had no choice. No alternative. Staying meant a slow, choking death as the fire consumed what little remained.

Out there... No matter what it looked like, at least he had a chance.

With a grunt of effort, Elian hauled himself through the hatch and tumbled down the short distance to the planet's surface. Loose gravel skittered beneath his boots as he fought to keep his balance, the howling wind tugging insistently at his pathetically thin sleeping clothes.

All around him, the wreckage of the starship lay scattered in a wide debris field. Twisted shards of metal glinted dully, the flickering flames casting an eerie crimson glow over the devastation. A thick plume of oily black smoke billowed skyward from the ruptured hull, roiling and churning in the biting wind.

Elian turned in a slow circle, heart pounding as he scanned the blasted landscape. Nothing. No movement, no signs of life or civilization as far as the eye could see. Just endless miles of that flat, rusty plain fading into the murky twilight. In the distance, it climbed into sharp, jutting hills, covered in a forest of thick, skulking trees.

What planet was this?! Where in the universe had their journey taken them? Elian raised his gaze to the bruise-colored sky, squinting against the biting wind.

No familiar stars or constellations. No shining moons to offer even the faintest sense of familiarity or comfort.

Just that seething, storm-wracked void stretching endlessly overhead.

Elian was alone. Utterly, hopelessly alone.

With a visible effort, Elian straightened his shoulders and began to walk, putting one foot in front of the other. Away from the burning wreckage, away from the bitter ashes of a dream turned to dust.

Alone, but not beaten. There had to be a way to survive this nightmare.

He had to believe that.

He had no other choice.

The wind howled across the desolate plain, whipping up swirls of rusty dust that stung Elian's eyes. He finally reached the cover of the woods, ducking out of that infernal wind.

He shielded his face with one hand as he surveyed the barren landscape. Night was falling fast. The sickly green skies were already fading to inky blackness, the last feeble rays of the alien sun disappearing over the horizon.

Elian's breath was beginning to plume in frosty clouds before him. He hadn't expected the temperature to plummet so rapidly. But there was no time to dwell on it. He had to find shelter.

It took most of the dwindling sunlight to find a small crevice tucked up between jutting alien rocks. Elian began methodically settling down into it, curling up into a ball.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Don't think about the flames licking at the ship's mangled hull. Don't think about the cryopods and the lives they were supposed to protect.

Just focus on the task at hand. One step at a time.

He tugged his knees to his chest, movements stiff and jerky in the cramped confines. The wind screamed past outside, a banshee howl that set his teeth on edge. His stomach roiled, reminding him of just how long it had been since his last real meal.

He was supposed to wake up to the medical team offering him rations. He was supposed to sit quietly for thirty minutes while his vitals were monitored, getting his strength back.

He wasn't supposed to flee a burning spaceship, and curl up in the woods like a lost creature.

Elian groaned, resting his head against his knees. Outside, the first few pinprick stars were winking into existence, alien constellations charting their stately paths across the bruised canvas of the sky.

How many light years had he traveled to wind up here, huddled alone beneath a foreign sky?

A lump rose in his throat, the grief sudden and visceral. He squeezed his eyes shut, but the tears came anyway, hot, stinging tracks that cut through the grime on his cheeks.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. If only he'd known. If he'd had even an inkling of the nightmare that awaited them all, maybe he could have...

Could have what? Stopped it? Changed the course of events? Don't be a fool. You're just a passenger, a name on a manifest. None of this was ever in your control.

He was so tired. Now that the adrenaline from the escape had ebbed away, bone-deep

weariness dragged at his limbs.

Elian's lashes fluttered, his breathing evening out into the slow, steady rhythm of encroaching slumber. Exhaustion clouded his mind, the ragged edges of despair fraying into blessed numbness—

A sound. Faint but distinct, subtle underneath the mournful keening of the wind.

Elian's eyes snapped open, body going rigid. He held his breath, straining to hear...

There it was again. A soft sound, like a footfall. Coming from outside the shelter, somewhere out in the endless night.

He wasn't alone.

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The wild storms of Vasz were fierce.

But so was Rael.

He squinted at the wild skies, the clouds shifting through a murky pearlescent shimmer that glinted off of his golden skin. His cloak whipped behind him, a complement to his pent-up mood, and the wind whistled between his horns.

It was all a beautiful sight.

It was all his.

The territory surrounding him was his clan's territory. It was his to protect, his to defend. Everything that he could see was under his care. His people lived here, safe under his watchful eye. They cultivated the thick vegetation, they tended the animals, and they lived in peace — all under his defense.

It was a heavy responsibility, but it was one that Rael bore with pride.

At the moment, though, he was also bearing it with more than a little fatigue.

The diplomatic trip had been grueling. Dealing with other clan leaders was always a trial, even when they were on good terms. Not just Rael's long journey over to their neighboring lands, but the endless negotiations, the subtle peacocking, the politeness that everyone knew could shatter into violence at any moment...

Gods, Rael had certainly had enough of that. It was all enough to make a Borraq

alpha long for the simplicity of battle.

And then there was the matter of the medical treatment.

Rael had gone to his neighbors for standard clan diplomacy, but he'd also been eager for any news of medical supplies.

Worrak was the child of one of Rael's warriors, just a few years from his prime. He was a good kid. He had a future ahead of him as a warrior in his own right, if he could just get through this damn sickness.

But the gene medicine that he needed was rare, and it was expensive. If there was any way to secure a cure, Rael needed to find it.

But none of the neighboring clans had heard of any cheaper suppliers. With the war against the humans raging in space, complex medical supplies were scarce on Vasz — and when you could finally find someone offering them, their prices were sky-high.

Rael was the clan's alpha. He had to find a way to get it.

He had to.

But first, he had to get home to his clan's village. He had a long journey ahead of him, but it was one that he'd taken many times. Through the woods, across the raging twin rivers of Miaj and Nor, and around the edge of the vast plain of the Kasri desert. All he had to do was keep putting one foot in front of the other—

Something exploded.

The sound was enormous, a deep boom that shook the landscape and echoed through

the sky, vibrating Rael's very bones. It was like nothing he'd ever heard before, something truly cataclysmic.

He startled, his heart pounding in his chest. What in the seven hells was that?! His grip tightened on his blade's hilt. It had been his father's blade before him, and his father's father's before that. It had seen every challenge that an alpha could face. Rael centered himself on its sturdy hilt, drawing on the touch of the line of alphas before him.

He scanned the area, senses on high alert.

Dust and debris scattered in the distance.

Rael's eyes narrowed, his protective instincts kicking into high gear. He broke into a sprint, muscles rippling beneath his skin as he raced towards the source of the disturbance.

Whatever was going on, it was in his territory — and he would be damned if he didn't defend it.

In the distance, a plume of smoke rose up from the Kasri plain.

There. That was his target.

He knew these lands. It didn't take him long to crest a ridge in the woods, gazing out over the open spread of the desert plain.

When he saw what it was, he froze.

A ship.

It was an ugly thing. It lay in the middle of the desert plain, half-buried in the sand. The metal was rent and twisted, great scars marring its surface. Smoke rose from it, thick oily plumes that filled the storm breeze with the stink of burnt electronics, even at this distance.

It was a human craft.

Rael knew a Borraq vessel when he saw one. They were sleek and deadly things, built for speed and for war. As his clan's alpha, he'd stood at Vasz's stardock and seen off the volunteer warriors from his clan, all eager to prove themselves in battle.

Some came back. Some never did.

Yes, Rael knew Borraq ships. But this was different. It was a bulky, ugly thing, all sharp angles and heft.

He'd never seen a human ship up close before, let alone a crashed one — but there was no question about it.

How had it gotten here? His territory was in the middle of the Borraq home planet, far from the human front in space. The war with the humans raged far away out there, between the stars, in asteroid fields and around dead planets.

The Borraq's home planet should have been the last possible place for a human ship to be.

And yet one had still managed to crash right in the middle of Rael's territory.

Rael's lip curled in disgust. He was a proud Borraq, born and bred. His people had their ways, their traditions. They lived in harmony with the galaxy, taking what they needed and defending it from any that would try to take it from them. They were fair

in their dealings with other species, so long as those species respected Borraq strength.

And if they didn't respect it, they were punished.

But ever since the humans had burst onto the galactic scene, everything had changed. The Borraq were a warrior race, it was true — but they were warriors with honor. They fought for reasons, for causes. They had rules, lines that they wouldn't cross. There were ways to earn their enmity, and ways to earn their respect.

But not with humans. Dealing with them was like trying to negotiate with wild animals. They had no sense of justice, no understanding of anything other than their own desires. They shook hands on agreements, and then stabbed you in the back. One would make a promise with Borraq, and then another would break it — and then both would close ranks and support each other.

They acted without honor, without rules.

They were a blight on the galaxy.

And now, even the Borraq that lived in their traditional ways on their home planets had to deal with them.

It was an insult. It was an outrage. Rael's chest swelled with pride, but also with anger. This planet was his. His people were under his protection, and he would defend them from any threat — no matter what species that threat might be.

His hand on his blade's hilt, Rael quickened his pace.

Soon, he approached the crashed ship with a mixture of curiosity and caution.

The thing was a mess. It lay half-buried in the sand, great gouges marring its hull. The front of the ship was completely torn open, crumpled and spilling out.

It was hard to imagine that anyone could survive a crash like that. Still, Rael had learned to never underestimate humans. They were tough, tenacious creatures, despite their smaller bodies.

You never could tell when they were truly beaten. No matter how you injured them, they always rose up again.

Rael eyed the wreckage cautiously as he approached, his powerful legs carrying him forward with long, purposeful strides. The twisted metal reeked of burnt electronics and ozone, assaulting his senses. He wrinkled his nose in distaste, the stench triggering a deep, primal revulsion within him.

Yet, even as his lips curled in a sneer of disgust, a tiny voice at the back of his mind whispered of opportunity.

There was a standing bounty for any human found on Vasz — dead or alive.

Dead humans fetched a sturdy sum, but alive ones were even better. The bounty on a captive human could easily cover the cost of the gene therapy Worrak so desperately needed.

Rael's eyes narrowed as he scanned the massive form of the wreckage, searching for any signs of life amidst the mangled debris. Surely some of the fragile humans had survived the crash, stubborn creatures that they were. If he could capture even one...

The thought made his blood run hot with anticipation. Not only would he be ridding his lands of an infestation, but he'd also be providing for his clan in the most direct way possible. It was his duty as alpha to protect and provide, and the prospect of

killing two sandgrubs with one strike filled him with a sense of grim satisfaction.

If there were humans aboard that wreck, he would find them. And once he had them in his grasp, the bounty was as good as claimed. Worrak's future would be secured, and Rael's clan would be provided for.

All he had to do was sniff out his prey.

He looked down.

Despite the stormy wind whipping at the desert sand, the tracks were unmistakable. A single pair of footprints staggered away from the wreck, deep imprints in the soil that showed the wearer's struggle.

A survivor.

Rael grinned.

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Rael followed the tracks, moving silently across the sand. The human had been moving quickly at first, as if fleeing from the crash. But as Rael had suspected, the tracks soon showed that the survivor had been moving more and more slowly, the staggering footprints growing closer and closer together.

The tracks led away from the crash site, across the plain and to where the forest began. Rael followed the tracks, his senses on high alert.

The human might be a survivor, but he was also a prey animal, wounded and alone in the wilderness. He might be desperate enough to attack anyone that he came across, or he might be crafty enough to set a trap. Rael would have to be on his guard.

The woods were empty and silent. The crash had sent the beasts of the woods scattering, and for now, the normally fierce fauna of Vasz were subdued. There was no sign of movement, no other tracks besides the human's.

Rael followed the human's trail, his instincts shining. He was a hunter, and this was his quarry.

Finally, he found what he was looking for. There was a particular scent on the wind, something that he could just barely sense underneath the lingering stench of a burning ship.

And there, when he followed it to its source, it was. Between two rocks, was a flash of white clothing and a small, huddled creature..

The human was squeezed into a rocky outcrop, silhouetted against the setting suns of

Vasz.

But there was something wrong with the scene. The figure seemed too slender, too delicate to be one of the brutish soldiers that Rael associated with the enemy species.

He crept closer.

The human was indeed slight of frame. Despite the thickening gloom, he could see that for certain. Unruly curls framed a face that could only be described as pretty, with high cheekbones, full lips, and large eyes that were currently shut, lashes splayed across its cheekbones. Its hands were white-knuckled as it hugged its knees to its chest, tense.

Something jolted in Rael's gut — a purely physical reaction that both surprised and disgusted him.

This was a human, one of the pestilent vermin that had brought war and suffering to his kind...

And yet, some primal part of him couldn't help but be captivated by the exquisite fragility of this particular specimen.

Rael pushed down the unwelcome stirrings with a mental snarl. He was Borraq, a proud warrior bred for strength and honor. To feel attraction to such a weak, insignificant creature was an insult to everything he stood for. This human was nothing but a bounty to be claimed, a means to an end. Rael would not sully himself by even acknowledging the fleeting stirring of his instincts.

Refocusing on his mission, the seasoned hunter evaluated the situation with cold calculation. The human seemed to be alone, with no signs of weaponry or backup. It would be almost insultingly easy to overpower and subdue him.

As Rael drew nearer, he could make out more details of this strange, delicate creature. The human — male, Rael could now see — was painfully slender in comparison to a Borraq frame, almost fragile. He shivered violently, his slim arms wrapped tightly around his body as if trying to contain what little warmth he could. He was wearing only thin clothing, nothing that would protect him from the harsh wilds of Vasz and its unpredictable storms.

What kind of soldier was this, to be so unprepared?

Rael's lips curled in a silent snarl of disgust as he watched the pathetic display. This was what passed for an warrior among the humans? This frail, shivering thing that couldn't even withstand the mild chill of a Vasz evening? The very idea that such a weak, insignificant creature could pose any threat to the mighty Borraq race was almost insulting.

It didn't matter. This human was nothing but a means to an end, a bounty to be collected. The hefty sum attached to his capture would secure Worrak's future, would provide for the clan in a way that Rael's duty demanded.

That was all that mattered.

And yet... a small voice in the back of Rael's mind whispered of honor, of the core values that had been drilled into him since birth. The humans were the aggressors in this conflict, true, but this one seemed utterly helpless. Capturing him in such a weakened state, when he posed no real threat... was that not a violation of the warrior's code?

Rael shook his head minutely, shoving aside the traitorous thoughts. Survival was what mattered here, the survival and prosperity of his clan. If capturing this human was what it took to achieve that, then so be it. He would not be swayed by misplaced sentimentality.

Rael moved with the fluid grace of a predator, his powerful muscles rippling beneath sleek golden skin as he closed in on his unsuspecting prey. The human remained oblivious, huddled in misery — until it was too late.

The human looked up, blue eyes wide.

In one fluid motion, Rael pounced.

”Shit—!” The human’s startled shout was cut off as the Borraq warrior’s weight slammed into him, knocking him to the ground. They tumbled together, Rael’s superior strength and mass easily pinning the human beneath him.

”Get off me!” The human thrashed wildly, eyes wide with terror as he stared up at his attacker. ”Let me go, you monster!”

Rael didn’t respond, his expression as impassive as carved stone. With cold efficiency, he seized the human’s slender wrists in one massive hand, pinning them above his head. His free hand snaked around the human’s throat, not squeezing but holding him firmly in place.

”Please... ” The human’s voice was little more than a breathless whimper now, his struggles growing weaker as the reality of his situation set in. ”Please don’t hurt me, I’m a human—”

”I know.”

The finality in Rael’s voice cut the human off short. The human stared up at Rael, those big eyes wide in horror. They roamed over Rael, taking in his appearance: his golden skin, his sharp teeth, his horns.

”Oh, god,” the human said, in a raspy whisper. ”You’re a Borraq.”

Rael could smell the fear rolling off his captive in waves, the acrid tang of adrenaline and the sweet, cloying undertone of something else... something that made Rael's mouth water in a purely physical reaction.

Humans smelled... good. It was something that the warriors at the front had to guard themselves against, lest the human scents get under their skins.

Rael's jaw clenched. This was the scent that every Borraq warrior spread rumors and warnings about, the one that made humans so maddeningly, dangerously alluring to his kind.

Everyone knew the stories, the whispers about how a human could make a Borraq lose control.

Rael had always dismissed such tales as mere exaggeration, superstitious ramblings meant to instill fear and mistrust of their sworn enemies. Surely no scent, no matter how pleasant, could override a Borraq's rigid self-control and discipline. They were warriors, not mindless beasts ruled by base urges.

Rael wasn't wrong often. Now, though...

Now, Rael truly understood the whispers.

It was the scent of a lover, the scent of rich food and warm hearth, of something primal that went straight down to his bones. There were hints of something crisp and citrusy, like the tart burst of flavor from a ripe zahfruit. But then that bright note would give way to something deeper, richer... almost like the heady aroma of vadian spirits, capable of intoxicating with even the faintest whiff.

And beneath it all was an undercurrent of musk, one that spoke of something primal. It was the scent of desire, a siren's call that got under his skin.

Rael's free hand clenched into a white-knuckled fist as he fought to maintain control, his every muscle tensed against the rising tide of want that threatened to overwhelm him. This was madness – he was Borraq, an alpha who had faced down countless foes without so much as flinching.

And yet here he was, caught by the mere scent of a single, pathetic human.

Humans smelled like something you had to have.

Humans smelled tasty.

Rael had heard of the rumors that the humans shared about his kind. They believed that Borraq were worse than savages — humans believed that Borraq would eat them.

And now that Rael had finally caught a human's scent for the first time, he couldn't blame them for the idea.

The human seemed to sense it too, his eyes widening even further as he let out a choked sound of mingled fear and revulsion. "The rumors... they're true, aren't they? You... you savages!"

A sneer twisted Rael's lips at the insult, but he remained silent, impassive. Let the human believe what he would. It would make no difference. The only thing that mattered now was the substantial bounty this capture would bring, the future it would secure for Rael's clan.

"F-fight me, you coward!" The human's words held more bravado than conviction as he resumed his fruitless struggles. "If you're gonna eat me... then at least look me in the eye!"

Eat him? This human was worth more alive than he was as a meal. Rael merely

tightened his grip in response, his powerful forearm pressing down on the human's slender throat just enough to make breathing difficult. He could feel the fragile bones, so delicate compared to a Borraq's dense physiology, and he marveled at how easily he could snap them if he wished.

But no, that would defeat his purpose here. The human was to be captured, not killed – at least, not until the bounty had been collected.

Rael would take this human to the nearest outpost, and he'd collect the bounty that he needed.

What happened after that... Well, the higher-ups would do whatever they did with enemies captured behind enemy lines. Rael tried not to dwell on the dark whispers of the military cells, the stories that made even seasoned warriors shudder.

With one final, efficient motion, the alpha warrior swept the human up into his arms. "Hey! Put me down!"

He would do no such thing. As the slender body struggled against him, Rael couldn't resist allowing his gaze to linger for just a moment, tracing the planes and angles that made up this strange, alluring creature.

Then, shaking off the momentary distraction, he tied the human's wrists and ankles, and hauled his prize over one powerful shoulder. His quarry secured, he set off into the rapidly falling night.

The first phase of his hunt was complete – he had his bounty.

Now, all that remained was to collect on it.

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The alien walked for hours through the night. Elian had been taken through miles of wild extraterrestrial landscape, across the face of a planet that no human had ever set foot on.

Elian hadn't seen any of it. He'd spent the entire time slung over an alien's shoulder.

His muscles ached. Weariness seeped into his bones, the adrenaline from his earlier panic replaced by numbness with each mile they crossed. His chest hurt, the burn he'd suffered while escaping the ship throbbing in a dull ache. Elian drifted in and out of consciousness, lulled by the steady rhythm of the Borraq's powerful strides.

Finally, the alien halted abruptly. Elian jolted back to alertness, his heart pounding — and then he was unceremoniously deposited onto the mossy ground with a yelp. He scrambled backwards, struggling awkwardly with his bound hands and feet, and eyed his captor warily.

The Borraq paid him no heed, dropping the modest pack that he carried, and scanning their surroundings with sharp, calculating eyes. Elian's throat constricted with fear, his mind racing with possibilities of what this alien intended.

Torture? Interrogation? Rumors echoed ominously inside his head.

When Elian had first looked out onto the planet, he'd wondered where he'd crashed. Once humanity had got off of Earth and out into the stars, they'd soon found that the galaxy was full of planets. There were so many possibilities: uninhabited planets, planets with colonies, planets with outposts, mining planets...

But there was one planet that Elian hadn't thought of — and for good reason.

No human had ever visited the home planet of the cannibalistic, brutal, violent Borraq, humanity's enemies.

Until now.

Elian watched his captor, waiting for whatever was about to happen. But to his surprise, the Borraq simply proceeded to unpack a thin bedroll and a small satchel. Elian looked on, perplexed, as the alien methodically assembled a rudimentary one-man camp, seemingly unperturbed by his presence.

Parched from the hours of exertion, Elian's eyes zeroed in when the Borraq extracted a canteen. His throat burned with desperation. Mustering his courage, he croaked, "W-water?"

The Borraq eyed Elian warily, his gaze inscrutable. Elian's heart pounded in his throat as the towering alien approached, movements slow and deliberate.

Cautiously, the Borraq crouched before him, tension in his broad shoulders, his eyes narrowed.

He was wary. Of Elian.

Elian let out a disbelieving laugh that bordered on hysterical. "I should be the one scared, not you!"

His words tumbled out. "I'm just a human. You're..." Elian trailed off, drinking in the sight of the Borraq's muscular frame, broad shoulders tapering down to a trim waist. "A giant warrior like you has nothing to fear from me."

The Borraq's jaw tightened, but he remained silent. Then, some internal assessment done, he reached out.

Elian's breath caught in his throat as the alien's thumb grazed his lips. With surprising gentleness, he cradled Elian's chin in one massive hand, tilting his head back.

Then, the Borraq raised the canteen to Elian's mouth with his other hand. "Drink.Slowly."

Cool water trickled past his lips, and Elian drank greedily, the liquid a balm for his raw throat.

This close, Elian could make out the finer details of the Borraq's striking features. The Borraq's golden skin seemed to radiate heat, etched with subtle ridges that followed the contours of his chiseled features. Elian's gaze traced the sharp angles of the alien's high cheekbones and strong jawline, his breath catching at the sight of those piercing green eyes.

Despite the Borraq's imposing stature, there was an almost regal quality to his presence. The way he held himself, confident and unyielding, commanded respect. Elian's eyes lingered on the alien's muscular frame, taking in the broad shoulders and toned physique that hinted at immense strength. Crowning the Borraq's head were a pair of impressive horns, curved and sleek, adding to his otherworldly allure.

Elian's pulse thundered in his ears. The Borraq's strength was undeniable – he could so easily crush Elian's delicate human form. Yet, those powerful hands handled him with a strange sort of gentleness. Even when he'd captured Elian, when Elian had fought against him as hard as he could, the alien hadn't hurt Elian.

Elian knew the rumors, the whispers of what happened to humans unlucky enough to

cross paths with the Borraq. But now, a part of him wondered if perhaps the stories didn't reveal the entire truth.

Elian drained the last few drops from the canteen, the water soothing his parched throat. "Thank you," he rasped, offering a hesitant smile.

The Borraq merely narrowed his eyes in acknowledgment before turning away.

Elian's smile faltered, but he pressed on, desperation for any shred of connection overriding his self-preservation. "I'm, um. Elian," he ventured.

The Borraq didn't so much as glance his way, deftly unpacking supplies with an economy of movement.

Elian swallowed thickly, undeterred. "What's your name?"

Silence stretched between them, thick and oppressive, broken only by the ambient sounds of the alien wilderness. Elian's cheeks burned with a mixture of embarrassment and loneliness so acute it hollowed out his chest.

Still, the words tumbled from his lips, a torrent he couldn't contain. "Okay, well... I... I don't know where I am. My ship crashed, and everyone else..." His voice cracked, eyes stinging with unshed tears. "They're all gone. I'm the only one left."

Elian drew a shuddering breath, hugging his knees to his chest as the weight of his solitude threatened to crush him. "I don't even know why my ship crashed. Or if anyone's looking for me." A bitter laugh escaped him. "Hell, I don't know if anyone will notice the ship went down... It was supposed to go dark, it wasn't meant to make contact with home base for years."

Elian faltered. The woods seemed to press in around him.

"I'm just... alone out here," he confessed in a small voice. "And scared."

The admission hung heavy in the silence. Then, just as Elian's fragile hope began to wither, the Borraq spoke in a deep, rumbling baritone.

"Rael."

Elian started, eyes widening. The name was uttered simply, without preamble or inflection, yet it unlocked something in Elian's chest.

A tiny spark of possibility amidst the overwhelming darkness.

A tremulous smile tugged at the corners of Elian's mouth as he met Rael's inscrutable gaze. "It's nice to meet you, Rael. Or, uh, I wish it was."

Rael didn't seem eager to continue talking. He turned back to his work, but that was okay.

Elian had never expected to be in the middle of the woods at night, watching an alien set up a tent.

The sight was surreal. Rael moved with a lithe, powerful grace, every movement efficient and purposeful. He started a fire, arranging branches according to qualities that Elian couldn't even begin to recognise. Satisfied, Rael moved on, preparing his rations for the night.

It was like watching a nature documentary, if the host of the documentary happened to be a seven-foot-tall alien with muscles that could crack rocks.

Elian sat still, watching him. Despite the heat of the fire, a shiver ran down his spine. He was still in the clutches of an alien, out in the middle of nowhere, with no one to

hear him scream for help.

But there was something else, too. Curiosity, he realized. He was seeing something incredible. This was an alien, right in front of him, doing... Well, doing something.

Surviving, just like humans did. Despite the gulf of difference between them, there was something universal about the need for shelter, the way that all creatures sought out a safe place to rest.

That universal similarity was a little comforting. It was something that Elian could understand, something that made the world — no, the universe — a little bit less unknowable.

Then, Rael's gaze pierced him. "It's time to eat."

Those four simple words made Elian's blood turn to ice. Memories assaulted him, a greatest hits compilation of every ghastly tale whispered about the Borraq in hushed tones.

They were cannibals, insatiable in their hunger for flesh — human flesh. They gorged on the raw, still-twitching bodies of their victims, relishing in the screams as teeth tore through soft, vulnerable skin. Everyone seemed to know someone who knew someone who'd heard someone else say that they'd seen it on the battlefield.

Some said the Borraq delighted in the suffering, keeping humans alive and conscious for as long as possible to prolong their agony...

Elian's skin crawled. Were the tales just wartime propaganda, twisted fictions designed to demonize the enemy? Or did they hold a horrifying kernel of truth, a glimpse into the brutality the Borraq were capable of?

His gaze skittered to Rael, lingering on the alien's powerful physique. Those broad shoulders and corded muscles could easily overpower Elian's comparatively slender human form. His throat constricted with terror as he imagined himself trapped in that vise-like grip, helpless against Rael's strength.

Then, with agonizing slowness, Rael began to move towards Elian.

Elian's heart hammered in his chest. "P-please," he stammered, his voice cracking with fear. "Don't kill me. I'll do whatever you want, just please don't kill me."

Rael paused. He regarded Elian for a moment, the fire casting his features into sharp relief. Despite the play of light and shadow across his face, his expression was inscrutable. "Why would I kill you?" he asked.

"Y-you said it was time to eat," Elian said, his words tumbling over each other in his haste to explain. "And e-everyone knows what Borraq do to the humans that they catch—"

"Silence," Rael said.

Elian's mouth snapped shut. He stared at the alien, wide-eyed and trembling.

Despite the chill of the night, a bead of sweat ran down Elian's back. His heart hammered in his chest. Despite the fear, despite the very real danger he was in, something in him bristled at being treated like this. He was a human being, damn it, not a creature to be cowed!

"G-go on," he stammered. "If you're going to kill me, then just get it over with!"

For a moment, Rael said nothing. His piercing gaze bored into Elian, as if he could see right through to the core of him.

And then, to Elian's shock, Rael's lips curled into a smile. "Humans are foolish creatures."

Elian's heart was still pounding with fear, but despite himself, he couldn't help but be curious about the alien in front of him. "Do Borraq eat humans?"

"Silence."

"That's not a no."

Rael arched an eyebrow. "It's not a yes, either. You're a skinny, fragile creature. Why would I bother eating you, when there are so many other, better game beasts out there?"

It was the most that Elian had heard Rael say so far. Elian's cheeks flushed. "You're teasing me."

Rael turned away from him, reaching into a pouch at his side. He pulled out a wrapped stack of thin, wafer-like objects. He broke one in half and offered it to Elian.

Elian eyed the proffered food warily. "What is it?"

Rael's expression was inscrutable in the flickering light of the fire. "It's sustenance. Eat it or don't, I care not."

As Elian watched warily, Rael began to eat his portion. Not poisonous, then. When he offered the other to Elian, Elian leaned forward and took it from Rael's hand.

It was salty and a little dry. But right now, it was the best thing he'd ever eaten.

He choked it down, his throat working to swallow the mouthful, and accepted the

drink of water that Rael offered to wash it down.

Then, Rael tensed, staring at Elian's body. Elian froze mid-chew. "W-what?"

Those alien eyes seemed to bore straight through him. The scrutiny made his skin prickle with unease, and he fought the urge to squirm under the weight of that stare.

Rael's brow furrowed. Before Elian could react, the alien reached out, his powerful fingers grasping the tattered remains of Elian's shirt. With a sharp tug, the collar tore, exposing Elian's chest— and the angry red burn that marred his skin.

Elian gasped, instinctively trying to hunch inwards to cover himself, but Rael's grip was like iron. Whatever he wanted, there was no getting away from him.

But Rael made no move to harm Elian. "You're hurt."

"It's from when the ship went down... It's just a burn."

Rael narrowed his eyes at Elian, assessing the wound. Then he produced a small container from one of the pouches at his side, unscrewing the lid to reveal a thick, viscous salve within. Dipping his fingers into the ointment, he began to spread it across Elian's burn.

Elian hissed at the initial sting, his muscles tensing, but then... Relief. Cool, soothing relief. The fiery burn that had plagued him since the crash melted away, leaving only a pleasant tingling in its wake.

Despite himself, despite the fear that still gripped his heart, Elian found his eyes fluttering closed as Rael's fingers worked the salve into his skin. The touch was unexpectedly gentle, almost... Intimate.

Then, all too soon, he was done. "Rest," Rael commanded, gesturing to the bedroll. "I'll keep watch. If you attempt to escape, you won't like the consequences."

His kidnapper had given him food and water, and now, he was treating his wounds and offering him a place to sleep.

Elian's head spun with the whiplash of it all. One moment, he was sure that the alien was a monster. The next, he wasn't so sure.

Here he was, at the mercy of an alien. And that alien was currently tending to his needs, showing him an unexpected glimpse of decency underneath his terrifying exterior.

Elian squared his jaw.

But none of that mattered.

Because as soon as he could, he was going to escape.

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Elian's heart hammered in his chest as he pretended to sleep.

Off to the side of the camp, Rael kept watch. When Eliau looked out from under his lashes, he could see the imposing golden-skinned figure sitting by a tree, surveying the perimeter. Every so often, Rael silently rose from his position and stalked out into the night, checking in on some soft sound or other.

He was close, but far enough from Eliau... If Eliau moved fast enough, there was a chance.

Surviving the crash had been a one-in-a-million chance.

Now, Eliau needed another of them.

Elian's mind raced, but he forced himself to move slowly, methodically. Under the cover of darkness, he worked at the ropes binding his wrists. Rael had tied them well, but Eliau had spent enough years working in docks and stations, loading and unloading supplies for the front. He knew his way around a knot or two.

With enough time — and enough careful tugging that the sound of the fabric rubbing against his skin was muffled by the soft sounds of the night— Eliau finally managed to work one hand free. Moving slowly, painfully slowly, he rolled over, tucking his knees up against his chest. He looked like a scared human huddling up for warmth — but it put his bound ankles in reach.

As he gradually worked his bonds free, freedom beckoned to him like a siren's call. Despite the fear that beat in his chest like a second heart, hope surged through him,

too. He didn't know where he was going to go, but he had to escape. He had to get away from this alien, before he found out whatever terrible fate Rael had in store for him.

Surely, someone would notice that the ship had gone down. Surely, someone would come to rescue him.

Until then, he just had to stay alive.

Alive, on a planet full of giant alien warriors that hated him.

Then, finally, the rope that bound his ankles was free.

Elian lay there, waiting. Sweat beaded on his forehead, whether from the heat of the fire or the tension in his muscles, he couldn't tell. The moments stretched on and on, the sounds of the forest filling his ears: the chirping of insects, the distant scream of some prey animal, the crackle of the dying campfire.

And then, at long last, the sound he had been waiting for: movement. Rael rose from his position by the fire and stepped out into the night again.

It was now or never.

Elian burst from the bedroll and ran out into the pitch-black night.

He made it ten whole seconds outside before the world exploded into a blur of motion, and he found himself scooped up in Rael's arms.

The alien had recaptured him in the blink of an eye. It was as if a mouse had tried to dart away from a lion, only for the lion to lazily reach out a paw and pluck it back up before it could even get a few inches away.

Eliau struggled, kicking and flailing, but it was like trying to fight against a force of nature. Rael's grip was unyielding, his arms like bands of steel as he held Eliau against him, one hand clamped around Eliau's chest and the other pinning his flailing limbs.

The alien's breath was hot against the back of Eliau's neck, and despite his fear, a note of something else — something shameful — shivered down Eliau's spine at the sensation.

Rael's deep voice rumbled in his ear. "Oh, you humans. You really are just like the stories say: full of spirit, but not a lick of sense to back it up."

"Let me go!"

Rael did no such thing. He carried Eliau back to the campsite as easily as if Eliau were a child throwing a tantrum, his captive's struggles doing nothing to impede his long, purposeful strides. There, Rael effortlessly deposited Eliau back onto his bedroll. Despite the force of his capture, there was an amused glint in his eyes as he regarded the human before him. "You undid your bonds? Interesting."

Eliau's cheeks burned with shame and the exertion of his failed escape. He glared at the alien, but found himself speechless.

What could he even say, in the face of such overwhelming strength? The shame of his failed escape attempt burned hot in Eliau's cheeks.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Rael's mouth. He leaned in, taking Eliau's wrists, and bound him again — with more complex ties this time. "I admire your spirit. But you'd do well not to test me again."

Eliau had to know. "What? What would you do?"

"The worst thing I could do... would be nothing." The firelight glimmered off of Rael's fangs as he smirked. "Let you run. Leave you on your own. You wouldn't like what might happen if you ran into a gang of clanless Borraq."

Elian's stomach churned at the implications. From the little he knew of this alien's kind, to be clanless was to be a pariah, an outcast.

A shudder ran through him at the thought. As much as Rael terrified him, at least the alien seemed to have some twisted sense of honor, wanting to keep Elian alive for some nefarious purpose.

But if Elian ended up in the hands of Borraq who didn't have those scruples...

Rael seemed to sense the direction of Elian's thoughts. "You have nowhere to run, little human," he said, his tone authoritative and almost... gentle? "This is Vasz. A harsh world, full of dangers and bloodthirsty beasts that would make short work of a fragile creature like you. There is nothing for you out there."

The weight of Rael's words settled over Elian like a heavy shroud. He was trapped, utterly and completely. Even if he managed to escape this alien's clutches, the planet itself would seek to destroy him.

Despair welled up inside him, thick and choking. Was there really no hope? No possibility of freedom, of ever seeing his own kind again? "Then where are you taking me? What are you going to do with me?"

Rael regarded him with an inscrutable expression. "Get some rest," the alien said gruffly. "We have a long journey ahead of us."

Elian wanted to rage, to fight, to do anything but meekly obey. But what choice did he have? He was alone, a tiny speck of life on an alien world that seemed determined

to snuff him out.

With a heavy heart, he curled up on the bedroll, trying not to think about what horrors might await him.

And not about wherever Rael was taking him.

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As they walked, Rael watched Elian.

The human walked through the wilderness of Vasz beside Rael, working hard to keep apace in the gnarled trees and the thick underbrush. Rael had draped him in a light travel cloak, the garment helplessly oversized on the lean little human.

Ever since his first escape attempt, Elian had seemed obedient. Over the last few days, he'd walked placidly enough alongside Rael, obeying commands with only a moment of cautious hesitation. They'd traveled together through the wilds, heading towards Rael's destination. By all accounts, Elian had learned his lesson.

Rael didn't buy it for a second.

Humans were devious. Everyone knew that. Whatever Elian was going to try next, Rael would be ready for it.

But that wasn't what the thing about Elian that put Rael most on edge.

Instead of Elian's cunning, it was his vulnerability.

The human was a creature not made for this place, not adapted to its harsh environment. His eyes were sharp, taking in everything around him, but there was a fragility to him that screamed prey animal.

It was infuriating. Rael's instincts kept locking on to Elian, on this creature who obviously needed protection.

And that wasn't all.

Elia's scent was in the air, a warm and earthy smell that filled Rael's head and stoked his instincts.

Rael gritted his teeth, and focused on the mission. He was no mere pup, about to have his head turned by pheromones on the breeze— but it was a distraction. When walking the wilds, a distraction was the last thing you wanted.

Nonetheless, the scent teased him. The urge to claim, to mark, to make sure that everyone in earshot knew that this particular mate belonged to him — it burned within him.

Rael had to tear his gaze away from the sight of Elia, and focus on the path in front of him. It was safer that way.

Safer for both of them...

His brooding was shattered by a hiss.

Rael's head whipped around, just in time to see a thick, scaly body rear up from the underbrush. The snake was enormous, its mottled green and brown scales the size of coins.

Damn! Rael had missed the signs, distracted. There was no time—

The viper lunged for Elia, its fangs bared.

Time seemed to slow. Rael's sharp senses took in every detail of the scene, from the way that Elia's eyes widened in terror, to the flex of the snake's powerful muscles as it prepared to end the human's life.

And then Elian was simply... not there. The snake's fangs snapped shut on empty air, as with a speed that Rael could barely track, Elian was already leaping away, jumping for safety.

He could be fast when he wanted. It came with being so slim and nimble, Rael had soon learned to appreciate. Elian was so much smaller than Borraq, able to move faster than Rael's expectations.

That turn of speed had caught Rael by surprise during his escape, as Elian had flipped himself from what appeared to be a dead sleep and sprinted out into the night.

It hadn't been fast enough, of course. But it had been a good try.

But there was no time for Rael's curiosity at human speed. With a hiss of rage, the snake turned to follow its prey. It lunged after Elian, its enormous body moving in a blinding-fast horizontal strike.

Rael was faster. With a single leap, he was between the snake and its target. He brought his blade flashing down, the honed steel slicing cleanly through the snake's thick body.

Rael's heart pounded, and for once, it had nothing to do with the danger. He sheathed his blade and turned to face Elian. "Are you unharmed?"

"I— I think so. I mean, other than needing a change of pants..." Elian looked up at Rael, those big eyes as blue as a rare clear sky. "Thank you for saving me."

Rael's heart pounded.

It was ridiculous. The snake was already dead, its two halves left behind on the forest floor as a testament to Rael's speed and skill. There was no danger to him or his

mission.

And yet, his heart pounded still...

Elian's wide, startled eyes as he looked up at Rael, the heaving of his chest as he caught his breath, the sweat beading on his skin... Rael's gaze strayed to the thin material of Elian's thin shirt, clinging to the lines of his body.

It was ridiculous. Elian was soft and weak, with no survival instincts to speak of. The most fearsome enemy of the Borraq had turned out to be useless, a vulnerable, pathetic thing.

Rael should despise Elian. He had to despise him.

Everything that his body was telling him now, feeling the urge to save the human, to protect him from danger... Well, that was merely his instincts as an alpha, misfiring. Whatever he was feeling was just a lost shadow of real feelings, nothing more.

Rael's gaze drifted to the horizon, seeking a distraction from the infuriating human whose scent seemed determined to burrow under his skin. A glimmer of steel in the distance caught his eye, and relief washed over him.

"There," he said, gesturing towards the distant buildings with a nod of his head. "Outpost Zekara. That's where we're headed."

Elian squinted against the glare of the twin suns. "What is that place?"

"An outpost," Rael explained. "The Borraq have cities on Vasz, but they are few in number, concentrated. Most of us live in our own territories out in the wilds."

He swept his arm in an encompassing gesture, indicating the harsh, unforgiving

landscape that surrounded them. "The outposts are dotted across the planet, halfway points between the cities and the wilderness. Places where those of us who live traditionally can come to trade, or receive news from the cities."

Elian nodded slowly, his brow furrowed as he took in this new information. Rael could practically see the questions forming behind those inquisitive blue eyes.

"So, you don't all live in cities then?" Elian asked. "Some of you live out here, in the middle of... all this?"

There was a note of incredulity in his voice. Rael felt a flicker of annoyance. Of course the human wouldn't understand the ways of the Borraq, raised as he was in the artificial confines of his technological havens.

Rael curled his lip. He knew that humans looked down on the Borraq way of life, scoffing at their connection to the wilderness and the traditions that had been passed down through countless generations. To the so-called "civilized" humans, the Borraq were little more than savages, clinging to outdated ways.

Before Rael could bite out a retort, however, Elian surprised him. "That sounds... nice, actually." The human's expression turned wistful. "Ever since pollution wrecked Earth, we've all been crammed into big megacities or living in space stations. There are gardens and parks, sure, but it's not the same as being out in real nature, you know? Like in the old stories and vids..."

Rael blinked, thrown off guard. He studied Elian's face, searching for any hint of mockery or condescension. But the human seemed sincere, a melancholic longing in his eyes as he gazed out at the rugged landscape surrounding them.

It was... unexpected. Rael had always viewed humans as the arrogant technological elite, looking down their noses at any species that still lived off the land. But Elian's

wistful words painted a different picture, one of a people who had lost touch with their roots, forced into artificial cages by the very technology they had put their faith in.

A strange sense of kinship stirred in Rael's chest, quickly followed by a flicker of guilt. He pushed the feeling aside, straightening his shoulders as he refocused on the matter at hand. "The outpost is where I'm taking you, yes," he said bluntly. No point in dancing around it. "You're a human, behind enemy lines. There's an automatic bounty on your head — dead or alive."

News like that could never be pleasant to hear. Elian's shoulders slumped, and he ducked his head in a vain attempt to hide the hurt that flickered across his features. When he spoke, his voice was deliberately light, forced casualness masking the fear that Rael could see in his eyes. "Well, I guess that makes sense. Nice to be wanted for once in my life."

The words hung heavy in the air between them, a stark reminder of the harsh realities they faced. Rael opened his mouth, some half-formed thought of reassurance on his lips. But the words died unspoken as he saw Elian's gaze — seeing the resignation there, the weary acceptance of a man who had already lost so much.

Elian's voice was deceptively casual. "So... what exactly will the people at this outpost do to me once you hand me over?"

Rael went still, the question hanging heavy in the air between them. He realized with a start that he didn't truly know the answer.

In all his years as a warrior and bounty hunter, he had never encountered a human prisoner before. They were an enemy spoken of in hushed tones, their very existence a threat to the Borraq way of life.

Silently, Rael's mind turned over the rumors he had heard whispered around campfires and in the shadows of outpost cantinas. Tales of human prisoners subjected to unspeakable tortures, their minds and bodies broken until they revealed every last secret about their kind.

But surely those were just stories, exaggerated tales meant to instill fear and hatred of their enemy. Surely, the military would handle a valuable prisoner like Elian with more care and pragmatism.

"The military will decide what to do with you," Rael said at last, keeping his tone carefully neutral. "Perhaps they will attempt to contact your leaders for an exchange of prisoners."

The words sounded hollow, even to his own ears. Rael risked a glance at Elian, taking in the human's forced nonchalance, the way his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Elian gave a small nod, his voice light as he replied, "A prisoner exchange, huh? Well, that's good. I'm basically half-way home already."

But Rael could see the truth in those expressive eyes.

Elian didn't believe the words any more than Rael did.

They both knew, deep down, that an outcome like that was unlikely. The war between their peoples had raged for too long, the hatred ran too deep.

The weight of that realization settled over Rael like a heavy cloak. He found himself unable to meet Elian's gaze, a strange sense of disquiet stirring in his chest.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. The mission had been simple — capture the human, deliver him to the outpost, collect the bounty, save Worrak.

But now, with Elian's haunted eyes fixed on the horizon, it felt anything but simple.

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The outpost was a shining spire in the distance, a scar that cut through the untamed landscape. As the hours passed, it grew larger and larger, swallowing up more of the horizon. Soon, they'd be back in civilization.

Elian's heart sank.

He'd known from the start that Rael was taking him for nefarious reasons. There was no other reason for an alien warlord to go on a road trip with a human. A human on Vasz...

The bounty on Elian's head had to be enough to buy a small moon, enough to fund Rael's people for years.

Elian swallowed. What kind of prison was waiting for him? What kind of trial? What kind of punishment?

He had to escape.

Somehow.

Elian tore his gaze away from the approaching outpost and looked at Rael. As they passed yet another marker leading them toward the outpost, the environment around them changing from thick wood to cleared land, Rael's brow was creased with worry. His jaw was tight, his sharp eyes troubled.

Elian had only known Rael for a few days, but he already had the impression that it was rare to see Rael anything other than coolly confident. The sight sent a strange

pang of concern through Elian. "What is it?"

Rael hesitated, then let out a breath. "I don't belong in cities," he said, eyeing the open land ahead of them. "I belong in the wilds. The lands where I can hunt, where I can fight for my territory. Not this."

He gestured towards the approaching outpost, as if the mere sight of it offended him. "Not all the politics, the backstabbing, the never-ending games."

"Games?" Elian said. "I thought you alpha guys liked all that stuff. Showing off, throwing your weight around — that's your kind of thing, isn't it?"

Rael scowled. "I'm a warlord, not a politician. I fight for what's mine, not sit around listening to a hundred other blowhards tell me why I can't have it."

There was real heat in his voice, real disdain. For a moment, the fierce alien in front of Elian wasn't a monster, there to sell Elian for his own skin. He was something else entirely — a wild creature, walking into a cage.

It was a glimpse behind the mask, and something about it tugged at Elian. It was a feeling he quickly tried to squash. If he felt sorry for Rael, then that was a slippery slope.

Sympathy for the guy who was going to turn him in? No way.

Elian looked at the outpost. One more day, and then Rael would hand him over.

Over the days that Elian had been in Rael's possession, there had been moments of peace. After Rael had set up camp in the evenings, the danger of the journey seemed to bleed away a little.

Eliau had never expected to find anything in common with an alien warlord, but as the days passed, he'd found himself enjoying those moments more and more.

That night, they sat by the fire, watching the stars come out. Finally, Eliau dared to ask a question that had been burning at the back of his mind.

"About... about the rumors," he said. "About your kind. Eating humans."

Rael's scowled, his gaze snapping to Eliau's. "That again?"

"I— I don't know what to believe," Eliau said hurriedly. "It's not like I've had a lot of chances to ask aliens about their diets. But there's got to be some kind of truth to it, right? Those rumors have been around for years."

"I cannot fathom any Borraq eating a human," Rael said, and then he paused, as if he was choosing his words. "But... your human scent is... intoxicating to us. It's a lure that's hard to resist. A call to something deep in our blood."

Eliau's heart beat a little faster. There was something both fascinating and dangerous in the way that Rael spoke, something that sent a shiver down his spine. "And what happens when your kind gives into that lure?"

Rael's gaze was intense. "Do not plan to find out." There was a warning in his tone—and something else, too.

Eliau hurriedly looked away, staring into the depths of the night. The firelight danced over the bizarre shapes of the alien vegetation, but Eliau didn't see it. He was too busy wrestling with his own emotions: fear, and a fascination that warred with his better judgment.

He'd been right to be curious about the rumors. But now that he had an answer, he

wasn't sure that he liked it.

Elian's heart thudded in his chest. Rael's gaze was fixed on him, pinning him in place by the campfire. In the depths of those golden eyes, there was a desire that was unmistakable — and yet utterly alien.

It should have been terrifying. No-one had ever looked at Elian like that. No-one had ever made him feel so small, so vulnerable, like he was a rabbit caught in the sights of a predator.

And yet...

Elian's heart raced, a surge of adrenaline mixing with something else. Something hot and heady, itchy under his skin. It was a feeling that he'd never experienced before, a strange cocktail of fear and excitement, drawing him towards the alien warlord like a magnet.

The silence between them was charged, thick with unasked questions and rising desire. In the heat of the alien night, neither of them moved to break it.

Elian cleared his throat, trying to keep his tone light. "So if humans smell so distracting to Borraq, how do you manage to stay in control the way you do?"

Rael's eyes flashed with heat. "I'm an alpha. I'm in control of my own body."

Despite his words, there was something in the way that Rael looked at him, something in the way that Rael's gaze followed the line of Elian's throat as he swallowed, that suggested otherwise.

Elian was getting to Rael.

Rael had been controlling himself, but it took effort.

The idea that Elian was desirable to anyone... It was insane at the best of times. He was just some run-of-the-mill warfront trash, volunteering for a generation ship to terraform for the people who were actually worth anything.

No-one wanted him. He was a war orphan, left behind by everyone he'd ever known. It was why he'd signed up for the colony ship — but the family it promised had gone up in smoke, just the same as every other hope of a family that Elian had ever had.

And now an alien king was telling him he was tempting.

It was insane.

Elian edged a little closer into Rael's personal space, entranced. He wanted to see what would happen — if he could get the proud alpha warrior to lose control.

If he could ruffle that confident facade...

Rael didn't move away. "Careful, human," he rumbled. "You won't like the consequences if you push me."

"Oh?" Despite the adrenaline that spiked through him, Elian managed to keep his voice light. "What are you going to do?"

He was half-joking, half-teasing — but there was a dangerous glint in Rael's eyes, something that sent a shiver of anticipation down Elian's spine.

For one wild moment, he wanted to see what would happen if he did push Rael too far. He wanted to see that iron control crack, to see the proud alpha warrior lose his cool.

Desire and challenge warred in his veins, a heady cocktail that made his heart race. He edged even closer, right up into Rael's personal space, until their thighs were pressed together.

Rael's breath caught.

The moment hung between them, thick with heat and possibility. The crackling campfire, the distant hum of alien insects, the dark of the night — it all blurred away, leaving just the two of them.

Elian's heart hammered in his chest. He'd dared to tease a powerful alpha warrior, to question his self-control, to insinuate that he couldn't handle the heat between them.

Now he wanted to see what would happen next.

Rael turned to face him, his emerald eyes burning.

Elian's heart raced as he watched Rael war with himself, as he saw the proud alpha's control start to slip. Desire burned in those eyes, mingling with frustration, with a hunger for something that the alien warrior clearly wasn't supposed to want.

And then Rael growled, low and dangerous. In one swift movement, he had Elian's arms pinned behind his back, and then he tied them firmly together with a length of rope.

"Hey!" Despite the adrenaline that still spiked through him, Elian put on his best indignant glare. "Let me go! This is unfair!"

Rael ignored him, finishing off the knots. "You're a maddening creature," he growled.

He tied Elian's bonds to a sturdy tree branch, and then he stepped away, putting distance between them. "Tonight, you're sleeping there."

"W-where are you sleeping?"

Rael simply gestured to the other side of the campfire, where the bedrolls were placed.

"You're really making me sleep over here?" Despite the heat of the moment, despite the adrenaline that still coursed through him, Elian couldn't help the incredulity in his voice. "What am I going to do, seduce you in my sleep?"

Rael's expression was utterly deadpan. "If anyone can manage it, I'm sure it's you."

He settled down for the night, wrapping himself in his bedroll and turning his back on Elian.

Tied up by himself, far away from the heat of the alpha warrior, Elian couldn't help a grin from spreading across his face. Half of him felt victorious, giddy at the proof that he'd managed to get under Rael's skin. The other half of him burned with the memory of desire, frustrated at the lack of closure.

He'd won something — but he'd lost something, too. Tied up in the cool night air, the crackle of the campfire the only sound in his ears, both feelings warred within him, keeping his heart racing just as much as any moment of desire.

He was in the middle of a dangerous game — and he wasn't quite sure of the rules.

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Elia's heart hammered in his chest. Today, he was to be handed over to a Borraq outpost, his fate sealed.

But in this moment, that wasn't the most immediate danger he faced.

Rael had stripped him down to the waist, and now sat behind him, working a thick, sweet-smelling salve into Elia's bare skin. The stuff was cold against Elia's overheated flesh, sending shivers down his spine. Despite the unease of the situation, he couldn't help the little gasps that escaped him as Rael's strong fingers rubbed the salve into his body.

"Is this really necessary?" Elia squirmed, half from the strange feeling of the salve, half from the even stranger feeling of Rael's hands on his body.

"Yes. There's no other way." Rael's fingers pressed against the corner of Elia's jaw and throat, rubbing the salve into his skin. "I have to get you through the outpost and to the military's representative. That won't happen if every damn Borraq in the outpost catches the scent of you."

That didn't sound good. Elia shuddered— and then stiffened as Rael's large hands closed on Elia's skinny frame, forcing him to stay still. "This will block your scent," Rael explained again. "It will only last for a short time, but that should be enough."

Rael leaned close, his broad chest pressing against Elia's back as he worked it into Elia's skin. In the dim light of the dawn, the scent of something spicy in Rael's own natural musk filled Elia's nose, dizzying him. Desire warred with nervousness, creating a heady mix that threatened to send him reeling.

This was dangerous. This man was dangerous.

But not in the way that Elian had first feared.

Rael finished rubbing the salve into Elian's skin at key points — his shoulders, the small of his back, and the back of his neck — and then pulled a cloak over his body, sealing him inside. Despite the heavy material, it did little to block the heady sensation of Rael's touch and the closeness between them.

"Does this stuff actually work?" Elian asked, his voice a little hoarse.

Rael's smile was sharp. "I don't take risks. If any other Borraq catches wind of your scent and decides to challenge me for you, there's no telling what might happen. I will not let that happen."

"They're not as polite as you are?"

"Polite?" Rael snorted. "Outposts like that are full of Borraq without clans. Lone wolves."

He said the term like a curse. "Thrown out of their clans? I didn't know that happened. I thought all of you guys were into clan honor."

"Sometimes, one can go too far. Sometimes warriors are thrown out of home." Something dark crossed Rael's gaze. "Or they have them, but don't want to return. After the war... Some warriors come back with a darkness in them. They do not wish to return."

He shook his head. "At least with Borraq from rival territories, you know what you're getting. With lone wolves... You never know what they're going to do. They have no alpha to hold them accountable, no families to care about, no-one to rely on."

That sounded like Elian's whole life. He was thankful for the cloak that covered his expression.

Rael stood. "You are disguised. It's time to go."

Elian's heart sank. He'd been trying not to think about it. "Do you really have to do this?"

"I must take care of my clan," Rael said, brooking no disagreement. "Stand."

"Is there anything I can do? To earn my freedom, I mean." The words tasted bitter on Elian's tongue the instant he said them.

"Please," Elian said, his voice breaking. He reached out to grab Rael's arm, but the man turned away from him, avoiding Elian's outstretched hand easily. "I'll do anything. I'll work for you. I'll — I'll be your personal bookkeeper, or your cook, or your — your anything. Just don't hand me over to die."

Rael's jaw clenched. "I do not need a cook. Or a bookkeeper, for that matter." He diplomatically didn't mention the "anything" part of Elian's plea.

Elian's heart sank. He was offering himself up, and he still wasn't good enough. "There's nothing else that I can do?" he whispered.

Rael's expression was hard. "You can survive."

Elian's shoulders slumped. He hung his head, the weight of his defeat pressing down on him.

He was going to be handed over to a place full of strangers who wanted to kill him. There was nothing that he could do about it.

And despite everything, the idea of being separated from Rael filled him with a cold, miserable dread. Rael was his enemy, but he was... kind. Proud. Respectful, in his own way.

He'd never mistreated Elian. Not even when he could have, the two of them all alone in the wilderness.

Elian's cheeks flushed. What kind of man was he, to be miserable at the thought of being separated from his captor?

Sorry, humanity, he thought. Someone else should have crawled out of their cryopod. Someone better. Someone stronger.

Someone who would have known what to do.

Elian's heart hammered as they approached the alien outpost.

It was like nothing he had ever seen before. The frontline spaceports that he was used to were dusty little holes in the wall, barely more than a few well-worn quarters and a landing pad.

In comparison, the outpost was a riot of color and noise. Bright flags flapped in the wind, bearing Borraq writing. Borraq of all shapes and sizes walked the streets, their gruff voices laughing and yelling.

Elian had read about aliens as a child, of course. What kid didn't dream about space and the possibility of meeting strange creatures from other worlds? But the reality of it was something else entirely. Peeking out from under his cloak, Elian caught a glimpse of a gang of Borraq drinking together at a bar, their horns glinting in the neon light. One of them had a pet — a creature with a long, sinuous body and a dozen writhing tentacles, which it used to steal sips from its owner's drink.

It was amazing. It was terrifying.

How was he supposed to escape somewhere like this, with Borraq everywhere he looked?

"You're drawing too much attention," Rael said, breaking through Elian's dazed observations. "Keep your head down."

Despite the thick cloak that still covered him, Rael's hand between his shoulders sent a shiver of memory through Elian. The salve that Rael had rubbed into his body before — the warmth of his strong, confident touch — it was impossible to forget, no matter how much Elian tried. It made his current situation all the more humiliating, to be escorted through the alien outpost at Rael's side, like a child holding onto the hand of his captor.

But what other choice did he have?

If he ran, he'd be caught in moments. If he tried to appeal to one of the other Borraq that walked the streets, who knew what would happen? Despite his situation, Rael was the devil that Elian knew. He was the safest option that Elian had.

And that was the most terrifying thing of all.

As they made their way through the bustling outpost, passers-by greeted Rael with familiarity and good cheer. Elian couldn't help but notice the respect and even reverence in their tones when addressing the imposing Borraq.

A scruffy merchant clapped Rael heartily on the shoulder. "Good to see you again, my friend! Feels like an age since you graced us with your presence." His eyes flickered to Elian with undisguised curiosity.

Rael grunted a terse reply, but the merchant seemed unfazed by his brusque manner. "Your father would be proud to see how you've carried on the clan," he said with a wink.

As they continued on, Elian's mind raced. The little snippets about Rael's past only deepened the mystery surrounding the enigmatic alien. A respected family? A father whose approval seemed to still loom large? Elian found himself craving more insight into the man who held his fate in his hands.

When they were alone again, Rael's shoulders seemed to sag almost imperceptibly, as if freed from a weight. Elian seized the opportunity. "That merchant seemed to know you well."

Rael was silent for a long moment, and Elian wondered if he'd overstepped. But then the Borraq spoke, his words clipped but laced with a rare vulnerability. "My father died during the first wars with your kind."

Elian's breath caught in his throat. Rael continued, "His death shattered our clan. We were... vulnerable. Preyed upon by those who sensed our weakness." His jaw clenched. "I vowed to never let that happen again. To protect my people with everything I have, no matter the cost."

As Elian processed the weight of Rael's confession, the reason for his capture snapped into stark focus. This wasn't just about a bounty or greed. It was about survival, honor, the solemn vow to shield his clan from the specters that had torn it apart before.

Elian's heart ached for him. "I'm sorry," he said. "That sounds... awful."

Rael snorted. "It was what it was. Every being has their own burden to bear."

But the old pain in his eyes was unmistakable. Despite the danger that Elian was in, despite the fact that this man was about to hand him over to a death sentence, he couldn't help but feel a surge of empathy for him. Rael was a man driven by his past, just as much as anyone else. He had his own hopes and fears, just like Elian did.

And speaking of hopes and fears...

Elian swallowed. "I lost my parents in the war, too," he said. "I never knew them, though. I was an orphan. I always dreamed of having a big family of my own. I thought... I don't know, I thought it would make them proud. Settle their spirits. Sounds stupid, I know."

Rael's gaze was intense on him. Just like the spicy scent of Rael's musk that still clung to the inside of Elian's borrowed cloak, the personal space between them had evaporated. They were walking side by side, deep in conversation, sharing their hopes and fears just as much as they were sharing the thick alien material that covered Elian's body.

They were too close for there not to be something between them.

It was understanding. Sympathy. A connection between two people who found themselves at unexpected crossroads in their lives, about to make an unexpected decision.

But it was too late for them.

They'd reached their destination. The military building loomed before them, its lights and busyness promising a hundred different fates for Elian.

The double doors of the outpost's entrance slid open, and Rael ushered Elian inside.

Elia's heart sank. This was it. This was the moment that he was going to be handed over to someone who would decide his future — or rather, his lack of one.

The building was a hive of activity. Borraq soldiers in unfamiliar uniforms bustled back and forth, speaking in so quickly that Elia didn't understand. Rael made his way to a desk, where a tired-looking Borraq woman sat surrounded by stacks of paperwork. She eyed Elia's cloaked form with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm here to see the outpost's military representative," Rael said.

The woman sighed. "He's left on short notice. Some emergency in Yattara, I don't know the details."

Rael's jaw clenched. "When is he expected to return?"

"I don't know that either. You'll have to go to Yattara and ask him yourself."

Yattara? Was this good, or bad? Elia eyed Rael from the depths of his cloak, trying to work it out.

Rael's shoulders tensed. "Fine."

The woman eyed Elia's much smaller form. "You're welcome to spend the night here. I recognize your clan, alpha. Your territory is far away. We have rooms for travelers, and your young friend must need a rest after such a journey."

Eager relief flooded through Elia. The thought of a soft bed, of sleeping without the constant ache of his feet and the hard ground beneath him, was almost too much to bear.

But Rael's response was a stiff, "No. We have our own accommodations."

Then, without another word, he ushered Elian outside.

Despite the busy crowds, Rael kept Elian closer to his side than ever, his grip on Elian's arm almost painful. Rael's shoulders were tense, his body coiled like a predator about to strike.

Elian was familiar enough with Rael to realize that something was very, very wrong.

They made it outside of the outpost's gate without incident. "What's wrong?" Elian asked in a hushed whisper.

Rael's eyes scanned the environment, his gaze sharp. "I'm not sure," he said. "But my instincts are never wrong."

He didn't relax until they had put a good distance between themselves and the outpost, and he'd found a new camp for them to settle in. This time, he set up their defensive position first, and only then allowed Elian to help him with the rest of the tasks.

Outpost Zekara loomed in the distance, its towering spires a shiny blur against the setting sun. "Is Yattara far?" Elian asked. "Is that a place, or a person?"

"A city." A muscle twitched in Rael's jaw. "Two weeks of good travel."

"I thought you didn't mind a long walk."

"I don't. It's not that." Rael turned to look back towards the outpost. From their new camp, they could look through the trees and see its main gate, but were hidden themselves. "Something was wrong. Military representatives don't often up and leave like that without replacement. And offering you a bed..." He shook his head. "Uncommon hospitality."

Elian's heart beat harder. "What does that mean?"

"Everything. Or nothing." Rael rolled his shoulders, his gaze never leaving the outpost's main gate. "Perhaps I'm jumping at shadows."

"I thought your instincts were never wrong."

That earned Elian a quick flash of a wry smile. "They aren't. Sleep lightly tonight."

Rael tied Elian up for the night as usual, the thick alien rope wrapping around his wrists and keeping him secured. But this time, with the firelight flickering across Rael's face, Elian saw a new glint of something in the alien's eyes.

Two weeks. Two more weeks of travel before his eventual disposal. Elian should have been overjoyed — and yet, a deep tension settled inside him, making his nerves ache.

Two more weeks with Rael.

Despite the weariness that dragged at Elian's bones, sleep was a long time in coming.

As he drifted off, the sound of Rael settling in beside him was both a comfort and a torment.

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Rael's eyes scanned the dense foliage, searching for any telltale signs of edible vegetation. His senses were attuned to the slightest movement or change in the environment, a skill honed by years of survival in the wilderness.

He glanced back at Elian, who was diligently following his instructions, carefully examining the plants Rael had pointed out. Despite the human's initial clumsiness, Rael had to admit he was a quick study, adapting to the alien surroundings with a resilience that demanded respect.

"Like this?" Elian asked, holding up a leafy plant with vibrant purple veins.

Rael nodded, a ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Exactly. Those leaves are rich in essential nutrients."

Elian beamed at the praise, his curls bouncing as he tucked the plant into his makeshift satchel. The sunlight danced across Elian's features, accentuating the sprinkling of freckles that adorned his nose and cheeks.

Shaking himself from his reverie, Rael turned his attention back to the task at hand. He couldn't afford to be distracted by the human's charms, no matter how alluring they might appear.

Two extra weeks of travel. Rael had already been heading home after a long journey when he'd first found Elian. Now that they had another two weeks ahead of them, his supplies were dwindling. It would slow them, but they'd have to forage as they went.

As they continued their foraging, Rael couldn't help but steal glances at Elian, taking

in the way his slender form moved with grace. The human was so different to Borraq. Even the weakest Borraq was bigger and heavier than Elian. Elian's quickness and nimbleness never failed to catch Rael's eye.

Elian must have sensed Rael's gaze, for he looked up, their eyes locking.

Clearing his throat, Rael tore his gaze away, focusing instead on the task at hand. "That should be enough for now. We should keep moving."

As he taught Elian how to forage for food in the wilderness, the human's wide eyes fixed on him in rapt attention, something had stirred in Rael. Something warm, something sweet.

He'd never met anyone like Elian. The human was a paradox, as confounding as he was charming. Rael had expected a cowering, broken creature, someone who would beg for mercy as soon as Rael got the drop on him.

And yet, despite the very real danger Elian was in, the human had a spirit to him. He cracked wry jokes at the worst times. He challenged Rael. He looked at Vasz with a sense of wonder that was completely out of place for a captive, as if every single part of the planet was worth paying attention to.

And he'd made Rael laugh. No one had done that in years.

Rael was going to miss him.

But he had to turn him in.

There was no other choice. The bounty on Elian's head was what Rael needed to save his own clansman.

And humans were the enemies of the Borraq. There was no future for Elian, not on Vasz. There was nowhere that he could go that Borraq wouldn't find him.

Rael couldn't let himself think about that future for Elian. He couldn't let himself think about the moment when other Borraq would take the human away, about the moment when Rael would be free and clear with his bounty money in hand, about the moment when those endlessly hopeful blue eyes would meet his own for the last time...

Rael's instincts prickled, shaking him free of his thoughts. Something was wrong.

In one smooth motion, he threw himself forward and tackled Elian to the ground.

A spear whistled through the air above them, narrowly missing both Rael and Elian. It embedded itself in the ground, quivering with the force of the throw.

Rael's eyes snapped to the weapon. It was a Borraq spear.

And it had been aimed at Elian.

Rael snapped around to face the source of the attack. He bared his teeth and roared, a sound that was half challenge and half fury. He was answered by an annoyed snarl from the other side of the clearing, and a tall Borraq stepped out from the underbrush.

And Rael knew him. "Korvax!" he growled.

"Rael." The other Borraq — a tall, scarred beast of a man, lean and blade-sharp — smirked. "No harm meant to you, alpha. I was just casting a hook for an interesting little fish."

Korvax was a lone wolf, a clanless warrior. Rael knew him well. He was always

lingering around outposts, implied in all kinds of under-the-table schemes. He was who people traded with when they needed warfront materials of unclear origin, or who they called when they had someone to hunt down and teach a lesson.

And somewhere along the line, Korvax had discovered that Rael had a human in tow.

The bounties on humans were dead or alive.

And clearly Korvax had decided which one was easier for him to collect.

Rael snarled. "It makes sense now. The military representative being called away, the offer of lodging..."

Korvax's scarred face brightened, taking that as praise of his smarts. "One quick bribe to ensure that he was called away before you could get to him, and then another to get your little fishie where I wanted him."

Korvax's smile remained in place, but something in his gaze darkened. "Or, that was the plan, at least, until you wasted my bribe. Why not take the offer of lodging, and leave that human somewhere nice and easy for me to collect? Pfah. That receptionist won't give refunds, you know."

Elian stepped behind Rael, eyes wide. "Stay out of my business," Rael snarled back. "This one's mine."

"Is that so...?" Korvax shifted his weight from foot to foot, acting bored and idle. "It's a long trip to Yattara. Those are some dangerous roads. Anything could happen along the way. Let's work together and split the bounty."

Anyone who was foolish enough to take Korvax up on an offer like that would soon wind up dead in a ditch. Rael squared up. "I'll split your head from your shoulders."

Leave.”

”Nothing wrong with working together.” Korvax cocked his head, trying to peer around Rael’s body to get a better look at Elian. He grinned. ”Or maybe you want the human for more than the bounty—”

Rael lunged for him.

The two Borraqs fought fiercely, hitting the ground. For a moment, it could have been any two beasts in the wilderness, fighting for dominance. There was no law, no society, no morality — just two predators, each trying to prove that he was the stronger one.

Rael swiped his blade at Korvax, but the other Borraq was fast. He narrowly twisted out of the way, only copping a scratch across his cheek. Blood welled up from the wound, but Korvax only grinned wider. ”That’s the spirit!” he said, his voice filled with the same sort of encouragement that he might offer at a friendly game of cards, as if he and Rael weren’t currently tearing each other apart.

Korvax lunged for Rael, but Rael was faster. With a swift movement, he brought his knee up into Korvax’s gut, winding the other man.

Korvax was a beast, but he was a lean lone wolf up against an alpha in his prime. He was lighter than Rael, and his reflexes were a little slower. Just a little, but it was enough. He roared in frustration as Rael pinned him to the ground, his blade at Korvax’s throat.

”Stay out of this,” Rael growled. ”The human is under my protection.”

Korvax’s eyes flicked over to Elian — now huddled by a tree, far from the scrap, but watching intently.

Elian could have taken the chance to run. Entangled with Korvax as Rael was, Elian would have had quite a head start.

But he hadn't. He'd waited, eyes fixed on Rael as Rael fought for him.

Something inside of Rael blazed like a sun at that.

Korvax's grin widened. "Your protection, eh? I've never seen someone get so possessive over a bounty before. What's the matter, alpha? Is there something special about this one?"

Rael's snarl was low and dangerous. "If I see your face again, I'll kill you."

Surprisingly, Korvax's grin didn't waver. "Interesting," he said, and then he laughed.

Rael hauled them both up from the ground, and threw Korvax away from him. Korvax staggered to his feet and leapt away, putting distance between the two of you. "It's always a pleasure running into you, Rael. Do try to stay alive until I see you again."

And with that, he was gone, disappearing into the foliage as if he hadn't just narrowly avoided being killed.

Rael sat there for a moment, breathing hard. He'd won the fight. That was the important thing. He'd protected Elian from being kidnapped right in front of his eyes. That was the important thing.

But despite the victory, a cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck. Korvax was never this bold. He was a lone wolf, a carrion-eater. He never showed himself to alpha warriors, never dared to interfere boldly with hunts.

For him to openly declare his intentions like this... It meant that he was absolutely certain that he could take Elian away from Rael.

Rael's eyes flicked over to where Elian was watching from behind the tree, face pale and trembling in fear. The human was in danger. He was being hunted by the worst scum of the Borraq, and he couldn't do anything about it. He was completely defenseless.

Rael couldn't let himself think about that. He couldn't let himself think about anything other than the huge sum of money that was going to be his, once he turned Elian in...

But despite himself, Rael's gaze softened. Before Rael could think twice about the action, he reached out and gathered the human into his arms.

Elian was small and slender, his body fragile in Rael's hold. He was warm and soft, a sharp contrast to the hard, muscular bodies that Rael was used to. The human trembled in Rael's embrace, and Rael realized that he was shaking with fear.

The fight with Korvax had barely raised his pulse. But now, with the human trembling in his arms, something hot and fierce roared to life in Rael's chest. It was a wild, primal feeling, something that demanded that he protect this small, fragile creature at all costs.

Holding Elian close, the scent of him filled Rael's senses. It was more than just the heady smell of a human, more than just a simple biological urge.

It wasn't just a human.

It was Elian.

Desire surged through Rael, hot and fierce. His instincts roared to life, screaming at him to claim Elian as his own.

Using all his willpower, Rael forced himself to shove Elian away from him. "Stay back," he growled, his voice rough with the effort.

Elian stumbled backwards, shock and hurt flashing across his face. "What?" What's wrong, Rael?" He looked at Rael's face, realizing what was happening, and then his brows knit together in thought. "I... I trust you not to lose control."

"You shouldn't," Rael said.

He turned away from Elian, clenching his fists in frustration. It was bad enough to betray his own instincts, but to do it in front of the human, to show him just how much of a monster Rael truly was...

Elian didn't understand. He couldn't. He was a sweet creature, not cut out to be around Borraq. He was an anomaly, a paradox, a puzzle that Rael's mind couldn't help but be drawn to, even in moments when he desperately wished it would focus on something else.

And he smelled so damn good.

If Elian was a Borraq, Rael wouldn't have to hold back. The way his body was reacting, the way Elian felt in his arms... It was pure, simple — primal.

If Elian was a Borraq, Rael would claim him as his mate.

But he wasn't.

Elian was the enemy of his people, and Rael had to remember that.

No matter how much his body demanded that he claim this pretty little thing, clever and brave and trying his hardest, as his own.

With a growl of frustration, Rael tore himself away. "Come on," he said. "We're going to have to move before that jackal's done licking his wounds."

Elian hesitated. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to—"

"Silence," Rael snapped. "Just follow me."

They moved in silence, the moment of peace from before now replaced with a tense undercurrent. Elian kept casting worried glances in Rael's direction, as if he was afraid that Rael was going to snap at him again.

And the concern only made Rael feel worse.

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Eliau had run. He was free, his legs whipping through the thick wild grasses of Vasz. He was free—

Then there was a growl, low and dark. Before Eliau could react, Rael pinned him down, rolling on top of him. The warrior's thick, hard thighs trapped Eliau's slender ones, and there was no mistaking the thick length that pressed against Eliau's body, hard and hot through the fabric of both of their clothes.

Rael's big hands closed over Eliau's wrists, pinning them to the ground. His mouth came down on Eliau's neck, hot and hungry. He nipped at the sensitive skin there, making Eliau moan.

Desire warred with the instinct to run. Eliau was at Rael's mercy, and the heady thrill of it sent arousal crashing through him. He arched up for more—

—and then Eliau was sitting up in bed, gasping for breath.

It was just a dream.

Eliau looked down at himself. His thin sleeping clothes clung to his body, revealing the hard evidence of his desire.

It was just a dream... but the desires it had awakened were all too real.

Eliau swallowed, his mouth dry. He wanted to learn more about this strange, savage world that Rael knew so well. He wanted to see more of those moments when Rael's hard exterior cracked, and the man underneath showed through.

He wanted to understand those moments when Rael looked at him with hunger in his eyes — and then put distance between them, frustrated and yearning.

He wanted more.

Elian's gaze drifted over to the edge of the camp, his heart still pounding from the intensity of the dream. Rael, ever alert, was already watching him, eyes hooded and intense in the pale dawn light. "Bad dream?"

"Something like that." Elian felt the heat rising in his cheeks as their eyes met. His chest heaved with rapid breaths, the thin fabric of his sleeping shirt clinging to his sweat-dampened skin.

There was no way Rael couldn't tell what he'd been dreaming about – the evidence was written all over Elian's flushed face and body. Not for the first time, Elian wanted nothing more than to disappear.

Rael stood. "If you're already awake, we should get a head-start on the day."

It was just barely dawn, but that was enough. The wilds of Vasz didn't get any safer as the day went on. Elian swallowed. "Yeah, I'm awake. Just give me a moment to get dressed."

He reached for his clothes, but Rael stopped him. The Borraq's hand was warm on his shoulder. It was all Elian could do not to shiver. "If Korvax is on our trail, then he will try to track you by your scent."

Elian's heart sank. "Is that possible?"

Rael's eyes were intense. "Yes. You humans might have dull senses, but trust me — to us, it's still enough to track by."

Elia's heart was pounding. "So what does that mean for me?"

"It means that you need to wash." Rael's hand slid off of his shoulder. "Thoroughly. We're near a freshwater stream. Go there and cleanse yourself."

Elia got up to head to the river, and Rael followed him, rummaging in one of his ever-present packs. "Here," the Borraq said, handing him a bar of something — a Borraq soap, Elia guessed. It was a deep, earthy green, and it smelled like pine and fresh-cut grass. "This will help you cleanse yourself."

"Thanks," Elia said, trying to ignore the heat in his cheeks. He'd spent months being trained to put together vegetable plots and build living quarters, but no training had prepared him for being told to wash by an alien king.

Elia bit his lip and followed the babble of the river. As he walked towards the sound of running water, though, he risked a glance back at Rael.

Yesterday, Rael had been willing to fight tooth and nail to keep Elia out of Korvax's clutches. He'd come out on top in their fight, but it had been a violent one, with no space for hesitation.

And then there was that moment when Rael had caught him in his arms. For a heartbeat, Rael's hold had been something more than just a way to reassure Elia. It had been warm, and strong, and...

Elia shook his head. He was losing it. There was no way that a big alpha alien like Rael had any interest in a scrawny lost human like him. Elia was just a job to Rael, that was all. Some kind of weird, pathetic job.

In the distance, he could hear the call of some alien birdsong, a haunting sound that echoed through the canyon. He focused on that, and not on the little voice in the back

of his head, the one that whispered that Rael's attention to him was different, that the Borraq's respect for Elian as a survivor was something more than just a job, that the heat in Rael's gaze was something more than just alien curiosity...

No, he couldn't think about that. There was no way that a man like Rael could ever have real feelings for someone like Elian. That was just a fantasy.

He was nothing to Rael, and Rael was nothing to him. That was the deal, plain and simple. A human and an alien, nothing more than captor and captive.

Definitely nothing more.

Elian began to head towards the stream, but Rael followed him. Elian's cheeks burned. "I, uh, think I can handle a bath by myself."

"Alone in the wilderness, with nobody to protect you?" Rael's eyes narrowed. "What if Korvax were to find you when you were vulnerable?"

"Vulnerable?" Elian's voice cracked. "I've survived a spaceship crash, I think I can handle a bath. So a little privacy would be nice."

"Privacy is for people without a bounty on their heads."

Damn. Elian swallowed. He looked away from Rael's intense gaze. He wasn't wrong, but...

Oh well. Here went nothing.

Trying to ignore the big alien on the river bank behind him, Elian stripped off his clothes and headed into the cold, crisp water. Shivering, he began to wash himself as thoroughly as he could with the strange Borraq soap, his gaze fixed firmly ahead at

the scenery— and definitely not back at his audience.

It wasn't hard to do. The scene was so beautiful that even a space colony kid like Elian couldn't help but appreciate it: the clear water, the sunlight dappling through the leaves, the sound of birds in the distance. He closed his eyes and breathed in the clean air, feeling a strange sense of peace.

He'd never experienced anything like this. By the time that he'd been born, Earth had been too polluted for moments like this. His entire world had been big cities, the interiors of ships, and the recycled air of stations.

Opening his eyes, Elian looked out at the wild scenery, feeling a strange sense of longing. Despite the alien world around him, this was something that all humans could understand: the call of the wild, the desire for open spaces, the need for contact with the natural world.

He washed himself, feeling the clean water against his skin, the scent of the forest in the air. For a moment, he could almost pretend that he was back on an Earth that he'd never been lucky enough to know, that he'd grown up in a world of open skies and untamed landscapes, that he'd known what it was to be a part of something more than just steel and recycled air.

The cool embrace of the river, the scent of pine and the unknown fragrance of the alien world, the dappled sunlight through his closed eyelids...

For this moment, the alien world of Vasz felt more like a home to him than his actual home ever had.

It was a strange feeling. Elian turned suddenly, water splashing around him, wanting to tell Rael about this feeling.

He froze.

He had clearly caught Rael by surprise. The Borraq hadn't been keeping an eye on their surroundings, but was intently focused on Elian.

And when Elian faced him, Rael's eyes roved over his body.

Elian flushed. There was no mistaking the intensity and desire in Rael's eyes.

Last night, Elian had gotten the impression that Rael might kiss him. The Borraq had caught him in his arms, holding him close, his gaze burning into Elian's. In that moment, it had felt like Rael was going to lean in, that his head was going to lower, that his lips were going to...

Elian shivered, drops of clear water tumbling from his hair. No, he had to be imagining things.

But if the circumstances between them were different... If Rael was a human, if Elian wasn't a captive with a bounty on his head, if there was no war between their species...

Then Rael would be the ideal man. Kind, brave, protective of his people, strong. Someone who had taken care of Elian and treated him well, even when Elian was supposed to be the enemy of his people.

Elian ran his hands through his wet curls, washing away the last of the soap. He and Rael locked eyes as he stood in the river, desire burning in the alien's gaze.

The Borraq's body was a work of art, all sleek, rippling muscle. His golden skin seemed to glow in the dappled sunlight, the color a perfect contrast to the deep greens and browns of the surrounding forest. Despite the coolness of the day, sweat glistened

on his skin, drawing Elian's gaze to the broad expanse of his chest, the chiseled ridges of his abs. A single trail of golden hair led down from his navel, disappearing into the loose fabric of his pants.

Elian's mouth went dry.

He'd never been attracted to anyone like Rael. In the space stations and colonies he'd been shuttled through, keeping his head down and focusing on survival had been his only priorities.

He'd never allowed himself to act on any desires for men, no matter who caught his eye. There had always been something more urgent to focus on, something more dangerous to dodge.

At least, that was what he'd always told himself.

But now... Despite the vast gulf of difference between them, something about Rael drew him. The sheer size of the alien, the power in his body, the deep rumble of his voice, the way his eyes burned with a fierce heat, fixed on Elian as if he were the only thing in the universe worth looking at...

He was staring. He couldn't stop himself.

"Come here," Rael commanded.

The sound of his deep voice sent a shiver down Elian's spine. His mouth was dry as he slowly stepped out of the water, water droplets trailing down his body, the cool air of the forest raising goosebumps on his skin.

He approached Rael. The Borraq said nothing, but his eyes blazed with unmistakable intent.

Desire and nervousness warred within him, a heady mix that made his head swim. Elian stopped in front of Rael, the alien's body towering over his own. He looked up at the Borraq, his heart racing, anticipation and need burning in his veins.

It was insane to have feelings for his captor — and for a Borraq especially! But after crash-landing behind enemy lines on an alien planet and kidnapped for the bounty on his head, his whole life was insane right now.

What was one more insane thing, right?

And maybe Elian could have one nice thing before being handed over to the authorities and disappearing forever...

Rael's intense gaze pierced into him, the tension between them sizzling like a livewire. Elian's breath caught in his throat as their eyes locked, a thousand unspoken words and desires passing between them in that heated silence.

Rael broke the stillness, his deep rumble cutting through the tension. "If you're done, I need to reapply the pheromone-blocking salve."

A flicker of disappointment sparked within Elian at Rael's all-business tone, but it was quickly doused by the shiver of anticipation that raced through him at the thought of the Borraq's hands on his body again.

Elian gave a small nod, unable to find his voice. He turned, putting his back to Rael. The Borraq was behind him, close enough that Elian could feel the heat of his body.

Then Rael's hands began to rub the salve into Elian's skin. The touch was firm, confident, as if Rael had rubbed this stuff into a hundred other humans before. The salve was cool at first, but as Rael worked it into Elian's skin, it began to warm.

Eliau drifted on the sensation, the chill of cool water, the dappled sunlight on his bare skin, the clean feeling of the river water and the fresh air...

He wasn't supposed to be enjoying this. Rael was his captor. But as Rael worked the salve into his skin, massaging his shoulders, tracing down his spine, all thoughts of their roles began to fade away. Pleasure hummed through Eliau's body, lulling him into a warm, hazy fugue state.

He tried to shake off the feeling, to focus on the fact that he was a captive, that he was at the mercy of an alien, that he was naked and being touched by a being who could do whatever he wanted...

No, that was definitely the wrong thing to think! Eliau stiffened as desire began to bloom within him, a sweet ache that demanded more.

He bit his lip, trying to fight it. There was no way that he was going to beg for something to happen! No way that he wanted more from a situation that was already insane, no way that he wanted to feel pleasure at the hands of a captor, no way that he wanted to be touched by a hot alien warlord in the middle of a forest with the sun on his bare skin...

There was no way that he wanted all of that.

But he did.

And, naked as he was, there was no way to hide the proof of his desire, jutting out in front of him, throbbing with need. Oh, Jesus.

Rael's hands slowed as they drifted lower, rubbing the salve into Eliau's ribs with firm, purposeful strokes. Eliau could feel the tension radiating off the Borraq in waves. Maybe Rael wouldn't notice...

Yeah, fat chance. A growl rumbled from Rael, the sound vibrating through Elian's body. The Borraq leaned in, his mouth inches from Elian's ear. "I'm trying to hide your scent," he said, his voice dark and tight. "And here you are, throwing off even more pheromones and undoing all my hard work."

Elian swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. He searched for levity, forcing a joking tone. "Well, you did say that humans are always devious, right?"

Rael let out a snort of amusement, the sound stirring the fine hairs on the back of Elian's neck. "That I did."

Elian's heart raced as Rael's hand drifted lower, his touch sending electric jolts through Elian's body. He couldn't help the way his body reacted to the Borraq's touch, the way his cock throbbed with need.

"I can't help it," Elian breathed, his voice shaking with desire.

Rael let out a low growl. "Then I'll just have to deal with it," he rumbled.

Elian groaned as Rael's fingers dipped to his cock, tracing his length with a feather-light touch. He leaned back into Rael's strong chest, his head falling back onto the Borraq's shoulder.

Rael chuckled, the sound sending vibrations through Elian's body. "Humans are so similar to Borraq in some ways," he murmured, his breath hot against Elian's ear. "But so different in others."

Elian didn't have time to wonder what that meant. His thoughts scattered like startled birds as Rael's powerful hand, still slick with salve, enveloped his cock. He gasped, arching his back as he leaned into Rael's solid chest. The Borraq's free hand gripped his hip, anchoring him in place, a captive to the alien's touch. The contrast between

the cool morning air and Rael's burning touch sent shivers down his spine, making him tremble with anticipation.

Rael began to move his hand, stroking Elian with a rhythm that made his heart pound. Each stroke was a blend of rough and tender, a testament to the alien's strength and the surprising gentleness he held within. Elian's breath hitched, his body responding to Rael's touch with a hunger he hadn't known he possessed. He gasped, his fingers digging into Rael's muscular arm as he rocked his hips, chasing the pleasure that was building within him.

As he moved, he felt Rael's hardness press against his ass, the alien's desire evident even through the fabric of his pants. The realization sent a thrill through him, a heady mix of fear and excitement.

He'd done that? Rael was hard over him? He couldn't believe he had this effect on Rael, a Borraq alpha, a man who was supposed to be his enemy. It was a thought that sent his head spinning, making his heart race even faster.

He reached back, wanting to touch Rael, to give him the same pleasure he was receiving. But Rael caught his wrist, his grip firm but not painful.

"Focus on your own needs," Rael growled into his ear, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through Elian's body.

The command was clear, leaving no room for argument. Elian whimpered, his body shivering with need as he obeyed, focusing on the pleasure that was building within him.

Elian's body trembled, a raw nerve exposed to the alien air. The anticipation of his impending climax left him vulnerable, as if he were standing naked before a crowd, every secret laid bare.

He was on the verge of coming, his body tense with anticipation. He gasped as he fought to hold on, to savor this moment for as long as he could. "Rael," he moaned, his voice trembling with need.

Rael responded with a low growl, his hand tightening around Elian's cock. He jerked Elian off harder, faster, pushing him towards the edge.

Elian gasped and bucked, his body shaking as the pleasure built to a crescendo. Finally, he couldn't hold back any longer. Elian came with a cry, his release painting the ground.

The world spun around him as the pleasure washed over him. He felt boneless, as if he could melt into Rael's arms and never move again. He struggled to catch his breath, his chest heaving as he tried to fill his lungs.

Before he could say anything, Rael spoke, his voice rough and low. "Now go back into the river. Scrub yourself clean again."

The words hit Elian like a slap. This was really just about his pheromones?

"Y-yeah. Sure." Elian nodded, his head still spinning. He turned and walked back into the river, his legs shaking with every step. The water was cold against his overheated skin, sending a shiver down his spine.

As he dunked himself under the water, he risked a glance back at Rael. The Borraq was still watching him, his eyes filled with desire. Elian's gaze drifted lower, taking in the obvious bulge in Rael's pants. He swallowed, his body responding to the sight with a renewed hunger.

He wanted to help Rael, to give him the same pleasure he had received. But Rael had been clear.

He had told Elian no.

Elian dunked himself under the water again, closing his eyes. But even in the darkness, he could still see Rael — the need of his body, and the heat in his eyes.

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The woods were thick and green around them, the air alive with the chirping of unseen creatures. Rael led the way, his senses on high alert.

It was a beautiful world, Vasz. Rael had fought for it, bled for it, and kept his territory safe. This was his home. But to truly know it, he had to know its dangers — and Vasz had plenty of those.

Elian followed at Rael's back, his steps light. He seemed to enjoy the journey, his gaze constantly flicking from one sight to the next. Today, he stared at a pair of enormous birds, their wingspan nearly as wide as the path they walked. The birds ignored the travelers, focused instead on tearing apart a morsel between them.

Rael didn't have the heart to tell the human what kind of birds those were, and what kind of carcass they were sharing.

It was a grueling journey. They were taking paths that Rael was certain no human had ever walked. The main path between the outpost and the city of Yattara was easier — safe, well-traveled — but too easy.

Too open.

Rael kept scanning their surroundings, his sharp eyes missing nothing. The smug look on Korvax's face was seared into his mind. That slippery bounty hunter wouldn't give up so easily, not with the size of the bounty on Elian's head.

Korvax was ruthless, sadistic even. Rael had seen the aftermath of some of his "hunts." Leaving Elian's fate to that monster wasn't an option.

They needed to stay off the beaten path, find some obscure trails to slip through. Rael assessed their location, calculating the distance they'd covered, the terrain they'd passed through. A few miles ahead, there was a cave system, well-hidden and easily defensible.

"We'll make camp early," he announced, not breaking stride. "Find shelter in a cave. Then we'll move again under cover of night. We'll be harder to track that way."

Elian simply nodded, his stride faltering only slightly as he adjusted to the new plan. The human was resilient, Rael had to give him that. Most wouldn't have fared half as well on a journey like this.

As they neared the cave entrance, Rael took the lead, his ears pricked for any signs of danger. The musty scent of minerals and dampness reached his nostrils, but nothing alarming. He signaled for Elian to enter, following him deeper into the cool darkness.

The darkness swallowed them both as they entered the cave. Rael's senses strained in the near-absence of light, the air thick with the scents of earth and damp. He could just barely see the cave walls and ground, his night vision working hard, but it was enough to navigate by.

Elian paused, hesitant. "I... I can't see."

"You can't?" That took Rael by surprise. Humans couldn't see in the near-dark? They really were such delicate things.

Rael placed a hand on Elian's shoulder. "Here. Walk with me. The way is clear."

It must have been a leap of faith to step blindly into the dark on nothing but the word of your captor, but Elian did it. He walked hesitantly, reaching out with each foot first, sweeping for obstacles, but he kept up with Rael.

Elian was no ordinary human. Rael had seen the depths of the man's courage, his resilience. There was something about him, something that set him apart from the rest of his kind.

And he was undeniably attractive. In the golden light of the sun, his hair was a mess of curls. His eyes were a clear, bright blue, the color of the sky. Despite the worry on his face, his youthful features were a sight to behold.

And then there had been that morning, the drops of water clinging to his skin, the way his lean muscles moved under his bare skin as he bathed in the river...

Rael's instincts were primal, impossible to ignore. The urge to claim, to mark, to mate — it thrummed through him, a call as old as the universe.

He'd never had a problem with his instincts before. When he wanted something, he took it. He fought threats, he cared for his people, he defended his territory.

But this was different.

This was a human in the middle of a war. A human that he'd taken for a bounty.

A human that he'd convinced himself was nothing more than a job, a task to be completed.

This was a human that he couldn't stop thinking about, no matter how hard he tried.

And worse — or better — the human seemed to feel the same way.

Rael had seen the desire in Elian's eyes, felt the heat of his gaze on him as they looked at each other at the river. Despite the dangers and the trials of their journey, there was a spark between them, growing hotter and hotter with each passing day.

It was madness. Rael was an alpha. He could have his pick of any mate he desired. He'd never felt the urge to settle down and begin his own family, though. Keeping his people safe in times of war was demanding enough, thrust into leadership suddenly with the loss of his father.

He had no room for distractions, especially not distractions in the form of soft, tempting humans with eyes that shone with unquenchable curiosity.

But that morning, he'd been tempted down to the bone.

As Elian bathed in the river, it had been impossible to ignore him. Rael had wanted to claim the human, to press him down into the sands, to cover that gasping mouth with his own and drink in the sound of his surprised moans as the cool river water ran over them both...

Rael's thoughts drifted back to that morning, to the feel of Elian's slender, wet body pressed against his own. The memory was intoxicating, a potent mix of desire and frustration that had lingered with him all day. He could still feel the way Elian's back had molded to his chest, pliant with trust and arousal, the smooth warmth of the human's skin beneath his fingers.

His arm had been a band of iron around Elian's waist, holding him tight, possessive. The other hand had moved with a will of its own, stroking, teasing, until Elian had been writhing in his grasp, moaning and gasping. The sound had been like a spark to tinder, igniting a furious arousal within him.

He remembered the feel of his own hardness, the rough fabric of his trousers rubbing against Elian's ass, the friction both torture and pleasure. The urge to take the human as a mate had been overwhelming, a primal instinct that had taken every ounce of Rael's self-control to resist.

In the end, he had been forced to release Elian, to step back and turn away. But the memory of Elian's body, of the way he had felt, the way he had sounded... It stayed with him.

As Elian had bathed, dipping unaware underneath the river's surface, Rael had sought a quick and furious release. His hand had moved urgently, imagining that his grip was instead Elian's hand, his mouth, his body...

The fantasy was a torment, a sweet, tantalizing taste of something he could not have. He was an alpha, a leader, and Elian was a human, a captive. The line between them was clear, unyielding.

But the memory of that morning, of Elian's body, wet and warm and willing in his arms, blurred that line.

Rael shook his head, as if the action could dislodge the forbidden thoughts. It was madness. He was going to go mad. He already was mad, to be considering anything other than delivering Elian safely into the hands of the military.

But at the same time, his heart disagreed. His instincts disagreed. His body certainly disagreed, his desire for the human burning hotter than any flame.

Finally, they reached the opening that Rael was searching for. "Here," Rael said, gently guiding Elian. "Sit here, by the wall. I'll start a fire."

Elian turned to face him, the human's eyes searching for him in the dark. "Are we safe here?"

Safe. The word echoed in Rael's mind, taking on a dozen different meanings.

"Yes," he managed to growl out, the sound thick with desire and self-loathing.

"We're safe here."

Safe from any danger but his own traitorous instincts.

Rael set up their makeshift camp, his movements efficient. He started a small fire, more for the light than anything else, and divided up their rations. Despite the scant provisions they had, Elian seemed determined to make the best of their situation, his chatter light and easy as he worked.

"I never thought I'd be camping out in a cave with an alien," Elian said, his tone dry. "Guess life's full of surprises, huh?"

Rael grunted, not trusting himself to speak. The tension between them was palpable, a living thing that seemed to grow with each passing moment. He could feel Elian's eyes on him, the weight of the human's gaze like a physical touch.

"I mean, don't get me wrong, it's not the worst thing that's ever happened to me," Elian continued with a wry smile, seemingly oblivious to Rael's inner turmoil. "At least the company's good."

Rael's eyes snapped to Elian's, the human's words hitting him like a physical touch. Did Elian really mean that? Or was he just trying to defuse the tension between them?

"You're not so bad yourself," Rael found himself saying, the words slipping out before he could stop them. "For a human, I mean."

Elian's smile was blinding, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "I'll take that as a compliment," he said, his voice warm.

They continued to speak back and forth, the conversation flowing easily despite the unspoken attraction between them. Rael found himself enjoying the human's quick

wit and easy charm, even as he fought to keep his own feelings in check.

But soon, it was time for them to sleep. Rael approached Elian with the bonds he used to tie the human every night.

Elian's face fell, his eyes dimming with disappointment. "Do you really need to keep tying me up every night?"

Rael set his jaw, hating the necessity of it. "It's for your own safety. The wilderness is too dangerous. If you were to try to escape, beasts would snap you up in an instant."

He bound Elian's hands in front of him, the action almost automatic at this point. "It's just more sensible this way," he said, trying to convince himself as much as Elian.

Elian looked up at him, his eyes searching. "Don't you trust me?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Rael's heart clenched at the question, his instincts roaring at him to take the human in his arms and never let go. But he couldn't. He wouldn't.

"You shouldn't trust me," he said instead, his voice harsh. "If you were a sensible creature, you'd be trying to get as far away from me as possible."

Elian shook his head, his expression stubborn. "Believe me, growing up where I did... You're the most honorable person I've met," he said, his voice firm. "I know you won't hurt me."

Rael felt a surge of frustration at the human's words, even as a part of him thrilled at the trust Elian placed in him. Didn't the human understand the danger he was in?

Didn't he realize what Rael was capable of?

But at the same time, Rael couldn't help but feel pleased at Elian's words. The human trusted him, despite everything. Despite the fact that Rael was his captor, despite the fact that Rael was supposed to be his enemy...

Under the dim light of the fire, Rael and Elian looked at each other. The tension between them was a palpable thing, hot and heavy in the air.

Desire warred with caution in Elian's eyes. He took a step forward, closing the gap between them.

Rael's heart pounded. He knew what was coming, knew that he should stop it — but he couldn't bring himself to move, to put any distance between them.

"Stop," he warned, his voice hoarse.

But Elian didn't stop. He kept leaning forward, right up to Rael. In the firelight, Rael could see the determination in Elian's eyes, the way his gaze flicked down to Rael's lips and back up again.

Elian got closer and closer, until there were just a few inches between them. The heat of his body was a palpable thing, a promise.

Rael's heart thundered in his chest, a storm within him. He was an alpha, a Borraq warrior, a man who never had trouble asserting himself or getting what he wanted.

But in that moment, he was utterly at the mercy of the human standing in front of him.

Elian smelled so good, a heady mix of desire and something sweet, something that

teased at the edges of Rael's senses. The human wanted him.

And Rael wanted him, too. He wanted him more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

With a growl, Rael slid his hand into Elian's hair, gripping those blond curls. He didn't pull — not yet. It was a possessive hold, a warning, a promise of what would come if Elian dared to step into the dangerous world that he was playing with.

"You don't know what you're asking for," Rael warned, his voice thick with desire. "I'm not a gentle lover. I'll take you and I'll mark you, and you'll be mine."

Elian's breath came out in a shuddering gasp. "I survived a spaceship crash. Do your worst."

It was a heady thing, to be desired so much that a man was willing to play with fire, to step right up to a dangerous predator and invite him to give in to his most primal instincts.

Rael's heart swelled with something hot and fierce, a protectiveness, a dominance, a desire to give the human in front of him everything he wanted — and to take everything that Rael wanted in return.

He couldn't hold back any longer.

Leaning down, he captured Elian's lips with his own.

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Desire exploded between them, a white-hot burst of need that sent a shockwave through Rael's entire body. Despite the heat of the cave, Elian's body trembled in his arms. He hesitated for just a moment, his lips soft and pliant beneath Rael's — and then, with a shuddering gasp, he kissed Rael back.

The taste of him was maddening. Rael deepened the kiss, unable to hold back. His tongue swept across Elian's lips, and with a moan, the human opened to him.

Elian's mouth was hot and wet, a perfect fit for Rael's. Despite the heat, the human's body was cool in his arms, a tantalizing contrast to the fiery desire that coursed through both of them.

In the depths of the kiss, Rael slid his other arm around Elian's waist and pulled him close. The human's body molded against his, every lean line and curve of him fitting perfectly against Rael's own hard muscles.

Desire burned through Rael like a wildfire, a hunger that threatened to consume him. His body roared with need, demanding that he take Elian right then and there, to claim him and make him Rael's in every way.

But at the same time, an even fiercer instinct — a protective one, a dominant one — filled him with a need to cherish the human in his arms, to give him pleasure and protect him from any hint of pain.

Rael's head spun with the heady mix of desire and possessiveness, longing and protectiveness. He was a predator and a gentleman, a warrior and a lover, a captor and a man who would give Elian everything he desired.

And from the way the human clung to him, moaning into the depths of the kiss, he knew that Elian wanted everything that Rael had to offer.

Rael's heart pounded in his chest as he kissed Elian, his body aching with desire. The human's scent intoxicated him, filling his senses and making him feel alive in a way he hadn't in years. He could taste Elian's sweetness on his tongue, and it drove him wild.

As they kissed, Rael's hands roamed over Elian's body, exploring every curve and line. He couldn't get enough of the human's soft skin, the way it felt beneath his touch.

Elian moaned into the kiss, his body arching against Rael's. He squirmed beneath him, his hands clenching and unclenching in silent pleas for release. Rael could feel the heat of Elian's desire, the way his body trembled with need.

"Please," Elian whispered, his voice hoarse with desire. He held up his bound hands. "Let me touch you."

Rael grinned. He took Elian's bonds and tugged them up, holding the human's hands above his head. Rael pulled back, his eyes locked on Elian's. "Maybe I plan to keep you exactly where I want you."

Elian protested playfully, his eyes filled with laughter and desire. "Please, Rael," he begged.

Rael ignored him, instead focusing on the sensation of Elian's body against him. He kept Elian's hands raised, keeping him helpless to resist. Rael nipped at Elian's throat, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin. Elian dissolved into shivers, his moans filling the air.

Rael's blood ran hotter at the sound of Elian's pleasure. He wanted to hear more, to feel more. He bit at Elian's throat again, harder this time, and Elian cried out, his body arching beneath Rael's.

Rael's eyes darkened as he noticed the flush of a bruise starting to form on Elian's pale skin. The sight of his own mark on his mate sent a jolt of arousal through him.

He couldn't keep teasing, his self-control crumbling. He untied Elian's bound hands, but his voice grew gruff as he leaned in to growl in Elian's ear. "Next time, I might keep you tied up, so I can have my way with you exactly as I please."

Elian's breath hitched, and Rael could see the dark desire flaring in his eyes. The human bit his lip, visibly hard in his pants, and Rael couldn't resist the temptation any longer. He pressed his body against Elian's, his hardness grinding against the human's. Elian groaned, his hips bucking up to meet Rael's thrusts.

Their movements became desperate, animalistic, as they rutted against each other. Elian's hands reached down to fumble with Rael's pants, his fingers trembling with urgency. Rael chuckled, a low, rumbling sound, as he helped Elian tug down his pants.

But then Elian froze, his eyes widening in astonishment. "Holy shit."

Rael smirked, a hint of pride in his voice. "Borraq anatomy really is different from human anatomy, isn't it?"

Elian's eyes were glued to the two hard, alien cocks that were now on full display.

When Rael had first seen Elian in the river — well, it had made a sort of sense to him. Humans were smaller and more delicate than Borraq, after all. Of course they had to be different.

Rael guided Elia's hands down, letting the human feel the unfamiliar forms. Elia's touch was tentative at first, but as Rael growled in pleasure, the human grew bolder.

"You're incredible," Elia whispered, his voice filled with awe and desire. Rael could feel the heat of Elia's gaze, the way the human's body trembled with need.

"And you," Rael growled, his voice thick with desire, "are mine."

Rael scooped Elia up into his arms, the human's surprised yelp echoing through the cave. He carried him over to the bedroll, his muscles barely flexing. Elia playfully protested, squirming in his grasp. "Hey, I don't appreciate being manhandled!" he said, but his eyes sparkled with mirth.

Rael chuckled, setting Elia down on the bedroll. He loomed over him, his body pressed against Elia's. "Is that so?" he said, his voice low and teasing. He reached down, his hand sliding over Elia's erection. "Because it seems to me like you're enjoying this quite a bit."

Elia blushed, his cheeks turning a deep shade of pink. He bit his lip, his eyes fluttering shut as Rael's hand continued to tease him. "That's not fair," he said, his voice breathless.

Rael grinned, leaning down to kiss Elia's neck. He nipped at the sensitive skin, careful not to scrape it with his sharp teeth. Elia moaned, his body arching up against Rael's.

It was an invitation if Rael had ever seen one. He stripped Elia bare, pressing their bodies together.

Rael's cocks were longer, thicker than Elia's human one. They were a deep, dark color, the skin textured. Elia's was smooth, the skin delicate and flushed with pink.

Rael found the contrast incredibly attractive, the way Elian's body fit against his own.

He liked being bigger than Elian, liked being able to protect him — and to claim Elian as his own.

He reached down, slotting Elian's cock between his own two. The sensation was incredible, the heat and friction sending a jolt of pleasure through his body. Elian moaned, his hips bucking up against Rael's.

"Do you like that?" Rael said, his voice rough with desire.

Elian nodded, his eyes wide and filled with pleasure. "Mm. Maybe. Keep doing that and we'll find out."

Rael grinned, his hips moving in a slow, steady rhythm. He could feel Elian's body responding to his own, could feel the human's pleasure building with each passing moment.

He leaned down, capturing Elian's lips in a searing kiss. The human's moans filled his mouth, the sound driving him wild with desire.

Rael's hips moved in a steady rhythm, grinding their cocks together. The sensation of their bodies moving in tandem was intoxicating, sending jolts of pleasure through Rael's body. Elian gasped and bucked up against him, his body desperate for more.

Soon, Rael's cocks were beading with precome, thick and slippery. The sight of it made Elian's eyes widen, his breath coming in quick, shallow gasps. "That's a lot," he panted, his cheeks flushed with desire.

Rael didn't know how much humans made — or if they made any at all — but the

look of surprise on Elian's flushed face clearly meant that his surprise was a good thing.

Rael smirked, a sense of pride filling him. "Borraq do everything better than humans," he said, his voice low and teasing.

Elan blushed, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Prove it."

Rael's heart raced at the blatant invitation, his blood running hot with desire. He growled, his hands moving to grab Elan's knees and pull them up over his shoulders. The human's body was pliant in his grasp, his eyes wide and filled with desire.

Rael slicked up his fingers with his thick, slick precome, his eyes dark with desire. "I'm going to make you feel so good," he said, his voice low and rough.

Rael's body was a coiled spring of desire, his two cocks throbbing with need. He could smell Elan's arousal, could see the way the human's body trembled with anticipation.

But Elan hesitated.

Rael narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Elan's cheeks flushed a deep pink. "I... I can't take both of them," he stammered.

Rael couldn't help but laugh. "I wasn't expecting a delicate little thing like you to take both," he said, leaning in to kiss Elan.

"I'm not delicate—" Elan tried to protest, but Rael cut him off. He pressed a finger into Elan's hole, sliding inside him. The human gasped, his body tensing around Rael's finger.

"Repeat yourself," Rael said smugly, sliding another finger into Elian. He stretched the human, making Elian's thighs tremble.

Elian tried to act like he wasn't affected by Rael, tried to keep his voice steady. "I-I'm not... not..." But as Rael fingered him faster, Elian's voice stuttered and his breath came faster and faster.

Rael admired the pink flush that spread from Elian's face down his throat to his chest. He could feel his primal mating instincts taking over, his body wanting to claim his mate.

Rael savored the sight of Elian writhing beneath him, the human's body flushed with desire and need. He slid a third finger into Elian, relishing the tight heat that enveloped his digits.

He leaned down, capturing one of Elian's hard nipples in his mouth, licking and sucking until the human was groaning and bucking against him. Elian rode his hand, taking everything that Rael had to give him.

"You like that, don't you?" Rael murmured against Elian's skin, his voice low and rough with desire.

Elian let out a shaky breath, his eyes fluttering open to meet Rael's gaze. "Y-yeah," he stammered, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Rael grinned, a wicked glint in his eyes. "Good," he growled, pulling his fingers out of Elian's hole. He pressed the head of one of his cocks against Elian's slick hole, just barely holding back from sliding inside him.

Elian gasped, his body tensing at the sudden blunt pressure. "R-Rael," he panted, his fingers digging into the alien's golden skin.

"Last chance, Elian," Rael said, his voice strained as he held himself back from plunging into the human's warmth. "Tell me to stop now, or I won't be able to."

Elian bit his lip, his eyes flicking between Rael's face and the spot where their bodies were joined. "I don't want you to stop," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

Rael's breath hitched, and he lost control.

He slowly slid his cock into Elian's welcoming heat. The human felt incredible, a tight velvet glove gripping him with a warmth that sent waves of pleasure coursing through his veins. His instincts roared in approval, the alpha in him rejoicing at the feeling of claiming his mate.

Elian's gasps filled the air, only spurring him on. It took every ounce of willpower Rael possessed not to slam into Elian, to bury himself completely in the human's tight heat. His grip tightened on Elian's hips as he slowly fed his cock into Elian's hole, his other cock rubbing tantalizingly against Elian's own.

Rael's thoughts were a whirlwind of desire and possessiveness. He marveled at the size difference between them, the way Elian's body seemed so small and fragile beneath his own muscular frame.

Yet the human was anything but fragile. Rael's eyes darkened as he watched Elian take him in, the sight of their bodies joined together sending a jolt of pure desire through him. He could see the pleasure in Elian's eyes, the way the human's pupils dilated with each thrust. It was a heady feeling, one that only served to fuel Rael's desire.

He leaned down, capturing Elian's lips in a searing kiss. The human's moans filled his mouth, the sound driving him wild with desire. He wanted to hear Elian scream his name, wanted to feel the human come apart beneath his touch.

And as he continued to move inside Elian, as he continued to claim the human's body with his own, he knew that he would have exactly that.

He would make Elian his, in every way possible.

And nothing, not even the war between their species, would stop him.

Rael's instincts took over, his hips snapping forward as he slammed into Elian's body. The human moaned, bucking against Rael's thick cock as he took the alien deep inside him. "Fuck!" Elian gasped, his eyes wide with pleasure. "Rael...!"

The sound of his name on his mate's lips sent a jolt of desire through Rael. He grinned savagely. "You like that, do you?" Rael growled, reaching between them to grab both his second cock and Elian's cock in one hand. He began to jerk them both off in time with his thrusts, feeling Elian's body tense beneath him.

"Oh, god!" Elian gasped, his body writhing beneath Rael's touch. The sight of Elian's pleasure, the sound of his gasps and moans, only served to heighten Rael's own arousal.

Rael slammed into Elian's body, burying his thick cock deep inside the human's tight hole. Elian rocked up to meet each thrust, taking Rael deep inside him as if he was born to be Rael's mate. The sight of Elian, his face twisted in pleasure, his body slick with sweat, was almost too much for Rael to bear.

Rael's fist tightened around Elian's cock and his own other cock, jerking them both off harder and faster as he continued to thrust deeper into Elian. The delicious scent of Elian's arousal filled the air, driving Rael wild with desire. He could feel Elian's body tightening around him, the human's muscles clenching as he neared the edge.

Elian's gasps and whines filled Rael's ears, the sound sending a jolt of pleasure

through his body. He could feel his own release building, his cocks throbbing with need. He snarled, his hips snapping forward as he slammed into Elian.

Elian cried out, his body arching up against Rael's, on the verge — and then he came with a cry. The sight of Elian's face, twisted in pleasure, was almost too much for Rael to bear. He could see the way Elian's eyes fluttered shut, the way his lips parted in a silent cry.

It was a sight that Rael knew he would never forget.

Elian's body tightened around Rael's cock, the human's muscles clenching as he came. Rael snarled, his hips snapping forward as he slammed into Elian one final time. He could feel his own release building, his cocks throbbing with need.

"Rael— god, Rael—"" Elian panted.

The sound of his name was enough to send him over the edge. His hands gripping Elian's hips tight, Rael buried himself deep inside. With a roar, he came, one cock marking Elian's stomach with his come, the other filling him.

And as he felt Elian filling with his seed, he knew that he had found his mate.

A feeling of deep primal satisfaction washed over Rael. He could feel the warmth of his release, the way it filled Elian. It was a feeling that sent a jolt of pleasure through his body, a feeling that only served to heighten his own satisfaction.

Rael leaned down, capturing Elian's lips in a searing kiss. He could taste the salt of Elian's sweat, smell the sweetness of his scent. As he pulled away, Rael could see the way Elian's eyes fluttered open, the way the human's chest heaved with each breath. He could see the way Elian's body trembled, the way the human's muscles clenched around him. It was a sight that filled Rael with a sense of pride, a sense of possession.

And as he looked down at Elian, as he saw the way the human's eyes sparkled with pleasure, Rael knew that he had made the right choice. He had found his mate, and he would never let him go.

Even if that meant fighting the world.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:14 am

Eliau stirred awake, his body deliciously sore and languid in the aftermath of the previous night. He was smarting in all the right places — the delicious ache of Rael's claiming touch. The lingering scent of their mingled musk clung to Eliau's skin, only serving to stoke the embers of desire that still banked low in his belly.

For a few blissful moments, he allowed himself to bask in the warm cocoon of the bedroll and simply breathe in the earthy notes of Rael's scent. His lashes fluttered as he turned his head, seeking out the hard planes of Rael's form amid the rumpled bedding.

Rael's sleeping visage stole Eliau's breath. The alpha looked so peaceful in repose, the stern lines of his features softened by slumber. A lock of hair spilled over one high cheekbone, lending an almost ethereal quality to his beauty.

Eliau's chest tightened at the sight, a confusing tangle of emotions swirling in his breast. Part of him yearned to reach out and trace the sharp angle of Rael's jaw, to commit every detail to memory while he had the chance.

Because despite the blissful interlude they'd shared, a kernel of doubt remained.

Would Rael still claim the bounty on Eliau's head?

The thought was almost too painful to consider, a cold knot of dread that coiled heavy in the pit of Eliau's stomach.

He pushed the doubts aside for now, refusing to dwell on the harsh reality. It would inevitably come crashing back in. For now, Eliau simply allowed himself to drink in

the sight of his alien lover at peace, cherishing this stolen moment while he could.

It might be the last time he was able to.

All too soon, the quiet was shattered by the distant call of some alien creature. Rael stirred, his piercing gaze flaring open as the vestiges of sleep fell away. Those vivid emerald eyes found Elian instantly.

Heat blossomed in Elian's cheeks at the naked want in Rael's stare. Rael's nostrils flared, no doubt scenting the fresh spike of arousal that Elian couldn't hide. A low, rumbling growl vibrated from Rael's chest as he shifted closer, looming over Elian with blatant intent.

"Good morning," he purred.

Elian's heart skipped a beat at the seductive promise in that deep voice. He bit his lip, unable to help the way his body responded. "Good morning. Or, uh, night, I suppose."

Elian winced as he shifted to sit up. A tremor rippled through his slight frame, the memories of the previous night vivid. Lesson learned: when getting railed by an alien alpha, take things a little slower.

Rael's gaze sharpened at the movement, those eyes missing nothing as they roamed over Elian in a slow, assessing sweep. Rael rumbled low in his chest. "You're sore," he murmured. There was no judgment or mockery in that rich tone, only a statement of fact.

Heat crept into Elian's cheeks at the blunt observation. "I'm fine. I can handle it. Should we get moving?"

For a moment, Rael looked at him, assessing, but then he nodded. Rael moved with his customary, efficient grace as he rose and began gathering their meager belongings. Elian watched through heavy-lidded eyes, unable to resist trailing his gaze over the hard lines of Rael's form.

He committed every detail to memory: the flex of corded muscle beneath gold skin, the strength in those powerful thighs, the masculine breadth of Rael's shoulders tapering to the lean vee of his hips...

All too soon, Rael turned back to him with an arched brow. Elian flushed, heat prickling over his skin at being caught staring so brazenly. He looked away, acting innocent.

Rael made no comment on Elian's ogling, though. With deft movements, he slung his gear over one broad shoulder and extended his free hand. "Come," he rumbled, the simple word holding layers of unspoken promise that had Elian's pulse kicking up a notch. "Let's get moving."

They fell into an easy routine. Rael would walk ahead, his sharp eyes keeping an eye out for any potential dangers in the light of the moons. Meanwhile, Elian followed behind, doing his best to keep up as he picked his way through the darkness. Somewhere along their journey, he began to ask Rael questions about Vasz, and Rael indulged him with patient answers.

Soon, the conversation moved to Rael's clan. "They're good people," Rael said, a note of pride in his voice. "Strong, kind, living off the land and keeping it in balance. We have a large territory, but it's safe and prosperous, thanks to them."

It was once hard to imagine the gruff, no-nonsense alpha speaking fondly about anything, but there was no mistaking the warmth in his eyes as he described his clan. "That sounds nice," Elian said. It really did.

The more time Elian spent with Rael, the more he began to understand him. Yes, he was a fierce and dangerous man, one who would kill without hesitation to protect what was his. But at the same time, he was a leader, fiercely proud of the people under his care. He was a man of honor, with a code that governed his actions — even if that code was sometimes at odds with a human's idea of justice.

And when he was kissing Elian, he was surprisingly sweet.

At every difficult patch of terrain, Rael was there to lend a hand. He'd boost Elian up a rock face, his strong grip sending sparks of heat through his body. He'd help him across a wide gap, his arm wrapped firmly around Elian's waist, pulling him close and keeping him safe. As the dawn broke and the bright Vasz day began, the heat of the suns were nothing compared to the heat of Elian's cheeks.

At one particularly difficult crossing, Rael didn't bother helping Elian across the gap. Instead, he simply swept him up into his arms and carried him across, bridal-style.

The moment was over in a heartbeat, but the heat of Rael's touch seared through the fabric of Elian's clothes. He clung to the alpha for just a moment longer than strictly necessary, breathing in the clean, masculine scent of him. When Rael looked down at him, his eyes were dark with hunger. Elian knew that the desire between them was mutual, no matter how stoic Rael's expression was.

And then Rael set Elian back down on his feet, and they continued on their journey as if nothing had happened.

It was the most maddening form of torture.

Finally, after a long walk, with no sign of that damn bounty hunter, Rael finally deemed it safe to take a break. Elian moved to assist without prompting. His hands were steady as he gathered the fruits that Rael had taught him were safe, his

movements sure as he filled his arms. What would have seemed like an impossible, alien task mere days ago now felt second nature.

"You're adapting well," Rael said. The simple praise sent a tiny thrill zinging through Elian's veins. "This world's perils no longer faze you as they once did."

It was true. Though the crash site's devastation would forever be seared into Elian's memory, the desolation of this alien world no longer felt so stark and hopeless. Vasz didn't feel like the nightmare world he'd once thought it was.

Even if its snakes were way too big. Urgh.

No, it wasn't a nightmare world any more — not with Rael to show him how to live in it.

As he picked fruit, Elian's cheeks heated. He ducked his head to avoid Rael's too-perceptive stare — and then winced. "Ow."

Rael's expression tightened as he watched blood blossom from the cut on Elian's hand. Rael reached out, tugging Elian's hand closer for inspection. "You're hurt."

"This? It's nothing." Elian looked at the cut. "It's just a scratch."

"It needs tending. Xirath splinters can lodge deep." Rael tugged him closer with ease. Rael held Elian's hand in his with surprising tenderness, a tiny furrow appearing between his brows as he examined the injury with sharp eyes.

Elian's breath caught in his throat at the unexpected care, at the simple intimacy of Rael's touch.

He knew he shouldn't revel in the alpha's possessive streak, knew he shouldn't crave

the sparks of primal hunger that banked hot and low in Rael's gaze whenever it swept over Elian's form. It was stupid.

Rael was his captor, and he was Rael's captive. That was all they could ever be.

And yet...

Elia couldn't deny the longing that blossomed warm in his chest, something bone-deep that went beyond just physical desires — though those had definitely been nice, too.

Rael's proximity was heady, intoxicating in a way that had nothing to do with his strength and everything to do with the fierce protectiveness he exuded. That same protectiveness was in full force now as Rael tended to Elia's wound with deft, careful movements. His touch was grounding, steadying in a way that threatened to upend Elia's world.

Elia didn't know what Rael ultimately intended to do with him — if he'd still turn Elia over for the bounty or not — but right now, Elia didn't want to think about it.

He wanted more of the way that Rael had made him feel last night. There was something about the way that the alpha looked at him, like he really desired Elia.

No one had ever looked at him like that before.

Before Rael could talk him out of it, Elia ducked in and kissed him.

Rael's lips were warm and firm against his. Desire curled hot and heavy in Elia's belly at the touch of their lips, and then at the way that Rael's arm slid around his waist and pulled him in close.

Rael's mouth slanted over his, and the alpha's tongue teased at the seam of Elian's lips. Elian clung to Rael, unable to get enough of the way that their bodies fit together, the hard planes of the alpha's chest against his own.

They tumbled back onto the grass, the thick grass cushioning their fall. Fresh dawn sunlight spilled across the clearing, bathing them in pale light. Rael's golden skin glowed like something otherworldly, a vision from a dream.

It was the most surreal and also the most romantic moment of Elian's life.

Elian's wry thoughts were cut off by the press of Rael's body against his own, the hard lengths of the alpha's desire unmistakable even through the thick fabric of their clothes. Heat raced through Elian, the heady power of knowing that he was the one to stoke that desire, that he was the focus of Rael's intense, burning need.

And he wanted to make that desire burn even hotter.

Elian found himself grinning against Rael's mouth. He'd been thinking about a certain something ever since he'd learned that Rael's species had two cocks. He hadn't had time to test it last night — Rael had kept him busy for hours, unceasing, and there hadn't been time to experiment.

Borraq had sharp teeth. That had to impact what they could and couldn't do.

Humans, however...

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Elian sank to his knees between Rael's legs.

Rael looked down at him with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. "What are you up to?" he asked, his voice low and gruff.

Elia's smile widened. "I want to try something."

"Try what, exactly?"

"Let's call it a little interspecies diplomacy." Elia lay down between Rael's spread thighs, his fingers deftly undoing the fastenings of Rael's pants.

Rael's eyes narrowed as Elia pulled out his two cocks, already hard. "What are you doing?" he asked, wary.

In answer, Elia leaned in, his tongue darting out to tease the head of one of Rael's cocks.

Rael cursed, his hips bucking involuntarily. "Elia—!"

It was music to Elia's ears. Emboldened, Elia took the head of one cock into his mouth, laving it with his lips and tongue. He could feel Rael's muscles tensing, and he knew that Rael was already struggling to maintain control.

Yeah, Elia was going to see about that. With one hand, Elia began to slowly jerk off the other cock, his movements steady and sure.

"Elia," Rael groaned, his voice ragged. "What—"

Elia pulled back, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm showing you some human diplomacy," he said, his voice low and husky.

Elia didn't know how long he stayed there, taking his fill of Rael. He'd never been able to do this back in human space, never letting himself trust someone else enough to open up — so it only made sense for him to do it now, getting twice as much experience at once, right?

Finally, Rael's breathing turned to rough, low panting. Elian quickened his pace, his mouth and hand working in tandem to drive Rael wild. Rael's cocks were slick with saliva and precome, the taste of the alien's arousal heady and intoxicating on Elian's tongue, the feel of him hot and hard in Elian's hand. Elian's own cock ached beneath him, already hard.

With a guttural groan, Rael's control finally shattered. His hips bucked as he spilled into Elian's mouth, his come hot and thick and strangely sweet. Elian swallowed it down, his cheeks hollowing as he milked every last drop from the alpha's cock. Meanwhile, his hand continued to work Rael's other cock, stroking it in firm, steady movements until it too erupted, spattering Elian's cheek with warm, sticky release.

Elian sat back, his heart pounding and his chest heaving. He felt elated, powerful even, as he looked up at Rael through hooded eyes. The alpha was breathing heavily, his golden skin slick with sweat and his eyes dark with desire.

"You sneaky little human," Rael growled, though there was no real heat in his words. "What am I going to do with you?"

Elian grinned, feeling bold and reckless. "I can think of a few things."

Rael chuckled, the sound deep and rich. He reached out, his calloused fingers gripping Elian's chin. He turned Elian's head, admiring the sight of his own claim marking Elian's face. "You're a menace, you know that?"

Elian's grin widened. "But you like it."

Rael's response was to haul Elian into his lap, his strong arms encircling his waist. "You're right," he said, his voice low and rough. "I do."

Then his hand was on Elian's cock, stroking it in firm, steady movements that had

Elia n gasping and whimpering. Rael's touch was rough, almost punishing, but Elia n didn't care. He wanted this, needed it.

"This is your punishment," Rael growled, his teeth nipping at Elia n's throat. "For being such a devious little human."

Elia n moaned, his head falling back as pleasure coursed through his body.

"You're lucky I don't lock you up for your own good," Rael muttered, his voice low and dark. "If others knew what you could do with that mouth of yours..."

Elia n whimpered, the words sending a thrill of fear and desire through him. He felt that Rael would never hurt him, but there was something undeniably hot about the alpha's possessive streak.

Then Rael licked the come from Elia n's face, his tongue rough and insistent. The gesture was primal, almost animalistic, and it sent Elia n spiraling over the edge. He came with a strangled cry, his body shaking as pleasure washed over him.

Rael's hand continued to stroke him through his orgasm, drawing out every last shudder and gasp. Then the alpha was pulling him close, his arms tight around Elia n's body as they both caught their breath.

"You're dangerous, little human," Rael murmured, his voice low and rough. "Do you know that?"

Elia n smiled, feeling a warmth spread through his chest at the words. He knew that he should be afraid, that this couldn't last — but he couldn't help it.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:14 am

The deep wilds of Vasz were no place for the unprepared.

It was a dangerous plan, navigating the planet's treacherous landscape on foot, choosing to avoid the main roads in favor of the unpatrolled wilds. But with Korvax still no doubt hunting for their trail, they had no choice. Over the few days since their encounter with him, they'd been alert for any sign of him.

As the two of them moved along the narrow, winding mountain pass, Rael's every sense was on high alert. The instincts that had been honed by years of war and survival now served him as he scouted the path ahead. Rocks that could hide an ambush, the telltale signs of a predator's territory, the distant sound of a river far beneath them — he took it all in, his mind working to keep himself and his mate safe.

His mate. The thought still sent a thrill through him, deep and hot. As the alpha of his clan, Rael had his pick of potential partners. He'd never lacked for attention. But now...

Now, there was something different. Something sweeter, more profound. Something that made his blood burn and his heart ache, all at the same time.

Beside him, Elian talked to him, his voice a bright counterpoint to the harsh landscape. "What's that plant over there? It looks like it's got thorns the size of my head."

Despite the danger, Rael couldn't help but smile. "That's a marrat plant. It's poisonous."

"Of course it is. I swear, everything on this planet is dangerous," Elian said, putting his hands on his hips. The movement tugged at the borrowed cloak he was wearing, and Rael's eyes were drawn to the shape of his body under all that fabric. "Does Vasz have any daisies? Petunias? Or are they all bloodthirsty carnivores, too?"

His mate was a strange creature. But, smiling, Rael wouldn't have had him any other way.

When he'd first met the human, he'd been nothing but a curious means to an end, a strange and fragile thing that Rael had saved for mercenary reasons. But Rael had watched that same fragile thing grow.

Like a plant reaching for the sun, courage had blossomed in Elian, fed by his own determination and Rael's careful tending. Now, despite the fact that he was as out of place on Vasz as a fish on land, Elian had become something else.

Under Rael's tutelage, he'd become a survivor.

And more than that: a proud survivor, eager to test himself, quick to learn, brave in the face of any challenge.

In Rael's bed, the human had been a sweet temptation. But here, in the wilds of his home, as he proved himself to Rael over and over again, he'd become something else entirely.

He'd become a mate.

A faint sound reached his ears, nearly entirely hidden beneath the birdsong. Rael's smile faded, his senses sharpening. "Hush," he said, his voice low.

Elian immediately fell silent, his blue eyes wide as he looked to Rael.

Rael pivoted smoothly, hand falling to the hilt of his blade as he moved to shield Elian. "We have company," he growled, low enough for only the human's ears.

Elian tensed, fingers twitching like he wanted a weapon of his own. Smart man. "Korvax?"

"Most likely." Rael's lip curled in a sneer. Damn. Over the last few days, he'd begun to hope that he'd managed to throw Korvax off their trail. With the bounty on Elian's head, through, that was too good to be true.

Without an alpha to keep them in control, clanless Borraq could be very persistent vermin. Rael narrowed his eyes.

There. Rael heard the softest of sounds from ahead of them, the faintest scrape of boot on stone. "Show yourself, Korvax!"

There was a rustle from behind a nearby outcropping of boulders. Rael braced himself, muscles coiled tight, and then the other Borraq finally slunk into view. Korvax stepped out onto the narrow mountain pass, scowling, and spat scornfully down the drop to his side.

"Well, well," Korvax drawled, flashing an insufferably fake grin. "You're truly showing off those alpha talents, Rael." His gaze slid over to Elian, dark eyes glittering with greed. "And you've managed to keep a hold on that pretty little pet of yours."

Rael growled low in his throat, a warning rumble. "Leave, Korvax. He's not yours to take."

The other Borraq shrugged, all fake nonchalance. "Then I'll just have to kill you and take him anyway." He twirled his blade lazily. "Should be easy enough. That human

scent has your senses all scrambled, doesn't it?"

"You'll regret those words." Rael's fingers flexed on the hilt of his blade.

He'd let Korvax go once. That was all the warning that an alpha owed a challenger.

There would be no second chances for Korvax.

At his back, Rael felt Elian shift into a wary stance, balanced on the balls of his feet. Ready to run. Good man.

His arrogant smirk was the only warning they got before Korvax attacked.

Rael moved on instinct, his blade a blur of steel as he met Korvax's strike. Their blades clashed together, sending sparks flying. Korvax may have had no clan, but his blade was true, standing up to the blow. Rael grunted with the force of their clash, boots skidding in the loose gravel as he fought to keep his footing.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Elian dart back, moving out of the way with a speed that would have made Rael proud if they weren't in the middle of battle.

With a snarl, Korvax whirled on Elian, his blade flashing out in a deadly arc. Rael bellowed a wordless shout of rage and launched himself at Korvax's back.

Metal shrieked on metal as their blades clashed again. Rael bared his fangs, meeting Korvax's vicious snarl with one of his own as they grappled for control of the fight. He could feel Elian at his back, could sense the human's determination and courage like a star.

The mountain pass was narrow and jagged, with the wilderness stretching out far below them. Blow after blow rained down, but Rael was always one step ahead. He

used the narrow ground to his advantage, letting Korvax overextend with his strikes, then retaliating with brutal counterattacks that drove the other Borraq back, off-balance.

Korvax was arrogant, but even a man like him knew that when it came to strength, he couldn't take Rael on man-to-man. He fought like the carrion-botherer he was, coming in here for a quick strike, lunging like a snake for every opening he could find. Sweat broke out on Rael's skin as he fought, on high alert for every new tactic that Korvax was going to throw at him.

Then, too late, a swift breeze told Rael that he'd been focusing too much on what was in front of him, and not enough on what was behind him — the ravine that stretched out beneath them.

Damn! Korvax had backed Rael up against an edge of the trail, pinning him in position with his back against the drop.

If he took one step back...!

And Korvax knew it. With a lethal glee in his eyes, he lunged for Rael.

Rael braced himself, muscles coiled tight as Korvax charged forward, his blade a deadly streak of steel. This was it — the final clash that would decide their fates. He tensed, ready to meet the bounty hunter's onslaught head-on.

But then a blur of movement caught the corner of his eye. Elian made a sharp, sudden gesture.

And then the rock that he'd thrown smashed straight into Korvax's head.

The stone struck true, cracking against Korvax's temple with a sickening thud. The

bounty hunter stumbled, his attack going wild as he lost his footing on the uneven ground. Rael knocked him aside, throwing Korvax off-balance.

Almost in slow motion, Korvax stumbled precariously at the edge of the rocky cliffside, boots slipping on the loose rock.

And then, with a startled cry, he was gone — tumbling down into the ravine below.

Rael was at the precipice in an instant, peering over the edge with his heart in his throat.

Damn. Rael's stars today were clearly not lucky. Korvax had skidded down the cliff face, landing in a crumpled heap on an outcropping below. He was groaning in pain, but still alive.

For now, at least. But there was no way for Rael to get down to Korvax and put an end to his pursuit for once and all. Rael scowled.

He turned to where Elian stood, frozen. "We need to move," he growled. "A dog like that won't be down for long."

Elian blinked, then nodded jerkily, adrenaline and fear lending his movements a frantic edge. Without another word, they put as much distance between them and the ravine as possible.

They ran until their lungs burned, eating up the miles. All that mattered was putting distance between them and the jackal dogging their steps, leaving him to trail to follow.

Finally, when they could move no further, they collapsed into a sheltered alcove, gasping for air. Rael leaned back against the cool stone, his chest heaving. His gaze

found Elian's, and he couldn't help the bark of surprised laughter that burst from his lips.

"You..." He shook his head in amazed disbelief. "You threw a rock at him. You impossible, foolish little thing."

Elian managed a weak grin, still wheezing. "Hey, it worked, didn't it?"

"It did." Rael reached out, gripping the back of Elian's neck in a gesture of gratitude and pride. "Quick thinking in the face of danger. I'll make a warrior of you yet, mate."

The endearment slipped out without thought, but it felt right on his tongue. Elian's eyes widened at the word, his pupils wide. Rael watched the human's throat work as he swallowed hard.

Elian looked away, his gaze dropping to the ground. "Do you think... Korvax will keep coming after us?" he asked tentatively.

Rael clenched his jaw, hating the flicker of fear he saw in those blue eyes. "Without a doubt. The bounty on your head is an impressive one." He couldn't sugar-coat it for Elian; any lie would only come back to hurt him later.

Rael reached out, tilting Elian's chin up so their eyes met once more. "But you needn't worry, mate. That dog can keep trying his luck. I'll send him fleeing every single time."

A brave smile tugged at the corners of Elian's mouth, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "My hero."

Rael couldn't shake the thoughts that gnawed at him. Could he truly keep Elian safe,

with the whole of Vasz out to claim the bounty on his head? So many dangers lurked in these wilds — beasts and bounty hunters and the brutality of nature itself.

Any single one of them could prove Elian's undoing.

It was too much to think about. With a growl, Rael captured Elian's mouth in a searing kiss. Let actions of the heart speak louder than pretty words.

When they finally parted, both of them were flushed and breathing hard. Rael drank in the sight of Elian, lips swollen and cheeks pink, and felt a surge of possessive need slam into him.

Mine, a feral voice in his head growled. All mine.

No matter what threats they faced, what perils awaited them on the road ahead, he would see his mate to safety.

Even if he had to fight off every last bounty hunter on this forsaken planet to do it.

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Elian had never been in love before.

He'd had crushes, of course. A dashing young pilot, a kind mechanic, a pair of soldiers with laughing eyes and bright smiles...

His feelings had all been fantasies, really. Elian had never done any more than enjoy the time spent with those men as friends. With the war raging, time was in short supply.

But this... this was different. Rael was different.

Elian had never met anyone like him. The alien leader was fierce and powerful, with a warrior's instincts that were utterly alien to Elian. And yet, beneath that hard exterior, he had a tender heart. He was fiercely loyal to his people and his planet, and he had a sense of humor that was surprisingly close to humanity's own.

And when he looked at Elian, for the first time in his life, Elian felt seen. Understood.

And desired, too. The way that Rael looked at him... it sent shivers down his spine. Elian's heart fluttered at the thought.

But now, alongside that fluttering heart, there was a leaden weight in his gut. Love was supposed to be a happy thing, wasn't it? A joyful thing?

But there was danger here, too. Elian was a fugitive. An enemy of Rael's people, trapped behind enemy lines. There was nowhere safe for him. Korvax's relentless attacks were proof of that.

And now Rael was wrapped up in it.

As Elian trudged along the path behind Rael, guilt churned in his guts. Rael had called him mate... But what did that mean for Rael? How could he even keep Elian with him? What would a life together even look like for them? Rael couldn't live his life hiding a fugitive, jumping at shadows.

Rael deserved better than to be a traitor to his own people.

Before Elian could get too lost in his thoughts, Rael held up a hand, listening to the air.

Elian strained his ears, too. After a moment, even he could hear it: the sound of footsteps on the road, getting louder.

On Rael's hand-signal, Elian dodged off of the road. He ducked behind a thick shrub, concealing himself from the approaching person. His heart pounded in his chest as he listened to the footsteps growing closer and closer, the adrenaline spiking through his veins making every sound seem amplified.

Who was this? Another bounty hunter? Someone from the Borraq military, hunting him down? Korvax again, somehow, back on their trail and now even more determined to take Elian?

Finally, a rough voice broke the silence of the road. "Rael? Is that you?"

Risking a cautious peek through the thick leaves that hid him, Elian caught sight of the newcomer. It was another Borraq, this one older and more weathered than Rael. His golden skin was crisscrossed with scars, and a thick braid of jet-black hair hung down his back. One of his horns was broken, the pointed edges jagged. Despite his scars, the alien carried himself with the same easy grace that Elian had come to

associate with Rael.

Rael stepped forward, meeting the stranger with a gesture that seemed equal parts greeting and challenge. One of Rael's allies? Elian strained to catch their words.

"Zarrack," Rael said. The name reverberated then snapped, like the roll of a distant thunderstorm. "I didn't expect to encounter you out here."

The one called Zarrack let out a rasping chuckle. "Nor I you, pup. What business brings an alpha so far from his clan?"

Elian saw Rael's jaw tighten almost imperceptibly before he replied. "Medical supplies. A young clansman needs treatment. I'm heading to the city to find it."

Despite the remote wilds that they were in, Zarrack seemed entirely at ease, an amused glint in his eye. "Is that so? You're in luck, the medics in Yattara just got a shipment. I'm just returning from there myself."

"Off to outpost Ylera?"

"No, the Thar clan's village." Zarrack grinned. "Heard they run a decent card game, and I thought I might try my luck."

Rael laughed. "Watch your back, old man. They're the most relentless cheats in the east."

The two Borraq exchanged pleasantries — and more than enough playful jabs at the moral nature of the Thar. Listening to their easy conversation, Elian breathed a little easier.

But then it went wrong.

Zarrack's head suddenly snapped up, nostrils flaring as he drew in a deep breath of air. The content expression melted from his face in an instant, replaced by a look of cold calculation. His hand strayed toward the wicked-looking blade hanging from his belt.

"What's that scent?" he growled, his gravelly voice now laced with menace.

Oh, no.

Zarrack's piercing gaze swept over the area, searching. Elian sank down behind his cover, his heart hammering in his chest. He shrank in on himself, trying to get as small and unobtrusive as possible.

If Zarrack didn't let this drop... To save Elian, would Rael be forced to fight an old friend?

A cold sweat broke out over Elian's skin.

But when Rael's voice rang out, it wasn't in challenge. "Elian, come out," he called, the command laced with resignation.

That seemed like insanity... But Elian trusted Rael. Heart in his throat, Elian stepped out from behind the tree.

Zarrack's eyes widened as he took in the sight in front of him. His hand instinctively tightened on the blade at his hip. "What is this, Rael?" The seasoned warrior's voice was a growl of barely contained hostility.

Rael's stance was wary, his body angled slightly to put himself between Elian and the potential threat. "A human ship crashed in my territory," Rael continued, speaking calmly. "This is the only survivor. I aim to collect the price on his head."

Elia's heart pounded in his chest as Zarrack eyed him with open disdain. The grizzled Borraq warrior's gaze was like a physical force, weighing him down with centuries of hatred and mistrust. Elia had faced his fair share of hostility in his life, but there was something primal about Zarrack's loathing that chilled him to the bone.

Zarrack's eyes narrowed, flicking between Rael and Elia as he evaluated the situation. Elia could practically see the calculations flickering behind the old warrior's eyes, weighing the risks and opportunities. Elia's pulse thundered in his ears as he waited for the other shoe to drop, for Zarrack to see through the deception and attack.

But the moment stretched on, taut with unspoken tension. Finally, Zarrack met Rael's steady gaze, his own eyes glinting with warning. "Humans are cunning, devious creatures," he growled, his voice like gravel. "You would do well not to trust them."

He pounded the crisscrossing scars that marred his chest. "I was taken by them during the war. Tortured for months on end for no purpose. I know of their cruelty first hand." As he spoke, Elia saw flashes of a deep pain cross Zarrack's features.

Rael dipped his head in a shallow nod of acknowledgment. "I am being cautious, Zarrack."

"Could stand to be more cautious, if an old dog like me could scent your scheming," Zarrack cut him off, flashing a grim smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I knew your father, pup. I don't want to see you sharing his fate."

The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. Elia saw Rael's jaw tighten almost imperceptibly. "I know what I'm doing," Rael stated, holding Zarrack's gaze with an intensity that made the hairs on the back of Elia's neck prickle.

The two Borraq sized each other up, a silent conversation playing out in the tilt of their heads and the set of their shoulders. The weight of their shared history, of traditions and experiences Elian could never fully understand, stretched between them like a physical force.

Finally, Zarrack gave a grunt of acknowledgement and stepped back. "I've got a card game waiting for me," he said, the edge of menace fading from his tone.

He slapped Rael on the shoulder with a calloused hand. "Let's hope I don't have to collect your bounty next time we meet, eh?"

The words were light, but Elian couldn't shake the feeling that there was a darker meaning lurking beneath them.

Elian froze, his heart pounding in his chest, as Zarrack started down the path towards him. But the grizzled Borraq warrior walked right past without so much as a glance in Elian's direction.

As Zarrack's heavy footfalls faded into the distance, an uneasy silence settled over the road. Elian let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, his shoulders slumping with relief.

"We should keep moving," Rael rumbled, already turning to continue down the trail. "I thought this trail was remote enough, but Zarrack may not be the only Borraq out here."

Elian fell into step beside the towering alien, stealing sidelong glances at Rael's impassive profile. He couldn't quite shake the feeling of unease that had settled over him during the tense encounter.

"Zarrack..." he began hesitantly. "He was..."

"Fearsome?" Rael finished with a rumbling chuckle. "An old friend to my clan, but a formidable warrior. Don't let his gruff manner fool you. He's got a surprisingly soft heart under all that scar tissue."

Eliau arched an eyebrow skeptically. "If you say so. He looked ready to gut me where I stood."

"Don't take it personally. Zarrack has... history with your kind. The war left its mark on him, same as it did all of us."

A pang of sadness twisted in Eliau's chest. No matter how close they might become, no matter the depths of the bond growing between them, he and Rael would always be divided by the brutal legacy of that terrible conflict.

Eliau was an alien here, an enemy. His very existence put Rael at risk simply by association. Even Zarrack, Rael's long-time comrade, had looked at Eliau with open hostility.

As much as Eliau's heart might yearn for the impossible, the sensible path forward was clear.

He had to leave Rael.

But he knew that Rael would never willingly let him go, not after everything they'd been through together. The alpha was too stubborn, too possessive, to simply release his claim.

And if Rael insisted on staying with Eliau, Eliau knew that he wouldn't have the strength to walk away from him. Not from Rael.

So Eliau would have to be the strong one.

He would have to make the hard choice, for both their sakes.

Elian swallowed hard against the lump forming in his throat, forcing his expression into an impassive mask as he looked ahead. He knew what he had to do.

No matter how much it shattered his heart, he had to leave.

Rael was exhausted.

They'd made good time, but that didn't mean that crossing a whole mountain range in a few days wasn't tiring. His muscles ached, and he could feel the weight of every single one of the miles they'd traveled that day.

But exhaustion wasn't the only problem.

Something was off with Elian.

Humans and Borraq were very different, but Rael could tell there was something bothering Elian. Elian had been quiet and distant all day, hardly speaking as they traveled. Every time Rael had secretly glanced at him, it was like Elian was looking at something far away, something that wasn't there.

Rael wanted to ask him what was wrong, but he could tell that Elian wanted his space. And besides, Rael had his own problems to think about.

He was going to have to figure out a plan for what to do with Elian.

Taking a human as a mate was madness. It was against every single one of their laws. It would put his whole clan in danger. If any of the other clans found out that Rael's clan was harboring a human, there was no telling what kind of retribution would break out.

And yet...

Rael glanced over at Elian, who was unrolling his bedroll with slow, tired movements.

And yet, the longer that Rael spent with Elian, the more he was sure that he was going to do exactly that.

Some of Rael's clan would accept it, Rael knew. His clan had many strong, proud warriors, but they also valued things other than glory, battle, and war: love, connection, duty. They protected what they cared for — and Rael knew that if he introduced them to his mate, they'd soon come to protect Elian, too.

Others in his clan would be outraged, but they'd come around, Rael knew. Even if they bore grudges against humanity as a whole, they'd find it hard to hate a creature as well-meaning as Elian.

Rael twitched an eyebrow. His second in command was going to be a challenge, though. Taryn was powerful, virtuous, and talented. He was no simple rank-and-file warrior — any clan would have rejoiced to call Taryn their alpha. But Taryn had stuck with Rael when Rael had suddenly become alpha of the clan, and he'd thrown his support behind Rael instead of aiming for a clan of his own.

And after losing his brother in the war, Taryn had good reasons to hate humans.

Rael shook his head. He was too tired to unravel this complex problem right now. First things first: he needed to figure out a plan for crossing the rest of the mountains and getting to the city, and then he needed to find a way to pay for the medicine he needed. After that, the two of them could head back to Rael's territory—

Before Rael could finish his thought, Elian was on him.

Rael's breath left him in a surprised whoosh as Elian tackled him, pushing him down

onto the ground. Moonlight shone down on them, the ground hard beneath Rael's back.

Desire burned in Elian's eyes as he straddled Rael's hips. "Rael," he said, his voice low and needy.

"What, my mate?" Rael managed to grind out, even as his pulse sang. Being straddled by an eager human was a hell of a thing, and his body was already responding.

In response, Elian simply leaned down to capture Rael's mouth in a desperate kiss. His lips were hot and hungry, and Rael eagerly returned the kiss.

Desire burned through Rael, fierce and wild. Rael's hands roamed over Elian's body, hot through the layers of his clothes. He gripped Elian's hips, grinding him down against himself, and Elian gasped into the kiss.

It was the work of moments for Rael to flip them over, pinning Elian to the ground. The human didn't seem to mind, gazing up at Rael with hooded eyes and flushed cheeks — and, now, kiss-swollen lips.

Rael growled deep in his chest, unable to help himself. He leaned down to capture Elian's mouth in another kiss, and the human moaned in response.

Elian's hands roamed over Rael, and the next thing that Rael knew, Elian had reached up to his horns.

Borraq horns were hard as steel, used for warfare in days long gone by — but the base around them was sensitive. Pleasure and desire shot through Rael, white-hot and blinding. He groaned, torn between thrusting down against the heat that burned between them, and arching up into the touch that was driving him wild—

But Rael hesitated. Despite the heat of the moment, despite the fierce desire burning through him, something about Elian's expression seemed... off. Distracted.

Rael didn't like that one bit. He wanted to see that smirk on Elian's face again, that fierce satisfaction when he got his way. He wanted to see the human's eyes light up with joy at the taste of a new meal, the sight of a new interesting beast, the rush of a new adventure.

He wanted to spoil Elian, to give him everything that he desired. He wanted to see the human happy again, free from whatever it was that was weighing on him.

And Rael was going to do whatever it took to make that happen.

Rael's blood burned with desire as he gazed down at Elian, flushed and beautiful beneath him. Moonlight bathed them in silver, casting deep shadows across Elian's features. His eyes were half-lidded, his lips swollen from kisses, his chest rising and falling with quick breaths.

Desire wasn't the only thing that Rael felt. It was there, fierce and hot, yes — but it was mixed with something else, something deeper.

He wanted to see Elian blissed-out. He wanted to see him throw his head back and cry out with pleasure, wanted to see his eyes roll back in ecstasy, wanted to see him gasp and moan as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over him, wanted to see him utterly, completely, blissfully sated, with no other care or thought in the world.

Rael wanted to give that to him. More than anything in the universe, he wanted to give that to him.

So he did.

He took his time as he claimed his mate, moving slowly, savoring every moment as he and Elian came together. The joining of their bodies was a slow, sweet burn, pleasure building up between them, growing and growing.

But as the pleasure grew, something else grew in Elian. Beneath the haze of desire in his eyes, there was something else, something that Rael couldn't quite read.

"Rael," Elian gasped, his voice needy. "Harder. Faster. Please."

Desire surged through Rael at the sound of that desperate plea, but that other feeling remained, a small spark of unease deep in his chest.

He complied, thrusting into Elian with all the strength that his body could muster. Elian cried out in pleasure — but as Rael moved hard and fast, taking him, that other feeling in Elian's eyes remained. It was like there was something missing from his desire, something that he was searching for and couldn't quite find.

Desire and unease warred within Rael, but in the end, desire won out.

He moved as hard and fast as he could, pleasure burning through him, and with a cry, Elian arched up beneath him. His eyes searched the night sky, and then he squeezed them shut, pleasure contorting his pretty little face. He bit his lip, gasping — and then he was coming, body clenching around Rael.

That was all the invitation that Rael needed. Pleasure exploded through him, white-hot and blinding, and he came, filling Elian's body with the primal mark of his possession.

Rael collapsed against him, breath coming in ragged gasps. He curled his body around Elian's, holding him close, protective instincts roaring to life within him.

Elia's eyes were half-lidded, his chest rising and falling with quick breaths. He gazed up at Rael, and a small smile spread across his lips.

He'd seen the human smile a hundred times, smirking, grinning, flashing his quick and charming expressions across his face. But this smile was something different, something deeper. Full of... peace, in some strange way.

The two of them lay together in the moonlit night, desire and unease mingling between them.

The mountain air was cold, but in each other's arms, Rael told himself, they were warm.

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Elia's heart was breaking.

He'd spent the entire day preparing for this moment. Now, in the dead of night, he was ready.

Rael had fallen asleep. He didn't sleep much, always alert — but now, blissed-out and sated, he'd slipped under.

And now Elia was leaving him.

Vasz was still new to him, but he'd absorbed enough from his journey with Rael to be ready. As silently as he could, Elia crept through the underbrush, using the cover of darkness to hide his movements. The tears welling in his eyes didn't slow him down.

Rael had been nothing but good to him. But despite Rael's open, friendly demeanor, Elia knew the truth.

Humans were the enemies of the Borraq. If — when — Rael didn't hand Elia over to the authorities, someone would eventually find out, and then...

Rael was a good man. Elia had seen it in every interaction, in the kindness that he offered without a second thought.

But in that kindness, something dangerous had bloomed. A softness. Something more.

Elian couldn't allow it.

Rael was putting himself and his entire clan in danger by harboring a fugitive like Elian.

This was for both of their sakes. With a heavy heart, Elian turned his back on the campsite and slipped away into the night.

He followed Rael's lessons, carefully navigating the alien landscape. The thick, spongy texture of the ground beneath the woods, the strange calls of unseen creatures in the night, the way that the two alien moons cast their light and affected visibility — he remembered Rael's teachings.

He ran as fast as he could through the alien woods, not daring to look back. He put as much distance between himself and the camp as he could, before Rael could wake up and stop him.

He was alone now. There was no going back.

He was on the run, hunted forever, eking out a tough existence in the wilds all by himself forever. Humanity would never be able to find him. He'd have to cover his tracks, hide from any Borraq. He'd have to learn to survive in the wilderness, far from any kind of civilization.

This wasn't what his life was supposed to be like. When he'd signed up for the space program, he'd dared to dream of something more. Of creating a new world, and finally finding somewhere he could truly call home.

He was supposed to be with people he could call family.

Not a lone fugitive.

Elian forced himself to focus on the future ahead of him, not the one he was leaving behind. He'd have to learn to survive. He'd have to learn to hide. He'd have to learn to outsmart a planet that would kill him if they found him.

And he'd have to do it all by himself—

Elian froze.

Something was wrong.

Elian's heart hammered in his chest, not just from the exertion of his mad dash. He scanned the night scene in front of him, looking for any sign of danger.

And then he heard it — a low, rumbling laugh.

Elian's blood turned to ice. He knew that laugh.

When he and Rael had watched Korvax tumble off the cliffside, he'd hoped that it was the last he'd see of the bounty hunter.

But now, with that low, mocking sound echoing in his ears, he knew that he'd been wrong.

Korvax stepped out from the trees, his form illuminated by the twin moons above.

The bounty hunter was even more haggard than before. His lean, muscular form was marred with fresh bruises, evidence of his run-in with Rael. It had been a long way to fall.

And speaking of fresh marks... A new scar marred his face, cutting across one of his eyes.

Korvax's remaining working eye was fixed on Elian, and malice shone in it.

"You little vermin," Korvax growled. "You think you can humiliate me and get away with it?"

Elian didn't waste breath answering him. Instead, he turned on his heel and ran.

A thick, powerful arm closed around his chest, hauling him off his feet and slamming him into the ground.

Elian's breath left him in a whoosh, the pain of the impact shooting through his body. The wind was knocked from his lungs, and for a moment, darkness threatened to overtake his vision.

The bounty hunter's hot breath panted against the back of his neck. "You're going to regret the day you ever crossed my path," he snarled.

Elian's heart sank.

He was caught.

And there was nothing he could do.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:14 am

When Rael awoke in the dead of night, he knew that something was wrong.

There was an unnerving stillness beside him.

Shock jolted through him. The sheets were empty. The space beside him was cold, untouched.

No.

Rael sat up, the thin covers falling from his chest. Moonlight poured through the forest canopy, bathing the camp in its glow. Rael's breath came quick and hard as he stared at the empty space beside him.

Eliau had run away.

Fury and hurt warred within Rael. He could feel the emotions burning in his chest, hot and fierce. He'd thought... He'd thought...

Rael's jaw clenched. He'd thought that he and Eliau had something special. Despite the differences between them — despite the fact that one of them was an alien from a far-off world — he'd thought that they'd connected. That they'd found something precious in each other.

But now...

Had Eliau been playing him from the start, pretending to love Rael in order to lower his guard? It wouldn't have been the first time that a human had been deceptive.

Every Borraq knew that they were underhanded, devious creatures, didn't they?

But... No, Rael couldn't bring himself to believe that. He'd seen the warmth in Elian's eyes, felt the sincerity in his touch.

It had been real.

So if Elian wanted to run, he was going to have to run far to get away from Rael.

There wasn't a single corner of Vasz that was beyond Rael's reach. If he had to, he'd track Elian to the ends of the planet to prove to him that he hadn't made a mistake in choosing Rael as his mate.

In the quicksilver mix of fury and determination, there was a deep, aching well of fear. Rael grit his teeth, refusing to acknowledge it. He was going to find Elian, and fix whatever was wrong, and then he was going to drag him back to his side, kicking and screaming if he had to.

And then Rael was going to give him a piece of his mind that he'd never forget, before holding him close and never letting him go again.

First things first, though. Rael sprinted out into the night, his senses on high alert.

Elian had left signs in his wake — there was no way he couldn't. A snapped twig here, a faint depression in the ground there... But Elian had clearly put on the pheromone-blocking salve that Rael had shown him, the one that hid his presence from the senses of any potential pursuers.

As Rael followed the tracker's signals through the wilderness, the world around him remained stubbornly empty of any scent other than the natural one of trees and earth.

The man was an absolute fool. Rael had taught him about Vasz as they'd walked its paths, but there were still many things that Elian didn't yet know. He was going to get himself killed out here, with no ability to sense any predators that might be stalking him.

Or worse, he was going to be found by someone less kind than Rael.

Rael ran through the night for gods knew how long, following the signals as they led him on. He burst through a ring of trees —

— and then he skidded to a halt.

There was the unmistakable sign of a struggle.

The earth was torn and trampled, the underbrush crushed beneath the weight of a furious scuffle. There were deep, heavy footprints, as if someone had dug their heels in—

— and then been dragged away.

Elian wasn't just fleeing.

He'd been taken.

Rael's blood ran cold. Korvax. Korvax wanted the bounty on Elian — but that bounty was alive or dead. The hot fury in Rael's chest warred with a deep, icy fear. He had to find Elian. He had to find him before Korvax decided to...

No. No time to think about that.

Rael ran through the woods, following Korvax's trail. His shields were up, ready for

the confrontation to come.

But no shield in the galaxy could protect him from the emotions that now roiled within him, fierce and undeniable.

He was going to find Elia.

And he was going to bring him home.

Eliau was going to die.

He was bruised, bound, and thrown over Korvax's shoulder like a sack of grain. The jolting motion with every step the Borraq took sent fresh waves of pain through him, but he gritted his teeth and bore it. He wasn't going to give this monster the satisfaction of hearing him cry out.

The wilderness flew by, a blur of dark shapes and moonlit grass. On the horizon ahead, the lights of a city were shining, a jewel in the night. Rael and Eliau had been drawing close, and as Korvax sped down the road leading right to it, it was even closer now. They were getting nearer.

And when they got there, Eliau was going to die.

"You humans," Korvax said, his voice a low rumble that was audible even over the rushing wind. He was speaking conversationally, as if they were both out for a pleasant stroll. "You're such a pathetic little species."

Korvax sniffed the air, a dark grin on his face. "And you in particular..." he said, his voice sliding from conversational to something more dangerous. "No wonder Rael was so possessive of you. You humans, you smell so tasty. Like little bags of honey, just waiting to be torn open and devoured."

"Just like Rael is going to do to you," Eliau ground out.

Korvax laughed, a deep sound that rumbled through Eliau's aching body. "The man you ran away from? You think he's going to come to your rescue?" He gave Eliau a

particularly rough shake, sending fresh waves of pain through him. "But I like the way you humans talk back to me. It's amusing. If the bounty wasn't big enough, I think I might keep you. A little pet to cower at my feet, a pretty little thing to—"

As Korvax continued his sneering, Elian's stomach churned. Fear and revulsion warred within him, a sickening cocktail that sent cold sweat beading across his skin.

No. Elian gritted his teeth, and in the face of despair, he summoned up his pride. I might be a nobody, a forgotten cog in a machine, but I'm still a human. We don't go gently, you bastard. You're going to have to drag me to my death kicking and screaming.

He didn't say any of that out loud, though. Korvax's blows hadn't been gentle. He kept his face buried in his arm, and he bore it in silence.

He longed for Rael.

Korvax could tell. The Borraq's grip on Elian was just as tight as it had been at the beginning of the journey, but now there was an extra pressure to it, a subtle warning.

"So sulky, little pet." In the moonlight, his pupils were like black voids. "Rael was going to turn you in, I'm going to turn you in — what's the difference?"

"He wasn't," Elian said, his voice hoarse. "He's not a monster."

"No?" Korvax's breath was hot against Elian's face. It smelled of meat, of blood, of something feral. "He was still going to turn you in, just like I am. After playing nice with you, he was still going to claim his bounty. We're the same."

"He's not!" The words burst from Elian, raw and desperate. "You don't know anything about him!"

But underneath the defiance, doubt gnawed at Elian's heart.

Korvax didn't know anything about Rael. He didn't know about the moments that Elian and Rael had shared together, the little glimpses into the Borraq's life that had somehow turned into something more.

He didn't know about the way that Rael's eyes had softened when he thought Elian wasn't looking, the rare glimpses of vulnerability in a proud and powerful creature. He didn't know about the way that Rael had protected Elian, keeping him safe. He didn't know about the heated looks that had passed between them, the charged moments that had sent heat curling through Elian's body and had made him wonder if there was something more between them.

Korvax didn't know about any of it.

And he didn't know how hard Rael was going to be chasing him.

Korvax was going to rue the day he ever laid a single claw on Elian.

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Rael pushed himself to the very edge of his endurance, the muscles in his legs screaming as he tore through the wilderness.

He was getting closer.

In the dead of night, under a sky full of alien stars, he was gaining on them.

Elian's kidnapper was heading straight for the city. Rael could see the route Korvax was taking, his feet barely touching the ground as he ran through the night.

If Rael didn't stop him, then as soon as he got there, he was going to sell Elian.

And then there'd be nothing that Rael could do to get him back.

At the break of dawn, Rael finally caught sight of them.

In the distance, Korvax was running through a clearing in the wilderness, its thick underbrush bordered by two steep hills. At the end of the clearing, the path to the city waited, its spires just beginning to glow with the first light of dawn.

He had a captive slung over his shoulder, and by the stars, that captive was...

Alive. Still fighting.

Relief and fury warred in Rael's chest. He'd caught up to them just in time.

Elian was battered and bruised, his head hanging down, his long hair hiding his face.

His bound feet dangled down by Korvax's hip, his bound hands hanging limply in front of him. Even in his bedraggled state, there was a fiery defiance to him, a refusal to be completely cowed.

Rael's mate. His human.

He was alive.

Rael gritted his teeth, fury and determination warring in his breast. He was going to stop this bastard. He was going to take Elian back.

Korvax whipped around at the first sound of Rael's racing footsteps, headed straight toward him. He bared his teeth savagely, but without surprise — he had to have known that Rael would be after him. "Took you long enough. You must be getting old."

Elian had been hanging over Korvax's shoulder, but at that, he looked up. "Rael!" he cried.

Rael's jaw clenched. He was going to break every bone in Korvax's smug face. "Let him go."

Korvax raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I don't think I will. You see, I'm about to sell this little pretty thing."

Rael reached for his blade. "Over my dead body"

"That can be arranged."

Korvax cast Elian to the ground, and charged. Rael roared, and he met Korvax head on.

And as he lunged into battle, his heart burst with one singular, undeniable emotion, drowning out all others.

Love.

He loved Elian. He'd denied it at first, trying to ignore it, but now it filled him with a fierce, undeniable strength. He was willing to do anything to keep Elian safe, even if it meant facing down an army, even if it meant breaking every single one of his kind's rules.

He was an alpha Borraq, in love with a human — and he was going to fight to save him.

Korvax struck first, his movements a flurry of wicked precision honed by a lifetime of underhanded dealings. But Rael was prepared, his own combat skills forged by the harsh demands of the wilds. He deflected the blows with an ease born of intense training, his counter-attacks scoring glancing hits that only enraged Korvax further.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rael caught Elian flinching, the human clearly awed by the ferocity of the exchange. He longed to offer reassurance, but couldn't spare the distraction. Not while Elian's freedom was at stake.

Wait for me, my mate...!

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:14 am

Eliau couldn't breathe.

In front of him, the two Borraq circled each other in the valley. The first light of dawn painted the world in hues of gold and pink, turning the dewy grass at their feet into a carpet of jewels — but there was nothing beautiful about the scene.

Rael and Korvax were going to kill each other.

The world had gone mad. Just a few weeks ago, Eliau had been a simple colony worker, training for a life among the stars. He'd planned for a quiet, peaceful life, free of any kind of excitement.

And then his ship had crashed, throwing him into Rael's arms.

The man was a whirlwind, a storm given flesh. He'd taken Eliau prisoner and dragged him across the planet — but in the process, he'd somehow made Eliau fall for him.

It was madness. Rael was an alien, a member of a species at war with humanity. His culture was as alien as his appearance, all honor and words that had no direct translation. His moral code was something that Eliau could barely wrap his head around, a brutal world of clans and challenges.

But despite all of that, Rael had somehow ignited a spark within Eliau. Underneath his fear, underneath his confusion, there was something else.

Something like hope.

And then, just moments ago, that hope had burst into full flame. Rael had come to save him.

Maybe there was some way they could be together after all. Elian had never felt so happy in his entire life.

But now that life was on the brink of being cut short.

Rael and Korvax were like whirlwinds, like wild animals fighting for dominance. Despite the sheer terror of watching the battle, Elian couldn't tear his eyes away. He'd never seen anything like it. Rael's muscles rippled underneath his golden skin, moving with a grace that was somehow both feral and human. When his blade flashed in the dawn light, it was as if the metal itself burned with some kind of otherworldly power.

Rael was a warrior. He was something more than human, something from a wilder, older world. In the face of his savage prowess, it was almost hard to believe that Korvax stood a chance.

But the other man was no slouch, either. He might not have Rael's otherworldly edge, but he was clearly a skilled fighter, his years of experience plain to see. His strikes were fast and precise, aiming for vulnerable spots on Rael's body. Whenever he managed to land a blow, the sound of flesh meeting flesh echoed up the mountainside, making Elian flinch in sympathy.

They were both monsters, locked in mortal combat. And Elian was caught in the middle of it.

Elian's heart hammered in his chest, the thunderous sound threatening to drown out the noise of the battle.

He couldn't watch. He couldn't look, he couldn't see—

With a sickening crack, Rael's head snapped to the side. A brutal blow sent him staggering, his feet unsteady.

Elian thought he was going to be sick. The world spun around him, a sick carousel. Rael was fighting for him. He'd called Elian his mate — and now he was putting his life on the line for him.

Elian had to do something!

His tied hands clenched into fists, his nails biting into his palms. He wanted to do something, anything to help.

But he couldn't. He was bound, utterly helpless. The rough rope that tied his hands behind his back might as well have been chains. He was nothing but a spectator, a prisoner forced to watch as the man who'd captured his heart danced with death.

Elian's throat worked, a strangled sound escaping him. He bit back on it. He needed to stay quiet — he couldn't risk distracting Rael.

Wait...

The realization hit Elian like a bolt of lightning. He couldn't risk distracting Rael... but there was someone else he needed to annoy as much as he could.

Drawing a deep breath, Elian raised his voice. "Hey, scumbag!"

The words burst forth, crude and grating in the crisp mountain air. Korvax didn't turn, intent on facing Rael, but his eyes narrowed at the interruption.

Elia didn't let the bounty hunter's that deter him. "Yeah, that's right, I'm talking to you! Did you enjoy your little trip down the mountain last time? Do you want another? Get a little closer, and let me see if I can do that again!"

Rael's blade flashed in a vicious arc. Korvax parried it — but was it Elia's imagination, or was his parry just a fraction of a second slower than it could have been?

"You call yourself a warrior?" Elia jeered, his voice dripping with disdain. "Well, I guess that works — there's only one eye in warrior, anyway!"

Snarling, Korvax advanced on Rael, clearly irritated. Yes! Elia kept taunting, desperate to keep Korvax's focus on him. "How'd it feel to get bested by a human, huh? You're too scared to fight us on the frontline! Figures, because you're too pathetic to even best a weakling like me! No wonder you're clanless!"

That did it. Korvax beat Rael back, his lip curling in a sneer of pure rage, then broke. "The bounty says alive — or dead!"

He lunged toward Elia, blade raised.

Elia didn't see the rest of the movement. He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself for the blow—

It never came.

There was a sickening gurgle, followed by a heavy thud.

When he dared to look again, Korvax was on his knees, a crimson stain blooming across his chest. Rael stood over him, his blade dripping, eyes blazing with a feral light.

The bounty hunter made one last feeble attempt to raise his blade, but Rael knocked it aside with contemptuous ease. Then, with a swift, economical motion, he ended Korvax's life.

Elia shut his eyes.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Elia's eyes flew open as strong arms encircled him, lifting him from the ground. He found himself pressed against Rael's powerful chest, the alien's intoxicating scent enveloping him.

"Rael..." Elia breathed, scarcely able to believe this was real. He was alive. They were both alive.

Rael cradled him close, his fingers deftly undoing the ropes binding Elia. "You're safe now, my love. I've got you."

The moment the bonds fell away, Elia flung his arms around Rael's neck, clinging to him with every ounce of his being. He buried his face in the crook of Rael's shoulder, shuddering with the force of his relief.

"Rael, Rael..." His name was a prayer, a benediction on Elia's lips.

Rael held him just as fiercely, one hand cradling the back of Elia's head. When they finally drew apart, just enough to look into each other's eyes, Elia saw a whirlwind of emotions in Rael's blazing gaze.

Anger. Fear. Desperation. And beneath it all, an emotion so profound it stole Elia's breath away.

"Why?" Rael's voice was a low rumble, his green eyes colored with anguish. "Why did you run from me?"

Elian's heart clenched. He pressed his forehead to Rael's, struggling to find the words. "I had to. If I stayed... every Borraq would be against you for sheltering an enemy. I couldn't let you ruin your life like that." He trailed off, his throat tight.

Rael's fingers tightened in Elian's hair, forcing their gazes to meet again. "You think I care about the opinions of others?" he growled. "You are mine, Elian. My mate, my heart, my everything. I will fight the entire planet to keep you safe and by my side. Never doubt that."

The intensity in Rael's eyes sent a shiver down Elian's spine. He saw the truth burning there, bright and undeniable.

Slowly, Rael's expression softened, the hard lines of his face relaxing into something infinitely tender. "But I will not have to fight, not for this. My clan... they will see how precious you are. How brave and loyal. They will welcome you, just as I have welcomed you into my heart."

Elian's breath caught in his throat. A clan. Somewhere he might finally belong.

A family.

"I want that," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "More than anything."

Rael's smile was like the rising sun, bright and radiant. "Then it's yours, my heart. All of it is yours."

Their lips met in a searing kiss, all the passion and desperation of the past few days pouring out between them. Elian clung to Rael, drinking him in like a man dying of

thirst. He'd thought he'd thrown this away, thrown away the one beautiful thing he'd managed to find in the midst of so much chaos and pain.

But now, with Rael's arms around him and the heat of his mouth claiming Elian as his own, he knew he'd never let it go again.

When they finally parted, gasping for air, Elian looked up at Rael with shining eyes. "I love you," he said simply, the words carrying all the weight of his soul.

Rael's smile was impossibly tender as he traced the line of Elian's jaw. "And I love you, my mate. My Elian."

He turned to face the rising dawn sun. "Let's go home."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:14 am

The deep wilderness of Vasz was like nothing else. The Borraq homeland was a place of strange beauty, all soaring cliffs and deep valleys, thick forests and rushing rivers. The trees were like nothing on Earth, their broad leaves a deep blue that drank in the light of Vasz's twin suns.

Elian was just a small figure in that vast landscape, a slender human in a world that wasn't made for humans.

And in the middle of that landscape was Rael's village.

Elian was perched high on a platform, working on the intricate electronics of a broken radio. Over the past few months that he'd been there, tinkering had been a daily task, something to keep his mind busy.

He might not have the strength of the Borraq, but he was smart. He'd found ways to be useful, ways to carve out a space for himself in a world that was never meant for his kind.

Below him, the sounds of the clan drifted up from the open courtyard at the base of the platform. Rael's home was a place of constant activity, filled with the deep voices of the Borraq.

A pair of them were working on a garden, carefully tending to plants that were just as alien as the rest of the world. Near the garden, a group of warriors were going through their drills, their weapons flashing in the sunlight. A pair of thick-bodied cooks were arguing good-naturedly about something by the entrance to the communal kitchen, their deep laughter booming out.

Eliau looked away from the sight and focused on his work, screwdriver in hand. The electronics were a delicate thing, and he had to be careful with them. Despite their species using plenty of advanced technology at the front lines, it was clear that most Borraq that lived on Vasz never used technology that was this complicated — or this finicky to repair.

But he'd succeeded, and now here he was, a valued member of Rael's clan.

Well, according to most of them. Rael's second in command had not been as easy to win over. Taryn was Rael's right-hand man, a key figure in the village... but Eliau had never even laid eyes on him. The man refused to be around him. Taryn would not so much as even look at Eliau.

Eliau's stomach sank. Rael had assured him that Taryn would come around in time, but Eliau hated being the source of friction between Rael and any of his people.

A call from below broke Eliau from his brooding. Eliau leaned over the edge of the platform. The sunlight was hot on his skin, and he wiped sweat from his brow. "What is it, Korr?" he called.

The cook looked up at him from the courtyard below, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Will you be needing a break soon, human? I've prepared a meal that won't turn your stomach."

Eliau hid a smile. Rael's people had come a long way from their initial skepticism about hosting a human. They'd quickly learned that humans had different needs from the Borraq — and different tastes. The first meal that the cooks had proudly presented to Eliau had been a trial for them both. The thick, rare meat had been delicious, but the accompanying thick, sour milk had nearly sent Eliau running for the hills.

After that, the cooks had grudgingly added their attempts at human-friendly dishes to

their menu. And after Elian had attempted to cook a few recipes himself, they'd shooed him out of the kitchens and tackled the challenge themselves. Now the kitchen could produce meals that satisfied both human and Borraq palates, and the cooks were fiercely proud of their cosmopolitan taste.

Elian leaned over the edge of the platform. "I'll take you up on that offer, but not just yet. I've got a delicate piece of machinery in my hands right now, and I don't want to juggle it with food."

Korr nodded, satisfied. "As you say. Come down when you're ready."

Elian got back to work, a smile playing at his lips. Life among the Borraq was never dull, that was for sure. But despite the occasional headaches — both metaphorical and literal, after he'd tried some of their spicier ingredients — Elian had never been happier.

He had a place among the stars, and a clan at his back. There was nothing else he could ask for.

Well, almost nothing...

But he didn't have the time to think about that. Worrak had no qualms about climbing up onto the platform, looming over Elian. "What are you doing today, human?" he called.

Despite the way that Worrak towered over him, he was, Elian had been told, still quite young. If Elian saw past the horns and the sharp teeth, Worrak reminded Elian of some of the young teenage boys that hung around space stations, trying to act cool in front of the actual soldiers.

No wonder Rael had wanted to heal him so badly. It was hard not to find the young

warrior endearing, like a big puppy.

"Same thing I do every day, Worrak. Trying to fix your toys."

Worrak's deep voice was filled with all the outrage he could muster. "Those 'toys' may be the difference between life and death in battle!"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I fixed this one — you can get those radio shows of yours, now."

Worrak broke into a bright smile. "Good. I do not want to miss what happens next."

Elian felt a surge of smug satisfaction as he chatted away with Worrak about the radio. The young warrior had made a full recovery. Thanks to Rael, he was back on his feet and as boisterous as ever.

The fee for the gene treatment had been costly — but it wasn't like Korvax was going to be using his blade any more. Rael had wasted no time in trading it in. Apparently a clan blade was serious business.

A small, satisfied smile tugged at the corner of Elian's mouth. It's what you deserved, you jerk.

Worrak was oblivious to Elian's smugness. "If you're done fixing it, you've got time for a sparring session."

Elian snorted softly, already knowing where this was headed. "Not again. You know you'll wipe the floor with me, right?"

"Until you learn!" Worrak shot back with a toothy grin. "Come and let me show you. I will make you stronger!"

Elian knew better than to take the bait. Sparring with a Borraq warrior, even a relatively young one like Worrak, was a sure-fire way to end up in pain. He had learned that lesson the hard way early on.

"Maybe later," he said kindly, turning his attention back to the delicate machinery in front of him. "I've got work to do."

Worrak made a rude noise, but there was no real heat behind it. "Suit yourself. But don't come crying to me when your soft human body gets out of shape from all that sitting around."

Elian simply shook his head, amused by the jibe. As Worrak wandered off in search of another target to spar with, Elian couldn't help but feel a swell of contentment. This was his life now — a valued member of Rael's clan, with a purpose and a sense of belonging that had eluded him for so long on Earth.

And it was all thanks to Rael's unwavering courage and the strength of his convictions. Elian owed the powerful Borraq warrior everything, a debt that could never be fully repaid.

And speaking of his mate...

The sound of heavy footfalls echoed up to the platform. Elian's heart skipped a beat. He knew that step, the confident stride of a certain Borraq alpha.

Despite the heat of the day, a shiver of anticipation ran down his spine. He turned — and there he was, striding across the courtyard. Rael was back.

Elian's breath caught in his throat at the sight of him. His mate was as imposing as ever. The sunlight caught the deep gold of his skin, the fierce curve of his horns. His cloak billowed behind him as he walked, a sign of the rank that he held.

Rael's trip to the neighboring territories had been a long one, filled with negotiations and politics. He'd been gone for weeks, and every day of his absence had felt like an eternity to Elian.

But now he was back.

His mate. The realization still felt too good to be true, a fantasy that Elian was scared of waking up from.

The other members of the clan gathered to welcome Rael back, their deep voices raised in a chorus of greeting. Their words were a rumbling sound that filled the courtyard.

But despite the fact that they were all there in the flesh, Rael only had eyes for one person. He greeted them all, then crossed the courtyard in long strides, his gaze fixed on Elian.

Heat crept up Elian's neck and settled on his cheeks. He was no stranger to desire, but the way that Rael could make him feel, with just a look, from across the courtyard, in front of the entire gathered clan... It was something else entirely.

The other members of the clan clearly noticed Rael's real target. The cooks elbowed each other and shared a knowing look, and the crowd dispersed, suddenly finding reasons to be out of the way.

The members of the clan might come from a different species to Elian, but good-natured teasing was a universal language. Elian had quickly learned that the Borraq were social people, and that their bonds of companionship were just as deep as their rivalries in battle.

Despite the fact that Elian and Rael's relationship was something new and

unprecedented, the clan had come to embrace it. They were proud to have a human member secretly living among their ranks, and that included every single part of human life — even the embarrassing bits.

Eliau was going to have to endure a lot of teasing in the aftermath of this. But you know what? He'd gladly endure ten times the number of raised eyebrows and nudged elbows for the privilege of having Rael look at him like that.

Rael paid his people no mind. He stopped in front of the platform, his gaze fixed up on Eliau. Despite the heat of the day, a hungry light burned in his eyes.

"Eliau," he said, his voice a deep rumble. "Come down here."

Eliau's heart raced. "One second." He hurriedly put aside the gadgets he was working on, shoving his tools as neatly as he could back into their box. Then he was clambering down the platform, and following the flick of Rael's cloak through the door of Rael's house.

Rael led Eliau through the ornate entrance of his private quarters, the space that was now equally theirs. The place reflected the Borraq's penchant for simplicity and functionality — the decor was minimal, the lines clean, the colors bright and vivid.

Rael's powerful arms encircled him from behind, the Borraq's warm breath tickling the nape of his neck. "I have thought of little else since I left but you," the deep rumble of Rael's voice reverberated through Eliau's core. "Your absence has been a constant ache, my mate."

Heat blossomed across Eliau's cheeks even as a teasing smirk played upon his lips. "Is that so?" He turned within the circle of Rael's embrace, drinking in the sight of his lover's chiseled features. "And here I thought the great alpha would be too occupied with matters of diplomacy to spare a thought for his human."

Rael's only response was a low, possessive growl as he closed the scant distance between them. Their lips met in a searing kiss, all teeth and tongue and raw, primal need. Elian surrendered to the onslaught, his fingers threading through the thick tresses at the nape of Rael's neck as a soft whimper escaped him.

In a dizzying flurry of movement, Rael swept Elian off his feet, his powerful muscles straining beneath golden skin as he carried his lover to the bed. Elian's back hit the soft furs with a breathless gasp, his eyes blown wide as Rael loomed over him, a predator claiming his prize.

Elian's breath caught in his throat as Rael's smoldering gaze raked over him. The sheer intensity of the Borraq's desire was like a physical caress, stoking the flames of Elian's own yearning until he burned with it.

Powerful hands roamed over the planes of Elian's body, mapping the familiar terrain with reverence and need. Rael's calloused fingertips danced across flushed skin, tracing the dips and valleys as if committing every inch to memory once more. Elian arched into the touch with a needy whine, his own hands grasping at the hard curves of Rael's chest.

"You've been away too long," Elian rasped, his voice husky with want. He dragged blunt nails down the ridges of Rael's abdomen, relishing the way the Borraq's muscles twitched.

Rael's answering growl vibrated through Elian's very core. "Every moment apart has been torment." His words were punctuated with a sharp nip to the sensitive flesh of Elian's throat, his sharp teeth just barely grazing his skin.

Clever fingers made short work of the fastenings on Elian's clothes, peeling away each layer with agonizing slowness until he lay bare and trembling before his mate. Elian's skin prickled with a heady mix of arousal and vulnerability as Rael drank in

the sight, his gaze molten and worshipful.

"Beautiful," the Borraq rumbled, the simple word a benediction on his lips.

Heat suffused Elian's cheeks even as he preened under the adoring attention. He reached up, tangling his fingers in the thick tresses at Rael's nape and tugging insistently until their mouths crashed together in a searing kiss.

Elian's fingers traced the lines of Rael's abdomen, marveling at the sheer size and strength of his mate. His exploration drifted lower, past the narrow trail of hair leading down from Rael's navel, until his fingertips brushed against the unmistakable twin hardinesses straining beneath the fabric of Rael's clothes.

A breathless laugh tumbled from Elian's lips. "Somebody's eager," he murmured, giving the rigid lengths a teasing stroke through the cloth.

Rael released a low, rumbling growl that reverberated through Elian's very core. "Any healthy Borraq male would be, after weeks apart from their mate," he rasped, leaning in to nip at the sensitive column of Elian's throat. "Especially when said mate smells as intoxicating as you."

That was a lie. Elian was diligent in applying his pheromone-blocking salve every day, so as to keep the peace with his new family — not that anyone would ever be bold enough or stupid enough to show interest in their alpha's claimed mate.

Still, Elian shivered at the words, his fingers moving faster. "Poor thing," he grinned. "All pent up with no release."

The derisive snort Rael loosed ruffled the damp curls at Elian's temple. "You underestimate a Borraq's restraint, little mate."

Despite the chiding words, there was no heat behind them, only a banked intensity that made Elian's pulse thunder in his ears. He tugged down Rael's pants and gave the twin lengths a firm stroke, reveling in the way Rael's hips canted into his touch with a harsh exhalation.

"Restraint, hm?" Elian arched a challenging brow, his lips quirking into a sly grin. "Doesn't seem like you've got much of that left right now."

"You're a menace," Rael rasped against the hollow of Elian's throat, the words a husky rasp edged with fondness.

Elian hummed in agreement, arching into the scorching drag of Rael's mouth and hands. "A menace you happen to adore."

The sharp nip to the juncture of his neck and shoulder drew a sharp gasp from Elian's lips. "Careful, little mate," Rael purred, his voice a sinful rumble against Elian's flushed skin. "Don't get too bold, lest I be forced to remind you of your place."

A delicious shiver raced down Elian's spine at the dark promise in those words. He hooked a leg over Rael's powerful thigh, using the leverage to grind their arousals together in a slow, filthy roll of his hips. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

Rael growled low in his throat, hips surging forward to chase the delicious friction. It was the work of a moment to strip both of them bare, then his fingers dug almost bruisingly into the soft flesh of Elian's thighs, holding him in place as their bodies rocked together in a primal, heated rhythm.

Pleasure zinged along Elian's nerves with each languid roll of their hips. He drank in the sight of his mate, head thrown back in abandon, muscles rippling beneath golden skin that glistened with a fine sheen of sweat. Rael was glorious like this, his usual stoic demeanor shattered, lost to the storm of desire that bound them together.

Elia's breath escaped in ragged pants as their movements grew more frantic, more desperate. He could feel the precipice looming ever closer, that razor's edge of blissful oblivion calling to him with each electrifying brush of their arousals.

"What do you need, my mate?" The endearment rolled off Rael's lips like a sacred invocation. "Tell me, and it shall be yours."

Elia's throat went dry as he met Rael's burning gaze. His heart thundered in his chest, every nerve ending alight with a heady mix of desire and trepidation.

"Mate me," he rasped. "Slowly. After being apart for so long, I want to feel every inch of you claiming me again."

The phrase worked its magic. A low, possessive growl rumbled from Rael's broad chest. In one fluid motion, he captured Elia's lips in a searing kiss, all teeth and tongue and scorching need. "Your wish is my command."

True to his word, Rael worshipped Elia's body with an almost reverent slowness. Calloused palms mapped the planes and valleys of flushed skin, each caress stoking the flames of Elia's arousal higher. Clever fingers danced over sensitive spots, drawing breathy gasps and needy whimpers from Elia's lips.

"So responsive for me," Rael purred, nipping at the juncture of Elia's neck and shoulder. "You've no idea how I've ached for this while I was away. Longed to feel you trembling and writhing beneath me once more."

Elia keened softly as Rael's questing hands drifted lower, teasing at the crease of his thigh. He arched into the scorching trail of open-mouthed kisses Rael blazed down the center of his chest.

"Tell me, little mate," Rael rasped. "Did you ache for me as I did for you? Did you lie

awake at night, body thrumming with unfulfilled need?"

A full-body shudder racked Elian at the dark timbre of Rael's words. He threaded desperate fingers through the thick tresses at his mate's nape, wordless pleas spilling from his lips.

Rael hummed, the sound a low, indulgent rumble. "I'll take that as a yes." He punctuated the words with a sharp nip to Elian's throat, smirking at the breathless keen it drew forth.

Elian was rapidly unraveling under the onslaught of Rael's skilled hands and wicked mouth. Every nerve ending sang with exquisite torment, the delicious drag of pleasure and denial binding him in rapturous limbo.

Just when he thought he could bear no more, Rael shifted, powerful muscles rippling beneath golden skin as he settled between Elian's thighs. The first brush of one of Rael's dual lengths against Elian's entrance, blunt and full of promise, made him gasp.

"Look at you," Rael rasped, drinking in the sight of his mate, flushed and trembling with want. "You're already wrecked, and I've scarcely begun to take you apart."

Elian whined high in his throat, hips bucking in a desperate bid for friction, for release. Rael's broad palm splayed over the jut of his hip, stilling the frantic motion as he tsked softly.

"Patience, my mate. I intend to savor every breathless cry, every needy whimper." His smoldering gaze raked over Elian in a molten caress. "You'll be utterly undone by the time I'm through with you."

Elian's breath escaped in ragged pants, his body thrumming with exquisite torment.

Rael's words kindled an inferno of need low in his belly, leaving him utterly at his mate's mercy.

A broken whimper tumbled from Elian's lips as one of Rael's thick lengths brushed against his entrance in a maddening tease, already slick with eager precome. He could feel the scorching heat radiating from them, the slick slide of arousal leaving him utterly undone.

Elian could only keen as Rael's hips rolled forward in one agonizingly slow thrust. His mate's thick length breached him, slicked with his own arousal. The stretch and burn stole the very air from Elian's lungs. He broke away from the kiss with a strangled cry, body arching into the delicious impalement.

Rael paused once sheathed to the hilt, giving Elian a moment to adjust to the thick intrusion. His lips trailed a blazing path along Elian's jaw and throat as he murmured fervent praises against flushed skin.

"So perfect for me," he rasped, rocking his hips in a shallow grind that had Elian keening. "Exquisite in your pleasure, my mate. My beautiful human."

The endearments fanned the flames of Elian's desire higher. He clung to Rael's powerful frame, chasing that exquisite friction as his mate began to move in earnest.

Elian lost himself in the maelstrom of sensations – the scorching glide of Rael's cock within him, the other rubbing against his own, the delicious burn of being stretched and filled, the intoxicating scent of their mingled arousal. His world narrowed to the point where their bodies joined, every nerve ending alight and singing with rapture.

Rael's thrusts grew harder, deeper, their pace spiraling into something frantic and primal. Elian matched him stroke for stroke, his breathless cries spilling into the heated air between them.

He could feel that precipice looming ever closer, the coiled tension in his belly winding tighter with each roll of Rael's hips. Any coherent thought scattered like leaves on the wind as Rael set a punishing pace, driving into him with deep, powerful strokes. Elian surrendered himself to the maelstrom, clinging to his mate as wave after wave of bliss threatened to sweep him under.

Elian's back arched off the bed, a breathless keen torn from his lips as Rael's thick cock drove into him with relentless intensity. Every nerve ending sang with rapturous bliss, the slick slide of their joining stoking the flames of Elian's desire ever higher.

He drank in the sight of his mate above him – powerful muscles rippling beneath sweat-slicked golden skin, emerald eyes blazing with a banked fire, full lips parted on harsh pants. Rael was glorious like this, lost to the maelstrom of their shared passion.

A broken whimper spilled from Elian as Rael's hips snapped forward in a sharp, punishing thrust. The angle drove the scorching lengths deeper, igniting sparks behind Elian's fluttering eyelids. His nails raked down the broad expanse of Rael's back, seeking an anchor in the storm.

"You're mine," Rael growled against the thundering pulse in Elian's throat. There was no menace in the words, only a raw, possessive need. "Every breathless cry, every shudder of rapture – it's mine."

Rael's hand slipped between their bodies, calloused fingers wrapping around Elian's weeping length. A broken moan tore from Elian's lips at the delicious friction, his hips surging up to drive into Rael's tight fist.

"That's it, my mate," Rael purred, voice a dark rasp edged with sin. "Let me hear those pretty noises."

The coil of tension in Elian's belly wound tighter with every brutal snap of Rael's

hips, every twist of his wrist. He could feel that razor's edge looming ever nearer, the promise of release singing in his veins.

"Rael," he gasped, his voice a ragged whisper. "I'm... I'm going to..."

Rael's only response was a low, possessive growl as he slammed into Elian with renewed vigor. The sound of their bodies coming together in a primal rhythm sent shivers racing down Elian's spine, his body trembling with the force of his impending release.

And then it hit him, a tidal wave of pleasure that crashed over him and swept him away. Elian's back arched off the sleeping pallet, a keening cry tearing from his lips as he came, his release painting his chest with warm, sticky ropes.

Rael's own climax followed, a low, guttural roar tearing from his throat as he filled Elian with his seed. The sensation of being claimed, of being marked as Rael's mate, sent another wave of pleasure crashing through Elian, leaving him boneless and utterly spent.

Or so he thought.

Elian's body trembled as Rael pulled out of him, the spent cock slipping from his well-used hole with a wet sound that left him feeling utterly debased. He could feel the Borraq's seed beginning to drip down his thighs.

But before he could even catch his breath, Rael was replacing his spent cock with his other, still-hard length. Elian whimpered at the sensation, his overstimulated body protesting even as his desire spiked anew. "R-Rael..."

"I told you — I intend to make up for all those days spent away from you." Rael's eyes blazed with a possessive hunger as he slid back into Elian's come-filled hole.

The Borraq's hips snapped forward with a brutal intensity, driving his second cock deep into Elian's quivering body.

Elian could only moan and cling to Rael's powerful form, his nails digging into the golden skin as the Borraq fucked him with a relentless, primal need. Every thrust sent sparks of pleasure racing through his body, his overstimulated nerves singing with delight.

"Mine," Rael growled against Elian's ear, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers racing down Elian's spine. "You're mine, Elian. My mate, my lover, my everything."

Elian could only whimper his agreement, utterly lost to the maelstrom of sensation. He could feel Rael's second cock throbbing inside him, the thick length filling him to the brim as the Borraq neared his climax.

And then it hit him, a tidal wave of pleasure that crashed over him and swept him away. Elian's back arched off the sleeping pallet, his heels crossing behind Rael's back, pulling him in deep.

Rael's hips stuttered as he emptied himself into Elian's quivering body, his grip on Elian's hips tightening almost painfully. Elian could feel the warmth of Rael's seed filling him again, the sensation sending another wave of pleasure crashing through him.

When it was over, Rael collapsed onto Elian's sweat-slicked form, his chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath. Elian could feel Rael's heart pounding against his own, the steady rhythm a comforting reminder that they were still alive.

For a moment, they lay there in silence, their bodies entwined as they basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking. Elian's heart swelled as he gazed up at Rael, his mate. A sense of peace settled over him.

The rest of the galaxy might be against them, but they had each other, and that was all that mattered.

Rael's eyes softened as he looked down at Elian, his powerful chest still heaving from the aftershocks of their lovemaking. He brushed a stray lock of hair from Elian's forehead, his touch gentle and tender.

"I love you, Elian," he murmured, his voice low and rough with emotion.

Elian's heart skipped a beat at the words, and he felt a lump form in his throat. He had never thought he would hear those words from anyone, let alone from an alien who had once captured him and held him captive.

"I love you too, Rael," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

Rael's lips curved into a small smile, and he leaned down to press a soft kiss to Elian's lips. Elian's arms wrapped around Rael's neck, pulling him closer as they deepened the kiss.

As they lay there in each other's arms, the rest of the galaxy faded away until there was only the two of them, wrapped up in their own little world. It was a world that was filled with love and warmth, and it was a world that Elian never intended to leave.

CHAPTER ONE

The mining ship was a rustbucket.

No, that was an insult to rustbuckets. This thing looked like it had been slapped together in a junkyard by a drunk toddler. Rhys had seen some desperate mining operations in his time, but this one took the cake.

Ahead of him, the thick, turbulent clouds of Vasz swirled. Lightning flickered within them, a dance of energy that was equal parts beautiful and terrifying. The planet was living up to its fierce reputation.

The ship shook as it hit the upper edges of the atmosphere, and Rhys's stomach lurched. He'd been on enough mining runs to know that they weren't exactly pleasure cruises, but this... This was something else.

"You're new," a voice said.

Rhys tore his gaze away from the impending doom outside the window and looked to his left. A grizzled man was watching him, leaning against the wall. "Yeah," Rhys said, even though it hadn't been a question.

The man was Jak, according to the patch on his jacket. Rhys hadn't exactly had a meet and greet with the crew. In the dingy, cramped corridors of Station Sittella, someone he'd owed money to had told him that a crew were looking for a good pair of hands and a mouth that could stay shut. Rhys had needed the money. That was that.

And now he was here, above a planet.

Above Vasz.

If Rhys had known that they'd be taking him here, he'd have run in the opposite direction.

Jak grinned at him. "Don't worry, kid. We pull this off, there's plenty of riches to go around for everyone."

It was clearly a line that he'd delivered a dozen times before. Rhys swallowed. The man was offering him reassurance, but the very fact that he felt the need to offer it was unsettling. Rhys might be new to illegal mining, but he wasn't a fool.

Desperation was so thick in the air, you could practically taste it. He needed this. He needed the money, and he needed it fast.

But the deeper he got involved, the more it felt like a trap.

"Trust me, kid," Jak said, leaning over and slapping Rhys on the back hard enough to jolt him. "We'll slip in and out without a single horned bastard knowing a thing, and when we get the good stuff back to human space, you won't regret it."

Rhys only managed a weak smile in response.

The ship shook violently as it punched through the last layers of the atmosphere, and Rhys's teeth clacked together. He was going to have to be careful about not chipping them. He couldn't afford another expense, another thing to worry about.

He was already going to the one place in the universe that a human shouldn't go.

"Lightning out here can reach temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun," another voice said. "It'll flash-fry you in an instant. And that's if the wildlife doesn't get you first."

Rhys turned to see Lila, the ship's medic, in her chair. Unlike the rest of the crew, he had already been introduced to her — she'd looked him over like he was an old spaceship ready for the scrapyard, then had ticked his paperwork with a terse nod.

She was a striking woman, with her sharp cheekbones and sharper eyes. She was speaking coolly, considering the subject matter that she was talking about — and the planet they were plunging towards.

"Once we land, don't do anything stupid," she said, lazily tapping her fingers against the armrest of her seat. It was a casual movement, as if she didn't even realize that she was doing it. "Between the storms, the native predators, and the risk of mining accidents... Don't leave us one man down."

She drawled the words as if she was talking about nothing more serious than the weather, but there was something sharp underneath her nonchalant demeanor.

"You've been there and back before? How?"

She didn't give anything away. "The Borraq aren't omniscient. If you want something bad enough, there's a way."

There was something bitter in her voice. Rhys looked out the viewport, not really seeing the storm-tossed clouds.

Borraq. Huge, horned aliens, with sharp teeth and muscles like rocks. The rumors about them, about what they did with the humans they captured... it wasn't worth thinking about.

Humans and Borraq had been at war for years. The Borraq home planet was deeply out of bounds for humans.

And now, this ship was going behind enemy lines.

The ship screamed as it tore through the atmosphere, metal protesting at the punishment. Rhys had been on enough space flights to know that re-entry was no gentle affair, but this... This was something else. It felt like the entire vessel was going to tear itself apart around them.

"Hey," he yelled to Jak, raising his voice to be heard over the racket. "How are we going to get this tin can back up again after we land?"

Jak grinned. "It's supposed to be like this. We want it to look like space garbage on the Borraq monitors, so they don't know we're in here. Don't worry, kid. Another ship is gonna pick us up when we're done."

Rhys's heart thundered in his chest. Once they were down, they had to rely on someone else to save them? That didn't sit right with him. He was used to saving his own hide.

But it wasn't like he had a choice.

"Here we go," the ship's pilot said, completely unconcerned. "Taking her down. Ten, nine, eight..."

The pilot's words cut through the chaos like a knife. Rhys looked to him, wide-eyed. The pilot — Cillian — was a man with a no-nonsense air about him, his face set into a mask of concentration. He was clearly focused on his job, and his job was stopping them from meeting a fiery death.

Settling a spaceship onto a planet's surface was an affair that took skill and precision. Rhys had seen plenty of pilots do it, their hands moving on their controls with the grace of dancers. It was always a moment of calm at the end of a white-knuckled journey, a gentle confirmation that they had survived the worst of space travel and were now safely home.

This was not like those moments.

The ship slammed into the ground hard enough to nearly tear Rhys from his safety harness. He yelped, his teeth rattling in his skull.

"Down," Cillian said, completely unruffled. The man was like human Xanax. "Get moving, all."

They were on Vasz.

In the belly of the beast.

As everyone unbuckled themselves, moving with hushed tension, Jak clapped Rhys on the shoulder. "Don't worry, kid," he said. "You just focus on how much money you're going to make."

He didn't know why Jak bothered. There was no turning back now. He was in too deep.

Desperation, thy name is Rhys.

He swallowed down his rising panic, and tried to focus on the one thing that had driven him to this madness in the first place: money. He was going to get those numbers in his account, and then he was going to pay off his debts.

He was going to start a new life, one finally free of the crushing weight of debt.

One where he was free to be himself.

When the ship's doors began to open, a blast of hot, acrid air hit Rhys in the face. Despite the chill that ran down his spine, he could feel a wave of eager anticipation sweep through the other miners.

He could have his freedom if he just persevered through this hell. The money would be his before he knew it, and then he'd be set for life.

Rhys grit his teeth. This was only temporary.

Soon, he'd be free.

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Taryn knelt in the deep, silent wilderness, surrounded by nothing but the rustling of leaves and the distant calls of unseen animals. Before him was a small, carefully balanced tower of three stones, each picked from the earth and placed there by his own hands.

The three stones represented the three worlds: the world of the gods, the world of the dead, and the world that lay between them both. As a Borraq warrior, Taryn stood in that last world, serving as a bridge between the dead and the divine.

He bowed his head.

Rael's clan of Borraq were proud to live in their territory, with customs that stretched back thousands of years. Taryn was proud to be one of them, and he was proud to follow their customs. In a modern galaxy, full of technology and ever-shifting alliances, the Borraq offered something solid and unchanging. The customs were the same as they had always been, just as unyielding as the mountains that stretched through their lands.

Not all Borraq lived like this.

Taryn closed his eyes, and for just a moment, the world around him was replaced by a different sight.

He was on a battlefield, the air thick with the stench of blood and the sounds of men dying. Airen, his older brother, was at his side, just as he had always been in those terrible days. Together, they had fought in the Borraq's war against the humans, cutting down their enemies with their blades.

And then, in a moment that had stretched on for an eternity, his brother was falling. Taryn had turned too late,

He'd screamed in pain. But there had been no one to answer. There was nothing in that moment except for the chaos of battle, the roaring of the humans, and the weight of a dead man in Taryn's arms.

Taryn's jaw tightened. He opened his eyes and shook his head, banishing the memory.

He reached for a flask at his side and poured a libation, offering it to the world of the spirits. The sweet scent of it filled the air, a heady mix of honey and something sharper. It was enough to please any spirit — and he knew that Airen would appreciate it.

Taryn carefully put the flask back at his side and bowed his head again. Despite the solemnity of the moment, his mouth twitched in a suppressed smile. Don't imbibe too deeply, brother. Your singing would make the other spirits rage.

He raised a hand to the world of the dead, and then he bowed his head. The ritual was complete.

Taryn allowed himself a few moments of peace, and then he stood. It was time to head back to his charges.

Today, they were on the far-flung wilds of their territory's eastern side, deep in the jungle. He had been accompanying four potential young warriors through the wilderness for a few weeks, teaching them everything they'd need to know to grow up into full-fledged warriors and make their clan proud. Bushcraft, resilience, foraging, tracking — he was filling their empty little heads with all that he knew.

Training the young ones was a task that made the other warriors groan. Hunting

beasts and tracking outlaws: now that was where the glory was, not guiding gangly, not-yet-grown Borraq.

But Taryn had volunteered.

Taryn loved his clan. He loved his people, and he loved his place among them, in the village deep in the heart of their lands.

And that love was exactly why he was out here, as far away from that village as possible — and from one creature in particular.

Taryn rose from the ritual clearing, the scent of honey and spice still hanging in the air. He took a deep breath, steeling himself against the ache that lingered in his chest. The ritual had provided its usual measure of solace, but some wounds never fully healed.

His brother's death at the hands of the humans still burned like an open wound. Each time Taryn closed his eyes, he was transported back to that fateful battlefield, cradling his brother's broken body. If only he'd turned a little faster, been a little more aware...

The memory haunted him.

And that was why the presence of the human cut so deeply.

Rael, his clan leader, had seen fit to take a human as a mate. A human! He'd found the creature after a ship had crashed, leaving Elian the last survivor. Instead of killing Elian, Rael had let the scrawny, pale-skinned creature join the clan.

Taryn's jaw clenched. How could Rael accept a human, knowing what they were doing to their kin on the front lines of the war? Didn't Rael understand the threat the humans posed?

Elia's shock of unruly curls and slight frame seemed almost laughable compared to the imposing physiques of the Borraq warriors. Rael seemed utterly in love, doting on the human and indulging his every whim.

Calling Elia his mate.

It made Taryn's stomach churn.

That was why Taryn had volunteered to lead the patrol of young warriors to the farthest reaches of their lands. He needed to put as much distance as possible between himself and the human, lest his simmering rage boil over into open defiance of Rael's foolish decision.

As Taryn made his way back towards the encampment, he couldn't help but steal furtive glances over his shoulder. Out here, among the towering mountains and ancient forests, he felt at peace. This was the true heart of their world, the realm where a Borraq's warrior spirit could roam free.

He would protect these lands with every fiber of his being, no matter the cost.

The humans had already taken too much from him. He would not allow them to take anything more.

"Taryn! You're done already?" When Taryn returned to the camp, his young charges greeted him with a mix of respect and eager excitement.

They were a good group of lads: Jorah, with his easy grin and quick wit; Krye, who was always the first to spot any movement in the wilderness; Worrak, who had a growing sense for strategy despite his brash exterior; and Soren, the youngest of the group, who was eager to prove himself.

They were a handful, but Taryn wouldn't have traded them for anything. In their

youthful overconfidence, he saw echoes of every Borraq warrior who had come before them. They were the future of the clan.

And besides, they kept things interesting. As they prepared for their daily patrol, the air was filled with their banter. "I bet I could take down a karantha with just my dagger," Jorah boasted. "Two, even."

Krye rolled his eyes. "Yeah, good luck getting close enough to one to actually use your dagger. But I'll have already put an arrow through its eye by the time you get within a hundred paces!"

"Enough boasting," Taryn said, though his lips twitched with the effort to keep a straight face. "The karantha are necessary for the forest. It's not our place to seek out conflict with them. We're here to protect the land from any outside threats that might come to harm them, not to act as hunters."

"Aww, come on," Jorah said with a grin. "You're no fun, Taryn."

Taryn watched his warriors as they chattered and teased each other, a fond smile playing at his lips. They were a good group. Under his command, they would grow into fine warriors. They already had the raw materials of strength and skill; it was just a matter of honing that, teaching them when to act and when to hold back, guiding them as they matured into their roles.

As they set out into the wilderness, Taryn kept his eyes on his charges. Jorah was quick to boast and quicker to laugh, always the first to break the silence with a joke. Krye rolled his eyes at Jorah's antics, but a small smile tugged at his lips. He was a good boy, with a keen eye for the wilderness. Soren was thoughtful, his eyes scanning the surroundings as he considered strategies. Worrak was the most eager of the group, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement at the day's adventure.

The deep, ancient heart of the clan's territory was a place of peace. Out here, there were no enemies to face, no battles to fight. It was the perfect training ground. Here, the young warriors could learn to track any creature that dared to threaten the clan's lands, to identify any potential foes, to understand the lay of the land and the creatures that called it home.

Here, they could learn to be true guardians of the land.

Taryn wasn't expecting any real danger on this mission. The lands were deep and wild, yes, full of creatures that could be deadly to an unprepared traveler — but nothing out of the ordinary. The truly most dangerous things on the planet were Borraq without clans, but those bounty hunters and lone wolves preferred sulking around outposts and cities, looking for cheap thrills and easy marks instead of trekking through deep jungle.

It was just a simple quest for training, that was all. A time to be spent in the heart of the wilderness, far from the encampment, far from clan politics and the weight of Taryn's own personal frustrations.

A time for peace.

Taryn frowned as he looked at a set of broken branches, the leaves around them crushed. It was a thick, sturdy tree, its branches not easily bent. Whatever had passed through here had done so with force.

The young warriors didn't notice anything amiss. They were too busy laughing and joking, their eyes looking for excitement, not tracks.

Taryn's hand tightened on the hilt of his blade. "Pause."

Despite their chatter, the boys were well-trained. They fell silent and turned to face him, their eyes expectant.

He pointed at the disturbed tree. "Look here. The branches are broken, and the leaves around them are crushed. Whatever passed through here did so with force."

The young warriors inspected the site, their faces thoughtful. "It's not a zytha's trail," Krye said. "I don't see any tracks."

Soren looked annoyed, like Taryn was teasing him with a too-hard riddle. "I give up. What made it?"

"I don't know," Taryn said.

Then they all heard it: the distant, unmistakable sound of machinery.