



Third (Intergalactic Warriors #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A warrior bound by logic. A woman driven by heart. A bond neither can escape.

Tor'Vek has always relied on logic and discipline to guide his path as an Intergalactic Warrior. A brilliant scientist and medic, he believes in precision, control, and keeping his emotions at bay. But when he's captured by the ruthless Selyr and forced to choose between six human captives, everything changes. One woman stands out—not for her strength or cunning—but for the calm in her gaze that speaks of unyielding resolve.

Anya never expected to survive the nightmare that was Selyr's domain.

Stripped of everything, she clings to the memory of her twin sister, the one person she swore to protect. When Tor'Vek chooses her to save her life, she senses a deeper connection between them, though he seems determined to resist it. But fate has other plans.

When ancient bracelets of unknown origin bind them together, Tor'Vek and Anya find themselves ensnared in a connection that transcends logic and reason. As the bond deepens, emotions that Tor'Vek has spent a lifetime suppressing threaten to consume him—and Anya discovers that her heart may not survive loving a warrior who refuses to accept what's between them.

But the dangers they face are greater than either of them imagined.

With Selyr's twisted experiments and a galaxy full of enemies closing in, Tor'Vek and Anya must learn to trust the unbreakable connection between them—or risk losing more than their freedom. They risk losing each other.

Third is a steamy, heart-pounding sci-fi romance filled with forbidden desire, intense action, and a love that defies the stars. Perfect for fans of strong, alpha warriors, fierce heroines, and the unrelenting pull of destiny.

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Chapter1

SIX WOMEN. One choice.

Tor'Vek stood motionless, his posture upright, the steel-cold weight of the restraints pressing against his wrists. The metal bit into his skin, a mechanical vise designed to remind him of his current powerlessness. For now, he could only wait, assess, calculate.

In addition to the restrictive cuffs, the scientist he'd come to kill, Selyr, had forced a bracelet around his left arm. Metallic and intricately designed, it had small jewels embedded along its surface, no doubt part of the control system.

The bracelet pulsed, a low but persistent sound emitting from it, a resonance that seemed to sink into Tor'Vek's bones. A surge of heat rippled from the band on his wrist, spreading upward through his arm, and into his chest like a living force.

He ignored it. His mind was focused, his objective clear: eliminate Selyr.

The chamber was dimly lit, a stark contrast to the harsh glare of the six women kneeling before him. They shivered, some crying, some staring blankly into nothing. Others trembled so violently their muscles could no longer hold them upright. None of it mattered. Not to him.

He was an Intergalactic Warrior, conditioned beyond the primitive struggles of fear, hunger, or weakness. This moment—this ridiculous spectacle Selyr had devised—was nothing more than an obstacle between him and his mission.

And yet...

His gaze swept over the women, methodical and detached. They were all human. Soft, delicate creatures, foreign to the brutal landscapes of war. He cataloged them automatically:

One sobbed openly, her face buried in her hands.

Another whispered desperate prayers to a deity that did not exist beyond her world.

The third was frozen, her gaze unfocused, her mind fractured beyond repair.

But the fourth—

His dark eyes locked onto her. She alone met his gaze, her expression impossibly calm. A composed facade. She sat straight, her breathing steady, the golden cascade of her hair spilling in perfect waves down to her waist.

Tor'Vek narrowed his eyes slightly. Was she like him? Logical. Controlled. Intelligent. He had spent centuries analyzing individuals, categorizing them based on their efficiency, their predictability. Weakness was transparent. Chaos was disorder.

Yet, her expression did not match the hysteria of the others. Was she calculating her next move? Weighing her odds? The alternative was that she was merely suppressing panic, but that seemed unlikely. It had to be something more.

It was the only reasonable explanation.

His choice was made.

“I choose her.”

His voice was even, absolute. He gestured to the blonde.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a cold, knowing chuckle echoed from the shadows.

Selyr.

The scientist stepped forward, his lean frame wrapped in a high-collared coat, his yellow eyes gleaming with curiosity. His silver-gray hair was swept back, lending him an air of detached precision. “Fascinating choice, Tor’Vek,” he mused, tilting his head. “Do you believe she is like you? Cold, calculated, rational?” A pause. “Or is this an experiment of your own?”

Tor’Vek said nothing. Selyr’s interest was meaningless.

“Well then.” Selyr smiled thinly and gestured toward the guards. “Dispose of the others.”

The blonde stiffened beside him. She had not moved, not spoken, but a violent tremor ran through her. Then, with a sudden, desperate motion, she lunged forward. “No!” Her voice cracked as she stumbled, reaching toward the others as though sheer will could pull them from their fate. The guards were faster, shoving her back before she could take more than a step.

Tor’Vek caught her reflexively, his hands firm but impersonal as he steadied her. She trembled against his hold, her breath ragged, her body tensed as though she might try again.

His mind calculated the inefficiency of her action. A futile attempt. But his chest tightened regardless. The bracelet at his wrist thrummed, the sensation curling beneath his skin like an echo of something foreign.

She was not like him.

He ignored it.

Selyr let out a slow, mocking sigh, stepping further into the room. “Ah, Tor’Vek. You are a model of restraint, as always. But let’s make things more interesting, shall we? Since you two are now... connected, perhaps introductions are in order.”

He turned to the human first, his yellow eyes gleaming with amusement. “This, my dear, is Tor’Vek. A warrior, a scientist, a man so disciplined he’s convinced himself he is beyond the primitive urges that define lesser beings. An exemplar of control. Unyielding. Cold. Until now.”

His smirk widened as he shifted his gaze to Tor’Vek. “And this, Tor’Vek, is Anya. A human—soft, emotional, entirely ruled by her instincts. Protective, as you saw earlier. A survivor, no doubt, but hardly your equal. Oh, but that’s the fun of it, isn’t it? Opposites attract, or so they say.”

Selyr chuckled, taking a slow step forward, his gaze flicking between them with unveiled amusement. “She is fragile in all the ways you are not. An open book of emotions, fear and hope tangled together in an ever-shifting display. And yet, here she stands. A little broken, perhaps, but resilient. I do wonder, Tor’Vek, how long before that cold shell of yours cracks in her presence.”

He turned slightly, addressing Anya now, his tone dripping with feigned sympathy. “And you, my dear, have found yourself bound to a warrior who believes himself untouchable. What a predicament. Will you adapt? Or will you shatter?” He tapped a finger against his chin, as though considering. “A fascinating question, wouldn’t you say?”

Selyr let his gaze linger on them a moment longer before exhaling in exaggerated

satisfaction. “Ah, but we’ll find out soon enough. The two of you, forced together, bonded in ways neither of you understand yet. This is going to be delightful to watch.”

Shortly after, Tor’Vek was led to a private chamber, the human at his side. His restraints were removed and the door sealed behind them, muffling the sound of retreating footsteps. The air in the chamber was stale, thick with the weight of unspoken words and uncertain fates. The stark walls bore no indication of time or purpose, save for the dull hum of hidden machinery embedded within them. He took in the details with a practiced eye, noting every seam, every potential weakness. But his attention was drawn back to the woman beside him, her breathing uneven, her presence unsettling in ways he did not fully understand.

She exhaled sharply, as though she had been holding her breath for an eternity. Her arms wrapped around herself, fingers pressing into her skin as though she could contain the tremors racking her frame. Her breath hitched, uneven. “They’re gone,” she whispered, the words barely more than a breath. “They were just—” She stopped, swallowing hard, blinking rapidly. “I tried... I should have done something. I should have fought harder for the other women.”

Her hands clenched into fists, her nails digging into her palms as if the pain could stabilize her. She turned her gaze toward him, her light blue eyes darkened with something deeper than fear—grief, raw and unfiltered. A choked sound escaped her, half-swallowed before it could fully form. The weight of loss pressed down on her, her body trembling with the effort of holding it in.

“You just stood there,” she accused softly, a tremor beneath the words, anger and sorrow tangled together. “You didn’t even flinch. Do they mean nothing to you?”

Tor’Vek regarded her in silence. Her reaction was inefficient, illogical. And yet, beneath the carefully maintained walls of his mind, the bracelet pulsed again,

asensation curling inside him, unfamiliar and unbidden.

His gaze flicked toward her, assessing.

Anatomically, she was unharmed. No visible injuries. No immediate signs of malnutrition. But the telltale tightness in her muscles, the way she clenched her fists, the rapid rise and fall of her chest—

“Are you unwell?”

The question came out clinically, but it was a question, nonetheless.

She snapped her gaze toward him, startled. Her eyes—deep with emotion—searched his face, as though trying to decipher whether he was mockingher.

“I...” She swallowed, the sound barely audible. “Idon’tknow.”

Her voice was soft. Strained. Fragile.

She was not like him. Unfortunate.

Tor’Vek turned, scanning the room. It was stark but functional. Asleeping platform, awater source, and a control panel embedded in the far wall. No immediate exits beyond the sealeddoor.

He retrieved a container of water, then hesitated. His gaze flicked to her again.

She was still naked.

It was... inefficient.

Without a word, he stripped off his black shirt and extended it to her. “This will regulate your body temperature.” It was a practical decision. Clothing was a necessary barrier against the chill of the chamber, nothing more. And yet, as she hesitated before taking it, a strange sense of obligation stirred within him—an instinct he did not recognize. He ignored it, as he ignored all distractions, but the bracelet at his wrist pulsed, as if aware of the anomaly in his thoughts.

Her fingers trembled as she took it, her breath hitching. “Thank you.”

He did not respond.

The bracelet pulsed again. A sharp, insistent hum against his skin.

Once again, he ignored it.

A few hours later, the door slid open. Selyr entered, his expression alight with scientific intrigue. “Settling in?” His focus turned to Tor’Vek. “You may be pleased to know that the bracelet has paused your Final Flight.”

“What is Final Flight?” Anya asked.

“It is the final stage of life for an Intergalactic Warrior” Selyr answered readily enough. “They experience horrific heat flashes until they eventually incinerate themselves and anyone unfortunate enough to be nearby. That won’t happen as long as he wears the bracelet.”

Tor’Vek’s jaw locked. “You toy with forces you do not understand,” he said, voice cold enough to crack titanium. “Your experiments will kill you long before they kill me.”

Selyr ignored the comment, his gaze flicking toward the bracelet. “Ah, but you still

believe you are in control, don't you?" He pressed a setting on the device he held.

The bracelet burned.

Tor'Vek did not make a sound, but his jaw locked as an explosive pressure detonated in his chest and surged outward through every nerve. It was not pain. It was fury.

Raw, red, all-consuming rage.

He staggered back a half-step, fists clenching at his sides as his breath came faster. Something inside him—something cold and ancient—snapped its restraints.

His eyes locked on the wall. He wanted to destroy it. Crush it. Tear it apart until nothing remained but dust and ruin. His pulse thundered in his ears, his muscles tensed, his vision edged with heat.

Anya's breathing hitched. "What's happening to him?"

Selyr's smile sharpened. "Ah. There it is. Rage, Intergalactic Warrior. Magnificent, is it not? The oldest instinct of your kind—aggression, barely buried beneath all that logic."

Tor'Vek's body trembled with his attempt to control it. His hands opened, closed, opened again. Every breath became a battle.

Selyr altered another setting. The fury intensified.

"Stop," Anya whispered, voice raw. She stepped forward instinctively, reaching out before catching herself. "Whatever you're doing to him, stop."

"Fascinating, isn't it?" Selyr mused, as detached as ever. "How quickly bonds form,

even when only one side wears the chain.”

Tor’Vek dropped to one knee, bracing his hand against the floor, jaw clenched hard enough to crack bone. The bracelet seared like a brand, its pulse a war drum in his blood. Control. Control. Control .

Selyr finally, mercifully, deactivated the setting. The burning rage eased—but it didn’t vanish. It curled inside him like a sleeping beast.

Tor’Vek exhaled through his nose, sweat beading at his brow. He had not lashed out. He had not surrendered.

But he had come close.

Selyr stepped toward Anya. “Now, let’s complete the set,” he murmured. Before she could recoil, he seized her wrist and swept it against Tor’Vek’s bracelet. Instantly a matching bracelet appeared on her wrist, glowing in synchronization.

She let out a sharp cry, yanking her arm back. The moment their bracelets linked, the pulse between them intensified, alive current that threaded rage across a fragile bridge of connection.

Tor’Vek stiffened. The bond was active. He could feel her now—confusion, fear, resistance—and beneath it, aspark of something deeper: sympathy.

Anya gasped, her body rocking with the force of the emotional surge. For a moment, she looked as if she might collapse.

Selyr’s yellow eyes gleamed. “Ah... much better. Let us see how long you last, Tor’Vek. Or rather, how long your companion lasts.”

With a flick of his fingers, he reactivated the rage setting on Tor’Vek’s bracelet. The effect was instantaneous. Tor’Vek’s muscles tensed like coiled steel, the fury surging through him again like a molten current.

Anya jerked in place, flinching as though struck—not from pain, but from the intensity radiating off him. Her own bracelet pulsed, but she felt no rage herself. Only the echo of his. It poured into her senses like a violent tide, foreign and monstrous and terrifying in its magnitude.

She stared at him, breath caught in her throat, overwhelmed by the sheer force of what he was holding back. It was unbearable and she could sense how hard he fought not to give in to the overwhelmingfury.

Selyr’s boots echoed as he turned and walked away, the door hissing shut behindhim.

Silencefell.

Tor’Vek stood motionless, trembling from the effort it took not to destroy something. Anything.

Anya didn’t move either, keeping her distance, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. “What the hell wasthat?”

He didn’t look at her. “Anger,” he said hoarsely. “Amplified. Unrelenting.”

She swallowed hard. “You looked like you wanted to kill something.”

“Ido.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself, edging backward toward the corner of the chamber, breath shaking. “Idon’t know what these bracelets do,” she said, voice

tight with defiance, “but I saw the way you looked at me. Whatever this is, whatever it’s making you feel—I’m not going to let you hurt me. Or attack me. Or fuck me. I’ll fight you to the death if I have to.”

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Chapter2

ANYA DIDN'T MOVE . Couldn't. Not with the way Tor'Vek was staring at her.

His chest heaved like he'd just run a marathon, his jaw clenched so tight she could see the cords in his neck twitch. The violet light in his eyes, faint at first, had grown into something eerie, something mesmerizing. Something alive.

She backed herself into a corner instinctively. Her entire body braced, heart pounding against her ribs like it was trying to flee first. She didn't think—she just moved, retreating until cold metal kissed her spine. Her brain was still trying to rationalize, to make sense of what she'd seen, but her body had already decided.

Getaway.

He wasn't just unpredictable. He wasn't just angry.

He was dangerous.

Not in a maybe-he'll-snap kind of way. In a primal, teeth-bared, alpha-predator way. Like something ancient and violent had surfaced, slashing through layers of training and logic with terrifying clarity. It wasn't just that he couldn't stop it. Some part of him didn't want to. Whatever had broken free inside him wasn't entirely foreign. It had roots. A place. A name he might've once whispered to himself before burying it deep. And now it was here—unchained, unfiltered, unafraid.

“Stay back,” she said, holding up a hand. Useless. He didn't even glance at it.

He took one slow step forward. Then another.

“If I want to kill you,” he said, voice low and full of gravel, “I will.”

Her breath caught.

His eyes glinted with something savage, a flicker of heat and warning that made the tiny hairs on her neck rise.

“And if I want to fuck you,” he growled, “I definitely will.”

Her stomach flipped. Not from desire, but from pure adrenaline. The kind that turned muscles to stone and instincts to knives. Her entire body screamed at her to run, to escape, to survive. She didn’t know what the bracelet did to him—or what it had awakened—but whatever now stood in front of her wasn’t just Tor’Vek.

It was a weapon barely sheathed in flesh.

And it saw her.

Then everything exploded.

He didn’t just pace the room—he obliterated it. Tor’Vek moved like a storm unleashed from centuries of discipline. One massive hand ripped a section of the control panel from the wall, wires sparking like veins torn open. He hurled the twisted hunk of metal across the chamber with a roar that seemed too raw, terrifyingly inhuman. The lights flickered violently, casting strobe-like flashes across his face, warping his features into something feral.

He tore a bulkhead covering from the ceiling, flinging it aside like paper. Another console shattered under his boot. Metal shrieked, groaned, surrendered.

There was no pattern to his destruction—only power, wild and unchecked, flaring from him like a solar eruption. It wasn't calculated. It wasn't methodical. It was pure instinct wrapped in muscle and rage, and it filled the room like smoke, choking everything else out.

"This emotion is illogical," he snapped, throwing a chair so hard it embedded into the wall. "It is chemical. It is nothing but fire in the blood. I will master it!"

But he didn't. He couldn't.

The mattress tore under his grip. The frame followed. A metal panel clanged to the floor, dented and useless. Anya flinched at every crash, packed tight into the furthest corner of the chamber, heart racing, arms wrapped around herself.

He spun on her. Fast. Eyes still glowing, breath ragged.

"Stay away from me," she said, voice shaking.

He stalked forward.

She scrambled sideways, hugging the curve of the wall, her breath shallow and fast. Every time she shifted, he adjusted with her—step for step, a mirrored shadow. His head tilted slightly, tracking her with the same predatory precision he'd used moments ago to tear the room apart. There was no rush in his approach, no sudden lunge. Just the unnerving certainty that he would not stop. Wherever she went, he would follow.

"I said stay back!"

She hated how her voice trembled. Hated how cornered she felt. Her words rang out sharp and defiant, but underneath them throbbed a current of terror so deep it made

her breath ache in her chest. She wasn't just trying to hold him off, she was trying to remind herself she still had some kind of power, some sliver of control. But it was slipping. Fast. And she could see it in his eyes. He wasn't listening. Or maybe he was listening toomuch.

He wants something, her mind whispered. And you don't know if it's to break you, or takeyou.

"I cannot."

The words came out like gravel ground between his teeth. He wasn't trying to intimidate her now. This was something closer to a confession, as brutal and unrelenting as everything else about him. An admission he didn't want to make but couldn't help. As if the very thought of choosing to stop himself felt like alie.

Something in his expression flickered, almost like apology, but it was gone before it could takeroot.

Another step. Then another. He was close enough now she could feel the heat radiating off his skin, intense and invasive, like standing too close to an open flame. The air seemed to shimmer between them, thick with pressure and something primal. The bond between them pulsed like a second heartbeat, stronger now, louder. A low thrum that seemed to echo in her bones, warning her and supporting her all at once. It felt ancient. Alive. And terrifyingly sentient.

"I do not want this," he said. "I do not want to need you."

The words came out in a snarl, like they pained him even as he admitted them. There was too much truth in them. Too much weight. His hands flexed at his sides, then curled into fists again. His jaw worked like he was chewing on glass.

Her back hit the wall.

He stopped inches from her, breathing hard.

The violet light in his eyes flickered, straining against itself, barely reined in. For a heartbeat, it looked like he might lash out, or maybe crumple under the force of whatever was unraveling inside him.

And then—

The rage inside him dipped.

It wasn't immediate. It was like a dam that cracked, one hairline fracture at a time. He froze, muscles locking, something behind his eyes shifting as if the storm had paused mid-strike.

She blinked, confused, watching the fury drain from his expression like water down a sink. It was as if someone had thrown a switch—his face stilled, his shoulders eased—but only just, as if the beast inside him had taken one step back and was still watching, waiting, the coiled tension in his body easing one ragged breath at a time. Not gone, not healed. But less. Like the heat had been turned down from a boil to a simmer. And he stood there, frozen, staring at her like he couldn't quite believe it either.

“What—?” she whispered.

Tor'Vek didn't answer. He closed the last bit of distance between them and yanked her into his arms.

Anya struggled immediately, hands braced against his chest, heart hammering against her ribs. “Don't— Don't touch me—” Her voice cracked with fear and confusion,

muscles tensing as she tried to shove him away. But it was like pushing against a wall of heat and steel. His grip wasn't cruel, but it was immovable, like even the idea of letting her go was unthinkable to him now.

"I am not going to hurt you," he said, voice rough but steady. "I need to touch you."

She shook her head, trying to twist out of his grip. "I don't understand."

"The bracelet," he said. "Use it. Feel it. Do you feel it lessen?"

She went still. Her pulse thundered in her ears as she focused, not on her panic, not on the way his arms locked around her like steel, but on what she felt through the bracelet. It wasn't just calming him. It was softening something deeper. As though the fire inside him wasn't extinguished, but drawn into embers, manageable only through contact.

She didn't want to understand that. Didn't want to know that the fire burning inside him—violent, uncontrollable, terrifying—could be tamed by something as simple and intimate as her touch. Didn't want to believe that her presence mattered. Because if it did, she wasn't just surviving this. She was becoming a part of it. She was being written into his need, into his balance, into the very way he held himself together.

It wasn't just his grip that had changed. It was everything. The tension between them had shifted, tilted. The emotional pressure that had been flooding off him—burning, suffocating—was no longer crushing her. It receded like a tide pulling back from the shore, exposing raw ground beneath. Her skin still tingled from the force of it, like a storm had just passed through and left her rattled but standing. She could feel him, still smoldering with fury, but the edges were dulled. Contained. Not by his will, but by something deeper. Something connected directly to her.

She didn't know how. She didn't know why. But in that moment, with her trapped in his arms and his breathing finally slowing, she knew one thing with startling clarity:

She was the only thing keeping him from going over the edge.

She sucked in a breath, disoriented.

The rage hadn't disappeared, but it had retreated. She felt his control returning.

Her heartbeat slowed just a bit.

He exhaled. The warmth of it grazed her cheek, unifying and strange. His body remained rigid, jaw tight with residual tension, but the tremble had vanished from his hands. It wasn't full control. He was still bracing against the storm. But something vital had shifted. Aman like him didn't yield, not even to himself. But right now, he wasn't breaking. He was bending. And for a warrior like Tor'Vek, that was far more telling.

"The closer I get to you," he said quietly, "the easier it is to think."

Her hands hovered between them, not touching but not pushing either. "This is insane."

She didn't mean the bond, though yes, that was insane too. She meant all of it. The way he clung to her like a lifeline. The way her touch had actually calmed him, like she was some kind of lightning rod for a raging storm.

Nothing about this made sense, and yet the evidence was undeniable. She should be trying to escape. She should be planning her next move, scanning for exits, calculating how far she could get before he caught her. But she wasn't doing any of that.

Instead, she stood still, suspended in the weight of him—his hands, his heat, the thunder of his pulse beneath her cheek. Her instincts screamed for action, but something deeper held her in place. Something quieter. Something disturbingly close to trust. She should be fighting. But her body hadn't moved, and neither had her hands. Because for the first time since this nightmare began, he wasn't a threat. Not exactly.

And that might be worse.

“Yes,” he said, the word low and deliberate, like he was acknowledging something neither of them wanted to admit. “This bond. This reaction. It is illogical, intrusive, and completely destabilizing.” He paused, then added with a faint growl, “But it is real.”

“I don't want to be bonded to a man who threatens to kill me.”

“Then you understand perfectly. I do not want to be bonded at all.”

His arms didn't loosen. But they didn't tighten either. They held steady, tense and deliberate, like he was computing the exact pressure needed to keep her near without breaking her. Not gentleness. Not dominance. Something in between. A warrior's grip not on a weapon, but on the one thing cleaving him to sanity.

Her forehead rested against his chest without meaning to. He was warm. Solid. Real. Too real. And despite every cell in her body telling her to pull away, she didn't. Because something about that warmth was steadying. Her cheek rested against his bare chest, and she could feel the thunder of his heartbeat. Not erratic now, not wild. Just strong. Commanding. Like him. It should've terrified her.

But in that moment, it didn't.

They stayed like that for a short time, breaths uneven. The silence was heavy, but not hostile. Anya felt every rise and fall of his chest against her cheek, each breath dragging against her skin like a tether holding him in place. He wasn't just letting her moor him, he was depending on it. And somewhere in the back of her mind, she suspected that if she stepped away now, he might not stop her. But he'd fracture. Not violently. Not immediately. But piece by piece. And somehow, she couldn't bring herself to let that happen.

Not yet.

Then she shifted slightly, just enough to lift her head from his chest.

"You're not going to fall apart if I move away, are you?" she asked, half-meaning it to be a joke, half-afraid of the answer.

Tor'Vek's eyes narrowed slightly. "You may try."

The words weren't menacing, but they weren't reassuring either. Just factual, like everything he said.

That was enough to make her take a full step back.

His arms snapped forward and pulled her in again, fast but controlled. One moment of space and he'd closed it without hesitation, like the emptiness between them was physically intolerable. His hold wasn't bruising, but there was urgency in it, like his body had stopped asking for permission and simply obeyed the need to stay tethered. The air between them tightened. Her breath hitched. He didn't speak, but the pressure of his hands said everything: this was not optional. Not for him.

She eased back slightly, just enough to put a breath of space between them. "I guess that didn't work," she muttered, more to herself than him.

“It did not,” he said simply. His arms stayed firm. Unyielding.

After a few more minutes of heavy silence, she mumbled, “We should probably pick this place up. If someone else walks in here and sees what you did, they’ll think we’ve already killed each other.”

His expression didn’t change, but he reluctantly released her, maintaining contact through a hand at her lower back, his fingers splayed possessively. Not restraint—just connection. Constant. Unbroken. Like his body had accepted a new law of physics: he must always be touching her, or he unraveled.

Together, they began collecting the debris—twisted metal, cracked furniture, a mattress half-hanging off its frame. It wasn’t much, but it was order. Her fingers gathered the pieces of a scattered control pad and placed them upright again. She turned to reach for a piece of paneling.

His arm wrapped around her waist, yanking her back with smooth, uncompromising force. His hand flattened against her side, as if that contact alone held the thread of his control. He didn’t say a word. He didn’t need to. His body had already decided the rule. They didn’t separate. Not even for a second. Not even for something as harmless as picking up a piece of paneling. It wasn’t possessiveness. It was survival. His.

“I said stop that!” she protested.

“You left.”

“I moved six inches!”

“You moved six inches away.”

Her breath came fast again—not out of fear this time, but pure exasperation. “Do you even hear how that sounds?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I do not care.”

His voice was calm, but his expression said more than his words ever could. His eyes, glowing and unreadable, didn’t flicker. His jaw remained locked, his brows low. Not with anger, or even frustration. Just certainty. As if her proximity wasn’t a preference, but a requirement encoded into his bones. There was no smugness in it, no possessiveness. Only unwavering resolve.

She stared up at him, heart thumping.

His violet eyes glowed.

Not flickered. Not sparked.

Blazed .

She’d seen his eyes before. Bronze. Earthy. Alien. But now they were a gorgeous amethyst, burning with something deep and resonant. Piercing. Beautiful and terrifying.

She lifted a hand and waved it in front of his face. “Hey. You’re... glowing.”

He blinked, glanced toward the corner of his vision, then touched the skin beneath his eye with two fingers. “There is a shift in pigmentation and luminosity. I do not

possess sufficient data to determine its cause. Explain it to me.”

“That doesn’t freak you out?”

He looked at her for a long beat. “Your species reacts to anomalies with fear. Mine reacts with analysis.”

She snorted softly. “You’re glowing like a damn reactor core. I think a little fear would be understandable.”

“I have no data to confirm whether this is harmful or permanent. Until then, fear is inefficient.”

She shook her head. “You’re like a terrifying Spock with a murder streak.”

For a half-second, her own words caught her off guard. A wild, inappropriate urge to laugh rose in her chest—because if she didn’t laugh, she might scream. She bit it back, jaw tightening, startled by how much lighter that moment felt, even with him towering over her like a loaded weapon.

His brow twitched. “I do not know what that means.”

Anya opened her mouth, then closed it again, lips twitching. “It’s a human thing. A cultural reference. He’s logical, like you. No emotions. But not nearly as scary.”

“I have emotions.”

She arched a brow. “Really? Because so far, all I’ve seen is fury, logic, and about seventeen ways to glare.”

He blinked once, solemn. “There are twenty-three.”

Her mouth twitched. “That... actually explains a lot.” She tugged gently against his hold. Her brain whirled, but beneath the spinning thoughts, something else emerged. A question she didn’t want to ask but had to. “What happens,” she said slowly, “if I don’t stay close?”

Tor’Vek’s expression hardened. “Then I lose control.”

She swallowed. “Completely?”

“I will destroy the room again. I will likely attempt to destroy anything in it. Including you.”

Her breath caught.

“But that will not happen,” he added quietly.

“Why not?”

“Because you will not leave.”

Her heart stuttered. “That sounds a lot like a threat.”

“No,” he said. “It is a fact.”

His gaze didn’t waver. And neither did the light in his eyes.

She didn’t know what this bond was doing to them. She didn’t know what Selyr had planned, or why. But for now—for this moment—she knew one thing:

She wasn’t safe from him.

But she wasn't sure she wanted to be.

Because somewhere between the destruction and the touch, somewhere in the chaos, she'd felt her reaction to him change. There had been a moment—brief, nearly imperceptible—when the bracelet pulsed hot against her wrist, then cooled rapidly, like something finishing a sequence. She hadn't thought much of it then, too focused on his fury, on surviving.

But now, within the violence and the stillness, there'd been a change. And she felt it again now, low and heavy in her chest, the echo of his heartbeat beneath her skin. Steady. Claiming. Familiar.

She didn't want to feel drawn to him.

But God help her, she was.

And the worst part?

The bracelet wasn't pulsing anymore.

It was quiet.

As if whatever it had meant to do was already done.

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Chapter3

TOR'VEK WAS not unaccustomed to chaos. He had stood in the wreckage of burning starships, walked through the aftermath of orbital bombardments, and calculated the survival probabilities of entire planetary populations while ignoring the screams beneath his feet.

He had witnessed entropy in its purest form and remained untouched by it.

Until now.

Now, his balance was compromised by something as illogical as skin. By the undeniable impact of touch, of presence, of proximity.

Hers .

He stood with one hand on the wall panel, head bowed slightly, as if listening for some whisper beneath the circuits. But there was no data here—no logical pattern to extract. Only the pounding silence of a chamber torn apart by his own hands, and the low, steady rhythm of Anya's breath behind him.

He could still feel her. Even after stepping away, even without direct contact. The bond did not dissipate. It stretched, taut and vibrating, like a filament running through his spine.

He exhaled. Slowly. Deliberately. Then moved.

She was seated on the edge of the reassembled sleep platform, arms wrapped around her knees, watching him with that narrowed, skeptical gaze he was beginning to recognize as her default expression.

“I am going to attempt a test,” he announced.

Her brow lifted. “Of what? Your patience or mine?”

“The emotional resonance field.”

“Of course.” She muttered it under her breath, but didn’t stop him.

He took two steps away. Then three more.

The bond pulsed. Once.

Nothing.

He continued retreating—five steps, then six. He turned slightly, checking the distance between them. Measuring. Observing.

The second pulse hit harder. His jaw clenched and he pressed onward.

On the seventh step, the rage surged.

Not like before. Not the unrelenting tempest that had ripped through him in the first activation. This was quieter, sharper—like a needle sliding straight into the center of his brain. Focused. Precise. It did not roar. It whispered, and that was somehow worse. It felt personal. Directed. As if the rage had learned something about him, and now knew where to strike.

He gritted his teeth and locked his posture, muscles tight and straining against the pull that dragged at his senses. Every calculation, every directive told him to maintain focus, but his gaze betrayed him. He glanced over his shoulder, his attention drawn unerringly toward her. She was still. Watching. And the sight of her, framed by distance and that pulsing thread of connection, hit harder than the rage itself.

One more step.

The rage ignited.

He spun—immediate, involuntary.

She was already on her feet. “It’s happening again, isn’t it?”

He didn’t respond. He couldn’t. He knew what would happen if he spoke. That his voice might carry too much stress, that the command in it might draw her in faster than she should come. Every part of him was straining, but not toward violence. Not anymore. Toward her.

The logical part of his mind screamed for restraint, to log the reaction and suppress the impulse. But the warrior in him—something primal, guttural—wanted her near because that was where the fire quieted.

He took a step forward.

She was watching him carefully. “You looked like you were about to tear the floor up with your bare hands.”

“Affirmative. I might have.”

She stopped less than a foot away. “Better now?”

“Moderately.”

“Great. We’re learning things.” She rubbed her arms, and he noticed the faint tremor in her fingers. “Like how to keep you from going nuclear. Step one: stay close. Step two: don’t die.”

“Pragmatic.”

“Glad we agree.”

The silence between them thickened. He studied her face. The tiny lines of tension around her eyes. The way her chin lifted when she was afraid. She was smaller than she seemed when angry, and stronger than she appeared when quiet. And despite himself, his gaze lingered—not just on her posture, but on the curve of her cheek, the softness of her mouth, the way her hair framed her face in loose, golden strands. He hadn’t meant to notice. Hadn’t wanted to. But the observation had formed anyway, stubborn and irrefutable.

She was aesthetically pleasing.

Unhelpful.

Distracting.

He would’ve categorized that as irrelevant under normal parameters. But now, it twisted under his skin like static interference, disrupting calculation, pushing at boundaries he didn’t know he had.

Dangerous.

The rage was gone. But something else remained.

He could still feel the bond.

And it was changing.

Subtly, but unmistakably. Not just in strength, but in nature. The tether no longer throbbed with aggression—it hummed with something deeper, something that made his thoughts blur and his instincts tilt sideways. His body still felt like his, but there were undercurrents he couldn't map. A shift in his awareness, a softening in the edges of computation. Whatever this bond was becoming, it was altering more than his chemistry.

It was rewriting who he was. Not just his physiology or reflexes, but the very foundation of how he processed the world. Logic, once his primary operating system, now bent to instinct. Calculation faltered. Precision wavered. The craving wasn't just rewriting his chemistry—it was unraveling the identity he had built over a lifetime of discipline and duty.

Anya shifted beside him, quiet now, her strength dimmed by exhaustion. He could see it in the way her shoulders sagged, the way her eyes blinked more slowly. He said nothing.

Instead, he gestured to the reassembled sleeping platform. "You should rest."

"I'm fine," she murmured, not looking at him.

"You are not," he said simply. "Your vitals are fluctuating. Your stability compromises mine."

She frowned but didn't argue. She lay down slowly, her body wrapping itself inward.

Tor'Vek stood still, watching her for a long moment, then moved to the far wall.

And stopped.

The distance pulled at him like gravity in reverse. He could feel the flicker returning—the bond reacting, heating, whispering. He shouldn't need this. It was illogical. Unacceptable.

He crossed the room.

Sat beside her.

Her eyes opened slightly. “What are you doing?”

He lay down, careful, measured, his body close but not touching. “If I remain near, my system stabilizes. If I do not, I may destroy the room again.”

She didn't respond, letting loose a deep sigh. Her gaze flicked to the ceiling.

He closed his eyes.

He didn't intend to sleep.

The bracelet pulsed.

And Selyr's voice returned from overhead speakers.

“Well done, Warrior. Shall we escalate?”

Tor'Vek's eyes snapped open.

The bracelet grew hot.

Another rune appeared.

“Let us try something more... primitive,” Selyr purred. “Let us see how you process craving .”

Craving.

Tor’Vek froze. The heat moved deeper, threading through muscle and nerve and thought. It wasn’t like rage. It didn’t burn.

It throbbed.

It sought.

He turned his head—just slightly—and looked at Anya.

Her breath was steady. Her body warm. Inches away.

And something inside him reached .

But he didn’t move.

Not yet.

And then—

The vision hit.

It wasn’t a memory. Not his. Not anything stored in reasoning or linear thought. It slammed into him like a hard reset to the spine, ripping away identity, language, time. There was no consciousness in it—only sensation, only drive. It carved away the

scientist, the warrior, the strategist. What remained was hunger, pure and unfiltered, seared into his muscles like instinct coded before birth.

He stood in a forest—primitive, humid, pulsing with life. The air was thick with heat and scent, laced with the perfume of crushed leaves and something sweet, feral. Every breath came sharp, instinctual, dragging in the animal tension of a world untouched by civilization.

He could feel the dirt beneath his feet, damp and clinging. Branches scraped his arms. The buzzing drone of insects blurred with the throbbing of blood in his ears. And before him, there she was.

Not Anya. But a version of her. Pure, primitive woman. Wild-haired. Barefoot. Glancing over her shoulder with wide, knowing, hungry eyes.

Sheran.

And the male—him, but not him—chased.

Not out of anger. Not even desire. But need. Immediate. Bone-deep. Every breath was a command. Every muscle a weapon aimed toward her. His body didn't ask—it obeyed. He ran, not because he chose to, but because not running was unthinkable. His pulse thundered in his ears, drowning out thought, devouring restraint. Each step consumed distance. Each breath ignited urgency. She was the answer to the ache, the cure to the void. He had to reach her. Had to possess her. Had to make her his.

She stumbled. Not far.

Turned.

Faced him.

Her chest heaved, but she didn't scream. Didn't beg. Her pupils dilated. Her breath hitched, lips parting just slightly as she turned fully to face him. She didn't run again. Didn't fight. She simply stood—waiting, steady, her gaze locked on his like she already knew what he was. What he needed. And still, she watched him come.

He reached for her—rough, hungry, his stride eating the space between them. And she did not move. The forest disappeared behind her. She stood in the clearing, framed by shadows and moonlight, wearing nothing but his shirt.

Anya's shirt.

It clung to her thighs, open at the collar, revealing skin he hadn't meant to imagine. But now he couldn't look away. The vision shifted, intensified. It was her. Not just a woman. Not just a symbol. Her. Anya.

He lunged.

She gasped as he grabbed her, spinning her hard against a tree. One hand fisted the fabric of the shirt, dragging it down over her shoulder. It tore. She arched into him—either in challenge or surrender, he couldn't tell. Didn't care. His mouth crashed to her neck, open and rough, golden canines scraping and the craving tore through him, ablinding, endless demand.

He pressed her back. Pinned her. Forced his weight against hers. The shirt gave way completely.

She moaned.

And just as he drove into her—

—Tor'Vek jerked awake.

His eyes flared wide, heart hammering. The air was wrong. The room was wrong. Too quiet. Too small. Tooreal.

The bracelet throbbed against his skin.

He turned his head—and she was there.

Anya.

Sleeping. Curled slightly toward him, lips parted, breath steady. Soft hair sweeping her cheek. Unaware.

He stared at her for one ragged breath. Then another.

His entire body was tight, on edge, trembling not with rage, but with something worse. He was still half-caught in the vision, breath shallow, blood heated and confused. The forest still clung to him—its heat, its scent, her image burned into the backs of his eyes. His fists clenched instinctively at his sides, and he shook his head once, sharp, like a predator trying to shake off a sedative. He didn't want it. Didn't ask for it. But the craving still crawled under his skin. The remnants of the dream tugged at him, begging for more, even as his mind recoiled in revulsion. He dragged a hand through his hair, jaw rigid, forcing every cell of his body back into alignment.

It took too long.

Long enough that he hated how close it had come.

Craving.

He sat up, slowly. Deliberately. Planted both feet on the floor and pressed his hands to his thighs.

That is not me.

The memory—no, the programmed vision—still roiled in his mind, slick with instinct and heat. He tried to file it away, like corrupted data. But it clung. It wanted .

That is not me.

Behind him, Anya shifted slightly in her sleep. The sound pulled at him like a hook in his spine.

He stood.

Backed away.

The bracelet pulsed once. Again. Hungrier this time. The craving growing. Pulling. It twisted through his limbs, wound tight in his gut, demanding motion, release, her . His lips curled back over his gold-capped canines, not in threat, but in instinct. Primal. Automatic. He growled, low and rough, a sound that rose unbidden from somewhere beneath speech—ancient and territorial. He pressed both hands flat to the wall, trying to protect himself against the rising heat.

It didn't work.

He forced his breathing to regulate. Forced his eyes away from the delicate line of her jaw, the softness of her mouth, the way she murmured something in her sleep—

“Maya...”

He froze.

His jaw locked. He turned his back.

A relative? An emotional connection? Whoever Maya was, she wasn't meant for him.
No, it was Anya's tether. Her reason.

A craving separate from his own.

And yet, their bond didn't care whose ache came first.

It responded anyway.

And still, the bracelet glowed.

He moved to the far wall and braced one palm against the cool surface, supporting himself. The craving followed. Not just followed—it surged. With each step away from her, it intensified, wrapping tighter around his chest, his spine, his thoughts. The absence of her beside him became unbearable, a dragging weight against his instincts. The wall was cold, but not enough. Not enough to counteract the burning need humming beneath his skin.

Control is not optional.

And then he heard her shift.

The sound was soft, barely audible over the pounding in his head. The mattress whispered against skin. A breath catching. A murmur of movement.

“Tor’Vek?”

Her voice was low, raspy with sleep. Human. Soft. Real.

He didn't answer.

“Are you okay?”

Still, he said nothing. His back remained to her, his hands planted against the wall, his body vibrating with restraint. He could hear her getting up—bare feet skimmed against the floor. The bond flared in response, humming, eager.

“Did he do something?” she asked quietly. “Selyr?”

The word snapped something inside him. He turned slowly, every motion controlled, deliberate. Anya had stepped closer, arms folded protectively, confusion etched across her face.

“I felt it,” she murmured. “The bracelet. It changed again, didn’t it?”

He nodded once. Unable to resist, he took one step toward her. The bond pulsed.

“You’re shaking,” she said slowly, brows drawing together. “What did he do?”

His chest rose, then fell. “Something worse than rage.”

Anya didn’t move. Not away. Not forward. She watched him the way one might watch a fuse inch toward flame—calm, but tense.

“I can feel it,” she said.

His breath hitched as he struggled for control. Non-existent control. “What do you feel?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know. Heat. Need. It’s not mine. I don’t think it’s mine. But... it’s strong.”

He advanced again, slower this time, but no less dangerous. His body fought him at every step—not with violence, but with heat, with hunger, with the ache of needing something he couldn't name. Each movement was too fluid, too tense. He didn't test the bond anymore. He stalked it. Pushed at the edge of it like a predator feeling out a cage he meant to break. There was no restraint left—only the thinnest thread of discipline, fraying fast, unraveling between each heartbeat.

“You are not wrong,” he said, his voice low, tight. “But it is not entirely mine, either.”

She shook her head in confusion. “What's not?”

He stepped even closer, pulse pounding in his ears now. His gaze locked on hers. “You feel it. The craving,” he growled. “Do not deny it.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. She opened her mouth, closed it again, then took half a breath like she meant to argue—but nothing came out. Her silence was answer enough, but he didn't let her retreat into it. He held her gaze, let her see everything—his control, frayed and smoking, and the demand pulsing just beneath the surface. It wasn't a question anymore. It was a fact.

And she felt it, too, and it startled her. She stepped back on instinct, breath catching, but it was a mistake. The moment she moved, something in him sharpened. His head tilted, shoulders squaring, as if her retreat had triggered a deeper instinct. A chase reflex. His muscles tensed, strained, eyes darkening—not with anger, but with focus. A predator who'd spotted motion.

And she had just flinched.

She froze in place, realizing too late that she'd provoked something he hadn't yet unleashed.

“This craving is not a weapon pointed only at me,” he said. “It reaches for both of us. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Their eyes met. Something shifted. “You’re wrong,” she whispered forcefully.

“I can control it,” he said. But the words came ragged and brittle, carved from the edge of a breath too shallow. He wanted them to be true. Willed them to be. But even as he spoke, he felt the bond pulse again—demanding, relentless. The hunger in his blood answered before his mind could override it. And he knew.

The words were alive.

“Then control it,” she urged, a thread of desperation underscoring her words. “Because this—” she gestured between them, “—this isn’t you.”

He nodded.

But he didn’t step back.

Instead, he reached out and touched her face. Light. Careful. But it might as well have been a spark to dry kindling. The craving surged. Her lips parted. Her pupils expanded.

He saw it.

She felt it, too.

She inhaled sharply. “It’s the bracelet. That’s all.”

But the look she gave him—uncertain, questioning—hit low. She was trying to rationalize it, to name it something clinical and dismissible, but her voice wavered.

He saw the tremor in her throat, the catch in her breath. And worse, he could feel the truth under her skin through the bond.

It wasn't just the bracelet. Not anymore.

"Affirmative."

She swallowed. "Then why does it feel like more?"

He had no answer. Only a matching ache.

He stepped closer, their bodies inches apart. Her breath caught, but she didn't pull away. Her hands pressed lightly to his chest—not to push, not to resist. Just to feel.

"This isn't who you are," she said, voice low and shaken. "And this isn't who I want to become."

"It is both," he said quietly. "And neither."

She searched his face, and he knew the moment she felt it—his control, still intact, but fraying.

The bracelet pulsed hard between them.

And her hands curled against his chest.

"I must recalibrate," he said aloud, to no one.

To himself.

To the beast clawing in his chest.

But there was no recalibration. Not from this.

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Chapter4

ANYA DIDN'TMOVE.

Couldn't.

Not with the way Tor'Vek was looking at her. Not with the heat radiating off him in thick, invisible waves. The bracelet on her wrist didn't pulse anymore—it throbbed. Not with warning this time. With a deep, hungry craving.

And that terrified her more than anything that had come before.

His breathing deepened. He clenched his jaw so tightly a muscle ticked along the edge. Those violet-glowing eyes burned into her, not with rage now, but with a cold, calculating hunger that promised ruin—mind, body, soul—until there was nothing left but him.

Not just destruction. Possession.

“I dreamed of this,” he said, voice rough and low. “You ran from me. Not far. You wanted me to catch you.”

Her stomach dropped.

He stepped closer, slow, deliberate, while she retreated, until her back met the cold metal wall. One hand came up beside her head. Not touching—yet. But caging.

“I chased you through the woods,” he murmured. “Watched your hips sway as you tried to escape. You did not run fast. You wanted me to follow.”

Her mouth went dry.

“You wanted to be caught.”

She should push him away. Scream. Shove her way out.

But a deeper part of her wanted to see what would happen if she didn't. She stood suspended in the storm of him, body frozen, breath caught, craving rising despite every warning her mind tried to scream.

The bracelet flared with heat at her wrist, and she gasped—because it wasn't just his need now. It was hers. Amplified. Heightened.

Arousal spilled into her system like liquid fire. Her skin felt too tight, her breath too shallow, every nerve in her body lighting up like a live wire. It was overwhelming, addictive, terrifying—and somehow exactly what she wanted. Her body answered his without hesitation, her core clenching with a desperate ache she couldn't suppress. She'd never felt anything like it. Not even close.

“I caught you, trapped you,” he continued, his lips coasting over her temple. “Slid my hand between your legs while you begged me not to stop. I stripped you bare and pressed you up against a tree.”

His hand found the hem of her shirt.

She should stop him. She knew that. Every rational voice in her head screamed that this was too much, too fast, too dangerous. But another voice—just as loud, just as primal—urged him on. She didn't want him to stop. Not when her body felt like it

might combust without him. Not when everything in her ached for the press of his hands, the force of his need. Her heart thudded painfully, torn between fear and craving, but she didn't pull away. She couldn't.

"I can show you what I did to you," he whispered.

She didn't say yes.

But she didn't say no, either. Deep down, buried under fear and reason, was the part of her that had already made the decision. The part that wanted to know what it felt like to be wanted, to be claimed, to belong to something—to someone—who saw her as necessary. That part whispered louder than the rest. And in that breathless pause between thought and action, she gave in.

In a swift, fluid motion, he yanked the shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. The air hit her skin, cool against the heat that was blooming inside her. Her nipples tightened. Her thighs clenched. She felt exposed and branded by his gaze.

He spun her to face the wall.

"Hands," he said.

She braced her palms against the metal. It was cold—shocking against her overheated skin, a harsh reminder of reality against the fevered haze of the moment. The contrast only made her shiver harder, nerves firing as though his touch had fused into the wall itself.

His body pressed in behind hers, solid and hot. His hands dragged down her sides, palms exploring every curve—her ribs, her hips, the underswell of her breasts. He cupped them, thumbs flicking across her nipples. She let out a low, shuddering cry, unable to stop herself.

“I remember how you sounded,” he murmured, mouth close to her ear. “In the dream. Moaning for me.”

One hand drifted lower, dragging slowly over the curve of her waist, the dip of her stomach, then lower still, tracing a path down the inside of her thigh before sliding back up with tormenting slowness. Each inch he covered ignited a fresh cascade of heat under her skin. She whimpered before she could stop herself, her body arching slightly into the promise of his touch. It was maddening—the control he had, the control she gave him. And God help her, she wanted more.

She bit her lip, her breath caught in her throat.

“Open for me,” he ordered, nudging her feet apart with his own.

Her breath hitched. She obeyed.

He slid his hand between her legs. Found her slick. Groaned against her neck.

“You are wet for me.”

Two fingers slid into her, slow and deliberate, filling her as his palm pressed against her clit. She arched into him with another whimper. His other hand wrapped around her body again, tracing lazy circles over her breast, thumb scraping the peaked tip until her knees threatened to give out.

The bond surged. Pleasure crashed into her like a shockwave—not just hers, but his. His hunger. His satisfaction at finding her this way. His desperate need for her. It was all-consuming, raw and wild, and it poured through the bond into her, making it impossible to separate where his desire ended and hers began.

Part of her still clung to the edge of reason, knew this was dangerous, that she should

resist. But the rest of her—every trembling inch—ached for more. Needed more. And she was losing the fight not to give in completely.

Her hips rolled against his hand, chasing every stroke with a desperate hunger she no longer tried to hide. Her moans spilled out, louder, broken, each one a confession she couldn't hold back. The sound embarrassed her and thrilled her in equal measure, a strange vulnerability blooming inside her even as she chased the next wave of sensation.

There was something unspoken in every cry, something wild and exposed—as if giving herself to him like this meant more than just pleasure. It meant surrender. She was past the point of shame, past thought, past fear—just heat and need, her body screaming for him to finish what he started.

Part of her still knew she should resist. But the rest of her—the louder, bolder part—begged for his touch, for his claim, for the wildfire consuming her to finally break loose.

He fucked her with his fingers, hard and deep, each thrust sending heat spiraling through her core. His thumb stayed locked on her clit, dragging her higher. His other hand pinched her nipple, tugged, twisted. She cried out, eyes squeezing shut as the pleasure climbed higher, her legs shaking.

Then he pulled away.

She almost sobbed from the loss.

Clothing rustled behind her. She looked over her shoulder just in time to see him stripping off his trousers, and her breath caught at the sight of him. There was no way any human man was built like that. Long and thick, a deeper bronze than the rest of his skin, the length of his cock was ringed with small golden-brown mounds that

pulsed in a rhythmic pattern, as though responding to the bond itself.

The tip flared in a subtle diamond shape, already beaded with pre-cum, and the slit at the head wasn't a slit at all—it was crosshatched, intricate and alien. At the base, just above his groin, a thick knot sat poised as if it might swell during climax, locking them together.

The thought of him inside her, those ridges dragging against her inner walls, that knot catching at the very end—it made her burn with fresh, impossible need.

Her breath hitched, and her thighs clenched involuntarily. She should have looked away, should have felt fear or shame or anything that might drag her back to reason. But she couldn't. Her gaze remained locked on him, heart thudding wildly as something deep and dangerous unfurled inside her, whispering yes. Yes, to him. Yes, to this. Yes, to everything he would do to her.

“I am going to take you now,” he said, voice guttural. He lined himself up behind her. “You want this. Tell me you do.”

God help her, she did. “Please. Yes, please.”

He gripped her hips. Pulled her back against him. The head of his cock pressed against her entrance, hot and unrelenting. Her hands braced tighter on the wall. Her body arched instinctively, ready.

Her breath came in shallow gasps. His hand snaked around to her front, fingers rubbing her clit again as he leaned in and growled in her ear.

“I want you to remember this. Every sound. Every stroke. The way your body begs for mine.”

She moaned his name, and then he pushed into her—slowly, deliberately, letting her feel every inch of him. The vibrating mounds along his cock pulsed against her inner walls, lighting up nerves she didn't know existed. Her body clenched around him, the fit almost too much, too deep, too intense.

But she didn't want it to stop.

He started to move, setting a rhythm that had her writhing, grinding deep with each thrust. The knot at the base of him swelled slightly, pressing against her with each motion. He kept one hand on her hip and the other on her breast, holding her steady while the bond flared between them like wildfire.

She lost track of everything—time, space, the fact that they were still prisoners in a sterile cell. There was only him. The brutal perfection of him. The way he made her feel like her body belonged to him, as if the only thing that mattered was his pleasure wrapped in hers.

When she came, it was like falling through fire and stars—a full-body collapse that broke her into pieces and rebuilt her in his hands. Her voice fractured around his name, panting, ragged. He thrust deep one final time, burying himself fully, and groaned against her neck as his body locked inside hers.

For a moment, time stopped. She felt everything—the throb of his knot, the heat of his breath against her skin, the brutal, consuming rightness of him. Her eyes burned as her body clenched around him, not just from pleasure but from something deeper, more dangerous. She didn't want him to ever pull away.

She felt him swell, impossibly thick, the knot at the base of his cock pressing forward and locking them together with a low, pulsing stretch that made her gasp.

She should have panicked. Should have questioned it. But the moment he spilled

inside her, the golden-brown mounds along his shaft released something electric. Her body flushed with warmth, her muscles softening, her thoughts floating. Pleasure deepened into a dreamlike, euphoria. A soft moan escaped her lips, helpless and wrecked.

“What—” she whispered. “What is that?”

His mouth grazed her ear, voice low and steady. “The ridges secrete a bonding compound. Temporary. Harmless. It causes euphoria and allows your cunt to expand enough to take my knot.”

Her eyes fluttered closed. “Definitely euphoria,” she murmured.

“You are safe,” he said. “I will not release until the knot retracts. You must remain still.”

She didn’t want to move. Didn’t want the feeling to fade. Being filled like this, locked to him, flooded with whatever he gave her—it was too good, too deep. It wasn’t just physical. It was everything. Her mind, her body, her soul... all tethered to him.

They stayed pressed together for what could have been hours, her body twitching with aftershocks, her breath syncing with his. When he finally slipped free, the knot easing back, she felt the loss like a sudden drop, an emptiness that left her aching.

And God help her, she almost asked him to do it again.

He reached down and lifted her into his arms. Carried her to the mattress and curled around her from behind. She felt the steady beat of his heart against her spine. Warm. Real.

She didn't mean to close her eyes. Just to rest them. But the crash was inevitable. Not just from exhaustion—but from the overwhelming swirl of sensation and emotion that left her hollowed out and full all at once. It wasn't peace exactly, but it was a stillness she hadn't known she needed. Vulnerable. Dazed. Raw. And somehow, despite everything, safe. The bond had taken all of her—and given her evenmore.

She drifted.

Her body still hummed with the lingering effects of the bond, of him. Her skin felt overly sensitive, every brush of the sheet a whisper against nerves stretched too thin. She lay there, cocooned in the heat of his body, her back pressed to his chest, his arm a heavy, possessive line across her waist. Every breath he took rumbled softly behind her like distant thunder.

"I have never done this before," he said quietly against her shoulder, the deep timbre of his voice vibrating through her. "Not like this."

She swallowed, throat tight. "You mean... the knot?"

There was a beat of silence. "No. The staying. The holding. The wanting after."

Anya blinked, emotion rising unbidden and sharp. She didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything. Just reached for his hand and laced their fingers together, pulling his arm tighter around her. Her breath caught when he squeezed gently.

"Does it always feel like that?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"No," he said. "Only with you."

She closed her eyes and let that truth settle into her bones.

Time passed.

She didn't know how long.

When the speaker crackled overhead, it felt like a blade cutting through silk.

"Fascinating," came the disembodied voice, calm and clinical. "Though rest assured, I granted you privacy. My monitors tracked biometric responses only."

Tor'Vek went still. Every muscle in his body locked down.

Anya stirred against him, still dazed and warm, her heart skipping as reality returned and Selyr's voice slowly penetrated. Tor'Vek tensed behind her.

Selyr's voice echoed from the speaker again, almost bored. "The craving protocol appears to have failed. Your responses were not aligned with the programmed outcome. Still, your reaction time was... notable. Far faster than projected. Curious. Very curious."

The voice slithered through the room like poison. Anya gasped, her arms flying up to cover her chest, heart pounding.

Tor'Vek shifted on the mattress, rising just enough to shield her with his body. His eyes blazed as he stared toward the sound of the voice, heat radiating from him like a warning. He didn't tremble. He didn't speak. But his hands curled into fists where they rested on the mattress, the tension in his frame sizzling like a storm barely held back.

Then, wordless, he grabbed his shirt from where it had fallen near the bed and tossed it to her without looking. Protective. Instinctive. She caught it with trembling hands and pulled it over her head, his scent wrapping around her like armor.

Amusement dripped from Selyr's voice, static echoing from a speaker embedded in the wall. "Truly fascinating. The bracelets have evolved faster than I anticipated. Your reaction time," he continued, "has surpassed my predictions. And you, human female—you responded remarkably well. Do you know what that means?"

Neither of them answered.

Anya couldn't. Her throat closed around the words, fury and fear and disgust colliding in her chest. She didn't trust her voice not to shake, didn't trust herself not to scream. Tor'Vek didn't move, didn't blink, his silence louder than any threat. Their defiance wasn't spoken—but it filled the room just the same.

"It means you're ready for the next test."

There was a hiss as the outer door disengaged and heavy footsteps approached.

Tor'Vek shifted in one smooth, silent motion, blocking them, muscles tensed with leashed fury. He didn't hesitate, didn't flinch. And that alone made her breath catch. It wasn't shock or fear that held him still in front of her—it was restraint. A terrifying, deliberate choice. A predator holding himself back by sheer force of will. He was containing the storm inside him with a control so absolute it scared her more than if he'd lashed out. Because if he let go, even for a second, she knew he would burn everything in this room to keepher.

He stood between her and the door, rage vibrating off his skin like a low-grade explosion.

He would not survive being parted from her.

And she... didn't want to be parted from him either. As if in response, Selyr's voice hummed through the air again, almost as an afterthought. "We'll separate you for

now, of course. The bond needs to be tested under strain.”

Her stomach twisted. There it was. The threat. The test. The separation she already knew she couldn’t bear.

Not after what had happened between them.

Not after knowing how it felt to be wanted like that.

She reached for his hand instinctively.

The cold metallic floor vibrated beneath her as the guards approached, their black boots striking in ominous rhythm. The guards stepped into the room. Tor’Vek moved, positioning his body to shield hers more fully, his every breath sharp with strain. Anya froze, every nerve sparking like static.

One guard scanned the room while another approached with careful, deliberate steps, hand resting near a restraint device that blinked with a sickly blue light. The sight of it made her breath catch. She could feel the bond stretching, quivering between her and Tor’Vek like a wire drawn too tight. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears.

They weren’t just here for data. They were here to divide. To tear. Their boots hit the floor with brutal finality, each step too loud, too deliberate, echoing through the chamber like a countdown. She didn’t recognize the armor—black, segmented, faceless—but she recognized the threat. The way they moved, the readiness in their posture, the small, silent weapons tucked at their hips.

The neural restraint glowed, pulsing softly like the bracelet, but colder. Crueler. Her pulse spiked. The air suddenly felt thinner, tighter. She pressed closer to Tor’Vek without thinking, her breath caught in her throat. Every instinct screamed: They are here to take him from you.

And the bond began to scream.

Not just in the bracelet.

In her chest. In her skin. In something deeper and older than language. Every inch of her rebelled at the thought of being separated from him.

She didn't know if it was the bond or her soul.

But something inside her begged the universe:

Do not take him from me.

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Chapter5

THE MOMENT they touched her, the bond snapped taut.

It wasn't rejection—it was resistance. A violent protest against the forced separation, like an elastic thread stretched to its breaking point. Every nerve in Anya's body lit up in warning, in fury, in grief. Her entire being shrieked no before her voice ever did.

She screamed.

Not from pain.

From loss.

Something inside her ripped open, raw and staggering, like her heart had been physically torn. She clutched at the bond—mentally, instinctively, desperately—as though sheer will alone could pull it back together.

It couldn't.

“Do not touch her!” Tor'Vek's voice exploded across the room, furious and thunderous. He moved in front of her in an instant, arms spread wide, body a shield of muscle and rage.

But she barely saw him.

The pain in her chest eclipsed everything else. She felt him, felt the bond spike and

flare, felt the instinctive protectiveness rising from him like a storm—but all of it was muffled under the weight of that unbearable separation. The guards were moving. Something sparked—violet light flashed across her vision.

Tor' Vek dropped.

She screamed again. “No!”

She surged toward him, reaching—but hands grabbed her. Rough. Tight. She twisted hard, kicking, shoving, fighting like a wild animal. All of it futile.

He was down.

He shouldn't be down.

The blast had been too strong. She felt it through the bond, how it hit him, how it knocked the breath from his lungs and cracked through his body like lightning. It wasn't just a weapon. It was a warning. And it was meant for her, too.

She didn't care.

She fought harder.

But it didn't matter.

They dragged her away.

Away from him. From the bond. From the one thing in this nightmare that felt real.

And as the chamber doors slammed shut, the echo of her scream twisted in the air like the bond itself.

Fraying.

But not broken.

Not yet.

She couldn't breathe—couldn't think—because her thoughts weren't hers anymore. They were his. Tor'Vek's.

And he was roaring .

Not aloud. Not physically. But she felt it—adeep, pulsing roar echoing inside her chest, shaking her bones from within. Through the raw, exposed edges of their bond came the weight of his fury. Rage. Terror. The unrelenting, animal instinct to destroy anything that dared come between them. The violent, merciless craving to reclaim what was his. Her entire body burned with it, like she was being swallowed in the storm he could no longer holdback.

It wasn't just panic.

It was madness. Panic had boundaries. Panic could be corralled, controlled. This was something else—wild and consuming, like a dam bursting inside her mind. Her thoughts didn't spiral. They fractured . Her identity tangled with his fury until she couldn't tell where she ended and he began. And she didn't care. All that mattered was getting back to him. Or burning everything that stood in theirway.

She cried out again, tears streaking her cheeks as her body shuddered under the weight of it. Her bracelet lit up, glowing bright gold against her wrist, runes flashing like a warning. One of the guards cursed and adjusted the setting, but the moment he did, the lights above them flickered and the device in his hand sparked violently, hissing as if the suppressant rejected the command. Another guard staggered

backward, clutching his wrist as the neural interface flared red-hot. And she felt it—whatever suppressant they activated—tried to numb her, but the bond fought back, pushing the influence aside like a rising tide overwhelming a crumbling dam.

It didn't work.

The bond didn't fade. It flared. It flared so hard she thought her skin might burst open with the force of it.

Not gently. Not gradually. It ignited inside her like a solar detonation, white-hot and unrelenting. Her body arched against invisible pressure, every nerve ending firing as if his need had slammed into her like a second heartbeat. Her skin flushed, her pulse spiked, and somewhere deep in her chest, the sensation of him surged again. Not just presence. Not just proximity. It was possession. Raw, scorching, inescapable. Like he was trying to reach her through force of will alone, burning a path through the void that separated them.

"Tor'Vek!" she gasped, reaching backward, even as they pulled her through the corridor. "I can still feel you—oh God, I can feel everything —"

The corridor warped. The floor tilted. Somewhere behind her, she thought she heard something break—metal, stone, bone—she couldn't tell. She just knew that he was coming. Somehow. Some way. If the bond had to drag him across the galaxy to get to her, it would.

Because this?

This was unbearable .

The guards shoved her into another chamber, sterile and bright, and sealed the door. She fell to her knees.

And screamed.

The sound tore out of her like an open wound.

The sterile brightness of the room only made it worse. Too clean. Too white. Too quiet. It didn't feel real. None of it did. Her breath came in short, panicked bursts as she curled forward, arms around herself like she could hold in the pressure building inside her. But it wasn't just fear. It wasn't even just pain.

It was him .

His absence was a roar.

She felt it like a phantom limb, a hollow place where warmth had been. Tor'Vek's presence—his mind, his touch, the bond that had laced through her blood—was gone. No, not gone. Ripped away.

And now that it was missing, she realized just how deeply it had embedded itself in her. Not just in her body, but in her sense of self. Of safety. Of control.

She gasped and gripped her bracelet, fingers tightening as if she could will it back to life. The gold glow had dimmed to a dull amber, flickering like a dying ember. The runes that had pulsed like breath now sputtered, fading in and out as though the bond itself were suffocating. A hollow ache spread through her chest, sharp and gnawing, and for a terrifying moment, she wondered if this was what it felt like to be unchosen. Untethered. Alone. It felt almost as though her spark for life was drained without him.

“No,” she whispered. “No, no, no.”

She didn't want to forget what he felt like. The heat of his skin against hers. The weight of his body. The way the bond had wrapped around her like armor and

wildfire all at once. And the way it had changed when he'd been inside her—when they had moved together, breathed together, burned together. Something had happened in that moment, something irreversible. It wasn't just sex. It wasn't even just bonding. It was transformation.

Did Selyr even realize what he'd triggered? Could he possibly understand the depth of what they'd become—the way their bodies had sealed something ancient and irreversible between them? The bond wasn't just physical. It wasn't even just emotional. It was cellular . Primal. Beyond anything a sterile lab or a stream of data could hope to measure.

Because no machine could calibrate the magnitude of this. No data could measure how completely she had fused with Tor'Vek in those moments. What it meant to be seen, to be chosen, to be claimed —not as a possession, but as a partner. What it meant to matter that much to someone so unshakable, so controlled. Someone who had shattered for her.

Her body trembled, nerves fraying from a loss she never knew could shatter her.

And then it happened.

The air warped.

Not physically—but inside her. A flicker of something swept across her consciousness. Faint. Familiar. A phantom warmth curling low in her belly, as if the echo of his presence had slipped through whatever dampening field surrounded her. It wasn't just a memory. It was alive. Residual. Like the bond had left a thread behind, whispering not gone . Whispering mine . And so very him .

“Tor'Vek?” she whispered, head snapping up.

Nothing answered.

But she wasn't alone in the room anymore.

Not entirely.

It was like breathing in heat without fire, pressure without weight. Something hummed through her cells—not strong, but unmistakable. It wasn't his voice. Not even his thoughts. Just the essence of him. A presence threading itself through her mind like smoke swirling under a sealed door.

And she clung to it.

It was the only thing tethering her sanity.

“You feel that, don't you?” she whispered to the room, to herself, to whatever fragment of him lingered.

It didn't answer. But it didn't fade either.

She wrapped her arms around herself and sat perfectly still, afraid that even shifting would cause that fragile sensation to break.

She would hold onto it for as long as it stayed chained to her—because losing it again might just shatter her completely.

TOR'VEK ROSE slowly from the floor, shoulders squared, eyes blank. Not calm. Not composed. Blank. Because the emotion brewing inside him had eclipsed all known parameters. He yanked on his trousers. His control—centuries of discipline—fractured.

The bond burned, a searing pressure across his chest and spine, like magma threading through every vein. His hands twitched. His jaw locked. The heat was unbearable. It wasn't pain, not exactly. It was purpose made physical. It was fury looking for a target. His muscles ached to destroy.

But there was something else threading beneath the rage. A shift he hadn't anticipated. The bond wasn't just feeding his fury—it was rewriting his instinct. Every action, every breath was being rerouted through something more primal, more urgent, more alive. He didn't just feel rage. He felt a purpose that didn't belong to science or discipline or even vengeance. It belonged to her.

And it was breaking him open from the inside out.

The first thing he shattered was the wall panel. One blow. Metal split open, sparks erupting like fireworks. But it wasn't enough. He needed more. The fury inside him had no outlet but ruin.

He slammed his fist through the control column, sparks arcing along his knuckles. The sound of crumpling metal only fed the blaze roaring through him. The next blow took down a ceiling brace, crashing debris around him like falling thunder. He welcomed the chaos. Needed it. He grabbed a support strut and twisted until it snapped loose, then hurled it across the room with enough force to leave a deep gouge in the far wall.

He tore into the bulkhead next, ripping free wiring, conduits, a panel of circuits that exploded under pressure. The console didn't stand a chance. Nothing did.

And still it wasn't enough.

He paced like a caged predator, hands clenched, breath ragged. His bracelet pulsed violently—warning, calling, reacting. The pulse wasn't steady anymore; it surged in

irregular bursts, like it was trying to sync with something already missing. His chest tightened at the rhythm. It felt almost... panicked.

As if the thing were sentient . As if it grieved her loss, too. As if it knew, on some fundamental level, that something vital had been torn away—and the bond wasn't designed to survive that kind of rupture.

Neither was he.

“You should not have taken her,” he growled.

Selyr's voice crackled over the intercom, clinical and cool. “And yet you still stand. Impressive.”

Tor'Vek stopped. Turned toward the ceiling. “Return her to me.”

“Why would I do that?” Selyr mused. “You have already given me what I need. The craving spike. The bonding effects. The rage response. All confirmed. But the more interesting question now is: what should I give you ?”

Tor'Vek said nothing. His silence was its own threat.

“There are... adjustments I can make,” Selyr continued. “This bond, this instability—it is a flaw in the design. An emotional flaw. But if you like, I can offer you something better.”

The bracelet on his wrist flared again.

Selyr's voice lowered to something almost conspiratorial. “I can suppress it for you. Your rage. Your... irrational attachment. You may choose between two settings. Shall we say... rage or reason? Violence or serenity? The purity of logic or the chaos of

love?”

He made it sound clinical, simple—as if what Tor’Vek had experienced with her could be switched off like a malfunctioning variable. As if choosing serenity meant abandoning the only connection that had ever given him a foundation. But even Selyr, brilliant as he was, could not calculate the cost of that. He spoke as a scientist, not as a bonded male. He didn’t understand that the chaos he offered to erase... was the very thing keeping Tor’Vek alive.

His head tilted. “You misunderstand,” he said. “There is no choice.”

“Oh?” Selyr’s voice purred.

Tor’Vek stepped over the wreckage, crunching metal beneath him. “You believe I am a variable to be isolated. A formula to be refined.”

Selyr didn’t answer.

“I am not.” He raised his arm, staring down at the bracelet. “You tampered with something ancient. Something you clearly do not understand.”

“And what is that, warrior?”

Tor’Vek’s voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “Instinct.”

Silence followed.

Then a click. Ahum. The bracelet on his wrist flared violently.

Pain lanced up his arm as the override activated. It struck fast and deep, aware of artificial numbness intended to dull his bond-driven fury. But the moment it hit,

something inside him roared to life. Not just resistance. Rejection.

The bond flared in defiance. Violet and gold runes lit along the bracelet's edge, burning through the suppressant with a surge of will he hadn't summoned—but felt rising from the core of who he was.

“Fascinating,” Selyr said, though his tone faltered. “It... should not be able to do that.”

Tor'Vek smiled without warmth. “And yet it does.”

He moved then. Fast. Savage. The suppression field around his cell flickered once—then shattered as the bond pulsed like a war drum in his chest.

Two guards burst in. They didn't last long.

Tor'Vek tore through them with terrifying precision, ripping one man's weapon free and hurling the other into the wall hard enough to leave a dent. He took the second's control badge before it hit the floor.

He didn't slow.

Doors fell before him. Metal screamed. Sparks hissed along the edges of fractured thresholds as walls caved beneath his onslaught. Alarms blared in the distance, but they sounded hollow—meaningless. The scent of ozone and scorched wiring filled the air, thick as smoke. Screams followed, some near, some far, punctuated by the sharp snap of bones and the thud of bodies hitting steel. No one slowed him. No one survived him.

And then he reached her.

Anya .

The door to her chamber burst open in a spray of sparks and smoke.

She turned just as he stepped through, his chest heaving, eyes wild with fury—and relief.

He reached her.

Her eyes locked with his, wide and wet and stunned, and for a second, she didn't breathe. Then she launched into his arms with a force that knocked the breath from his lungs. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Her arms locked around his neck. Her fingers dug into his shoulders like she never planned to let go.

And he held her like that.

One arm crushed her to his chest, the other supporting her thighs, holding her to him. Her breath came in trembling gasps against his neck, and his came slower, deeper, as if pulling her back into his arms allowed him to breathe for the first time.

Neither of them spoke. They didn't need to.

The bond thrummed between them like an aftershock, not steady, not calm—but alive. A low, rhythmic pulse that wrapped around them both—his rage, her relief, their desire—tangled into one breathless current. It wasn't soothing. It was raw, unfinished, still sparking from everything they'd survived. Her heartbeat faltered against his, and his grip tightened as if he felt it too. The bond didn't simply reconnect. It reignited.

And in the rush of that heat, she felt it—an overwhelming certainty, crashing through her like the aftershock of his kiss. He had come for her. Not because the bond demanded it. Not because it was written in his blood. But because he chose her.

He pulled her back just enough to look at her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted, her eyes wide with something that looked like relief and disbelief all at once. And then he kissed her—hard, fierce, claiming. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't sweet. It was the crash of restraint breaking, the echo of everything they'd survived, the firebrand seal of something already written in both their blood.

It was a vow.

She didn't hesitate.

Their arms locked around each other in silence. The corridor, the blood, the destruction—all of it fell away. His breath was still ragged, her pulse still fluttering wildly under his fingers, but for that one suspended moment, the world narrowed to just this: skin, bond, relief. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed. Only her in his arms. Only him beneath her hands. Only the unspoken vow now blazing between them, fierce as fire and twice as unbreakable.

But there was one more place he had to go.

They moved fast. Together. Through the halls. Back to the lab where it all began. Where Selyr's voice had first reached them.

Tor'Vek kicked in the final door.

But the room was empty.

Tor'Vek froze, instincts flaring. The scent was wrong. The air too still. No warmth, no residual breath, no trace of life. He felt it a second before he saw it.

A shimmer in the center flickered, the light bending unnaturally—then resolved into Selyr's hologram.

Tor' Vek stepped toward it.

"Coward," he growled.

"Cautious," the hologram replied.

"Where are you?"

"Far enough. For now."

Tor' Vek's bracelet lit again.

And for the first time, Selyr's voice wavered.

"That wasn't supposed to happen." There was a pause, then a crackle of static, as if Selyr couldn't decide whether to end the transmission or press further. "What is it evolving into?" he murmured. "What are you becoming?"

The warrior's eyes narrowed.

"Prepare yourself," Tor' Vek said coldly. "Because this is only the beginning."

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Chapter6

THE HOLOGRAM of Selyr flickered out, but his presence lingered there, poisoning the air.

Tor’Vek did not move at first. His hands stayed loosely at his sides, posture composed, every movement deliberate. The only flicker of tension came in the faint pulse of the bracelet on his wrist, mirroring a response he chose not to show.

“Prepare yourself,” he called to Selyr, certain the scientist listened.

His words weren’t a threat. They were a declaration made with the clarity of a warrior who no longer believed in mercy. Selyr had drawn the first blood long before this moment—Tor’Vek had merely accepted the terms. The board was no longer Selyr’s. Every move from here on belonged to Tor’Vek.

He turned to Anya. She stood a few paces behind him, tense, watchful, waiting. Not afraid—not anymore—but rigid in that quiet, fierce way she had when she braced herself for truth. He gave a single nod, and they moved.

The lab beyond the meeting chamber had been largely untouched since his arrival. Corridors once lined with flickering lights were now dark, consoles dormant, the hum of the facility fading beneath the silence. Power still ran to the deepest layers—he could hear the low, steady pulsation beneath the floor panels and see faint glows in the seams of the walls. Energy hadn’t been cut. It had been redirected. Suppressed. Waiting for reactivation. A base like this did not truly sleep.

It waited.

He bypassed the biometric lock to Selyr's private data vault, the mechanism accepting his clearance with an almost reluctant chime, as if the system itself resented his intrusion.

They entered a room bathed in pale blue light. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with old tech and organic samples in sealed containment units. At the center of the room, an elevated platform housed a sprawling terminal system surrounded by auxiliary control nodes.

A cracked data core flickered lazily at its base, its surface riddled with scorched microfractures and deep channel scars from overload reroutes. It looked like it had survived at least one purge—possibly more—each leaving behind damage that corrupted data without fully erasing it. Enough function remained to suggest that the core still held fragments, shadows of what Selyr once stored. Information worth salvaging—if Tor'Vek could coax it back to life.

He moved toward the main console without hesitation.

Anya followed him in but veered toward the far wall. She didn't speak. Her expression had sharpened into something purposeful. She began touching panels, eyes scanning each screen as it powered up.

He approved of her silence. Of her initiative.

She was not waiting to be rescued. She was here to uncover her own truth.

He turned his focus to the central terminal. The access logs were half-corrupted, degraded by time or intentional damage. Still, he worked quickly, fingers darting across the interface, bypassing security gates and bending subroutines like steel under

flame, reshaping them with precision until the system yielded to his will.

Keywords. Command hierarchies. Psychological pairing matrices. Jump logs. Encryption tables.

He chased them all, tracing their shadows across fragmented code like a hunter stalking prey through dense fog. Every path led deeper into the dark, into the mind of the man who'd built this place to be unreadable.

The data was fragmented, scattered across partitions like a puzzle snapped mid-assembly. Some files referenced interstellar transmission relays—assign Selyr had sent updates somewhere. Tor'Vek began cloning what he could to a secondary drive.

He paused only once—when he saw the date stamp on the last outgoing transmission.

It was sent less than an hour ago.

Which meant Selyr had been here—recently. Not long before Tor'Vek had gone feral tearing through the base to reach Anya. Likely during that final surge of chaos, Selyr had initiated his departure. That would explain the intact systems, the half-scrubbed logs, the fragments left behind like breadcrumbs. It hadn't been abandonment. It had been evacuation.

Tor'Vek's fingers stilled on the console. Not in hesitation. In recalibration. The information he'd uncovered reshaped the perimeter of the problem. Selyr hadn't abandoned the base—he'd staged its departure like a scientist closing the lid on a specimen jar. And now Tor'Vek understood: the test was still running. The trap was still active. His next move had to be precise, and it had to be final.

This wasn't an abandoned lab Tor'Vek was dissecting—it was an active environment, engineered to be observed long after Selyr's physical presence vanished. The data

wasn't simply left behind. It had been curated, monitored, possibly manipulated. Tor'Vek wasn't uncovering a crime scene. He was walking through an open experiment, one Selyr still controlled from a distance.

He did not tell Anya. Not yet. If she knew Selyr had been here so recently—had possibly watched their suffering in real time—her focus would crack. She needed to stay sharp, not spiral. Let her have her clarity now. The truth could wait. Just a few more minutes. Until he had what they needed.

Behind him, he heard her exhale sharply—not fear, but recognition. A terminal flared to life beside her, its screen stuttering before stabilizing, the glow casting lines of pale blue across her features.

Her posture shifted as she leaned closer, fingers poised above the interface. Whatever she saw had her full attention. It wasn't incidental. It was a thread she intended to follow.

“This one's personal,” she murmured. “It has my name on it.”

He glanced over his shoulder. Her jaw was tight, hands steady. She looked fierce, prepared, as if bracing for answers she already suspected. He did not interrupt. She had earned this confrontation with her past. Shielding her now would only weaken the lucidity she fought so hard to gain. Some truths needed to be seen with open eyes.

Turning back to his own terminal, he entered a deeper partition.

Another file blinked to life. This one buried under three levels of override, labeled in Vettian:

CONTINGENCY: SERIES17

He opened it.

And the bracelet on his wrist flared in warning.

The glow from the screen deepened to crimson. Without warning, the bracelet on Tor'Vek's wrist ignited with heat—not just a flare, but a violent surge that slammed through his nervous system like a plasma strike. It was not the slow burn of rising anger; it was a precision-triggered override, invasive and immediate, hijacking every instinct with programmed fury.

His breath caught. Muscles locked. The pressure behind his eyes spiked, his pulse leapt, and the edge of control cracked as he realized—this wasn't a malfunction.

The system had been tampered with. Remotely. Deliberately.

The rage setting had returned.

He staggered back half a step, his teeth gritted, jaw clenching under the sudden pressure. His body fought to stay upright as red-gold light spiraled along his forearm, wrapping like a shackle. The burn wasn't pain. It was provocation.

A crackle of static split the air, sharp and deliberate, like the clearing of a throat before a lecture.

Selyr's voice returned. Smooth. Smug. Mocking. "Oh dear. What have you done?"

Tor'Vek's vision blurred, narrowed at the edges like tunnel walls collapsing inward. A pulse drummed beneath his skull, primal and loud, drowning out thought with sensation. He felt himself slipping—not into madness, but into something more dangerous: something feral and soul-stripping, unrelenting and void of reason. This wasn't him. It was what the bracelet demanded. What Selyr had planned.

He locked his jaw, dug his heels into the floor, and forced out the command through clenched teeth, aiming the words at Anya alone.

“Touch me. Now.”

She spun, alarm blooming across her features. She didn’t hesitate. She flew across the space between them and pressed herself to his back, arms sliding around his chest, palms flat against him, skin-to-skin.

The bond surged—then steadied. Not calm. Not gentle. But with a silent threat, like a predator held in restraint by a single thread of breath. Her touch became the tether, drawing him from the edge, holding his mind together while his body fought to obey.

Tor’Vek drew in a ragged breath, forcing control to return to his limbs as if dragging it from the edge of collapse. His hands trembled over the console, not from weakness but from the sheer force of will it took to stay perfectly still. His knuckles blanched, locked in a death grip against the terminal, each breath a battle to cage what clawed inside him.

The red hue faded to amber. The bond shivered and pulled taut, like a wire strung between them under too much tension, humming with volatile energy just shy of snapping. It wasn’t balance—it was a pause, a breath held too long, a reprieve earned but not promised.

A flicker pulsed in the corner of the screen, subtle but insistent—a system response Tor’Vek hadn’t initiated. Before he could disable it, a video file auto-played on his screen.

Selyr’s voice again, but now in clinical rhythm—recorded.

“...unexpected results from emotional reciprocity. Warrior displays high fusion rate.

Most viable bonding match to date.”

Anya froze against him.

“Female subject selected for accelerated bonding trials due to above-average biological responsiveness and heightened emotional permeability. Chosen specifically to test whether a non-engineered subject could achieve sustainable stabilization of the warrior unit in a field environment. Initial results exceeded predicted parameters, indicating a strong primary bond response. However, long-term viability remains questionable. Should destabilization persist or the subject reject integration protocols, elimination will be required. Backup candidate has been identified from shared genetic source material.”

“What?” she whispered. “Is he talking about my sister, Maya?”

The voice paused.

Then:

“If this subject proves unstable... the younger sibling remains a viable secondary candidate. Genetic pairing model identifies her as the most accessible replacement.”

Tor’Vek’s blood went cold.

This was not random. Not some opportunistic cruelty born of Selyr’s instability. It was part of the plan. Anya had been selected deliberately to test the limits of bonding viability in uncontrolled conditions. Tor’Vek was the experiment’s variable.

The realization clawed at something deep beneath his armor of logic. He hadn’t just been observed—he’d been engineered into the framework of the test. A trigger. A tool. A threat to be manipulated. And that knowledge sparked not confusion, but something

far more dangerous that had nothing to do with the bracelets: rage-charged intent. And now, with the data gathered and the outcome inconvenient, Selyr intended to erase the result.

And replace her.

With Maya.

Cold calculation disguised as science. Selyr wasn't simply observing anymore. He was preparing the next trial.

He didn't look at Anya. Didn't have to.

Because the bracelet flared again—and this time, it was not from his rage.

It was something else. A shift. Not in him—but in her. The bond realigned in a way he did not initiate. It stabilized with intent.

Anya's intent.

She wasn't panicking. She wasn't falling apart. Through the bond, her focus sharpened like a blade—not cold, but cutting. It wrapped around him, steady and unyielding in a way no algorithm or protocol ever had. Her presence didn't calm the storm. It simply refused to be drowned by it.

She was focusing.

He felt it radiate through the link like a beacon—calm, determined, terrifying in its clarity. And it forced him to feel it too.

She would not let Maya be taken.

And neither would he.

Not because he shared her motive. He did not. She wanted to save her sister. He wanted to end the one who had threatened her. They would not always agree on how the path should unfold. For now, the only thing clear was the threat. And the promise: this was not over.

A sharp chirp echoed through the chamber.

Then another. Louder. Urgent.

Tor'Vek's gaze snapped to the far console. The lights above them flickered once, then again—slower, darker. Systems he hadn't accessed powered up on their own. Energy rechanneled through backup cores. The console let out a low whine as power surged through its frame. A buried subroutine, long-dormant, had come online, its code auto-executing without prompt. This wasn't passive defense. It was the final layer of control—an ending written into the walls.

He bypassed a firewall. Another. Deeper access.

Then the words appeared:

AUTODESTRUCT SEQUENCE INITIATED. 04:32 REMAINING.

The air itself seemed to contract.

He turned to Anya without a word, reached for her wrist, and pulled her sharply to his side.

"We are leaving," he said, snatching up the handheld device that contained the data he'd downloaded.

They sprinted.

From speakers above and around them, Selyr's voice followed, still amused, still maddeningly calm—his tone dispassionate, as though delivering the final entry in a lab report. The air itself seemed to contract, as if the base itself resented their survival.

“You’ve taken your data. I’ve extracted my results. This facility has outlived its usefulness—and your presence here is no longer required. Elimination is efficient. Clean. Statistically preferable to further contamination of the test group. I will continue the trials elsewhere—with a new Intergalactic Warrior and the sibling specimen from the same genetic line. Early simulations suggest the next model of bracelets will yield even more adaptive results.”

The hallway outside the vault was already dimming as they raced along it. Overhead, the light panels cracked one by one, sparks raining down in brief, angry showers. Alarms blared in rhythmic bursts that seemed to chase their footsteps.

The floor shuddered beneath them.

Anya stumbled—once, twice—but Tor’Vek’s grip was iron around her wrist, never letting her fall. The bond between them burned hot, not with rage or fear, but with a singular, unrelenting directive: escape.

They tore through the compound, winding through half-collapsed corridors and fractured bulkheads. The floor vibrated with the pulse of deep, destabilizing detonations. Flames licked through open vents above them, and the stench of melting circuitry filled the air. Panels sparked and burst as they rushed past, casting wild shadows across the walls. One hallway behind them erupted into fire with a roar that shook the base, driving them forward faster. It was not a chase. It was a race against disintegration.

Tor’Vek didn’t look back. The explosion that rocked the corridor behind them struck like a thunderclap, blasting them sideways into the wall. He slammed into the metal hard enough to jar his teeth, twisting mid-fall to shield Anya with his body as they hit the floor. Her shoulder struck first, a sharp cry escaping her lips.

He yanked her up with a force that bordered on brutality, not trusting the structure to hold another second. Flames erupted again as a ceiling panel buckled, raining sparks that scorched the air as they sprinted on, battered and breathless. Smoke poured in waves, burning their lungs. Each racing step was a gamble between traction and collapse. The base wasn’t failing. It was devouring itself, determined to take them with it.

When they reached the hangar bay, smoke had already begun to choke the high ceilings, casting the enormous space in a sickly haze. The emergency lighting was failing, flickering in broken pulses across the polished floor. At the far end, his ship stood like a shadow amidst the chaos—distant, motionless, and their only way out.

They ran.

A support beam collapsed in front of them, slamming into the floor with an impact that sent tremors through their legs. They veered around it, lungs burning, feet slipping on the dust-slick metal.

A fireball burst from a nearby maintenance tunnel, the concussive force knocking them sideways. Anya hit the floor hard but rolled, catching herself on her palms. Tor’Vek was there instantly, hauling her to her feet as more explosions echoed behind them.

The ship felt impossibly far, like a mirage at the end of a collapsing world. Every step became a battle—legs numb, lungs searing, the weight of the crumbling base pressing down around them like a tidal wave of heat and smoke. Alarms shrieked overhead in

fractured bursts, each one snapping through the air like a countdown to death. Time and gravity conspired against them, dragging their feet, staggering their rhythm. But they pushed forward, because there was no other option. Because stopping meant dying.

And they refused to die.

He reached the access panel of his ship first, lungs dragging air like fire through his throat. He shoved it open and slapped the control screen—nothing. The panel sparked, then went dark, unresponsive under his hand. For a heartbeat, it felt too late.

The silence that followed was crushing, filled with the shriek of circuitry and the thunder of approaching collapse. He slammed the heel of his hand against the panel again, desperation clawing just beneath the surface.

This was their exit. Their only escape. And it wasn't responding. For one brief, brutal second, he imagined Anya's body in flames, his own pinned beneath debris, the bond severed by fire and steel—and that image alone sent another surge of force through his limbs.

"No," he growled, tapping into the rage that simmered so close to the surface, and slammed his palm into the override node with a force that cracked the panel casing. The emergency circuit whined, then clicked.

The blast doors hissed and parted.

He boosted Anya up the ramp before she could argue, gripping her by the waist and hoisting her bodily through the opening as smoke and sparks churned behind them. Her fingers scrabbled for purchase until she caught the edge and pulled herself in. He didn't wait for thanks, didn't check if she was steady. There was no time for gentleness. Only survival.

Metal screamed behind them, the shrill agony of tearing infrastructure echoing through the hangar like a death knell. Beams cracked, walls buckled, and a column of flame erupted near the base entrance, silhouetting Tor’Vek for a heartbeat in searing gold before he lunged forward.

He dove through the entry as the corridor collapsed in a roar of dust and fire.

The hatch sealed.

But they weren’t safe yet. Not until the ship lifted off, not until the inferno behind them was nothing more than a fading smear in the sky. Anything less was still within Selyr’s reach.

Tor’Vek didn’t wait to exhale. He spun toward the cockpit, fingers flying across the startup sequence. The ship groaned in protest, systems slow to initialize, lights flickering across the console like dying stars. Anya dropped into the copilot seat beside him, her breath ragged, arms wrapped tight around her midsection.

“Come on,” he muttered, going through a list of possible variables and likely issues. “Come on.”

For one harrowing second, nothing happened. A sick weight dropped into Tor’Vek’s gut. What if Selyr had disabled the launch protocols? What if the entire hangar—ship included—was part of the test’s final purge?

He slammed his fist into the console, not out of panic, but sheer refusal combined with rage. This ship would fly. It had to. Anya shifted beside him, her breath ragged, her fingers locking around the edge of her seat. She said nothing, but he felt her gaze flick to the console, then to him. She had no illusions about the danger—not after what they’d just survived. And though her body trembled from exertion, her faith in him was absolute. It didn’t need to be spoken. It lived between them, threaded

through the bond like a silent vow: he would get them out.

Then the engines roared to life.

A low vibration spread beneath their feet, stabilizers engaging as the ship lifted off the deck. Through the viewport, the hangar was a cathedral of fire—support beams collapsing, debris crashing, the blast wave gaining speed.

“Hold on,” Tor’Vek said.

The ship launched into the sky just as the firestorm consumed the structure below, the blast catching the undercarriage and flinging them into the atmosphere like a stone from a slingshot.

The base exploded.

A bloom of light and fury filled the viewscreen, and for a moment, neither of them breathed.

Only then did Tor’Vek say, quietly, finally:

“Now, we are safe.”

Chapter7

ANYA SAT perched on the edge of the pilot's bench, arms around her knees, trying to breathe past the ringing in her ears. The world hadn't stopped burning. It had just changed shape. The heat and panic still lived under her skin, even though the flames were gone. Even though they'd made it out alive.

She could still see it—flames racing up the walls, that last shriek of metal before the hangar collapsed in on itself like a dying star. Her chest hurt, ribs bruised, lungs raw from smoke and terror.

The scent of scorched metal still clung to her skin, and the ship's recycled air felt too thin, too artificial. But none of that explained the real reason she couldn't seem to inhale properly—the strain pressing in from the bond, from the man across the room whose fury hadn't cooled since they escaped.

Tor' Vek.

He hadn't sat still since they launched. He prowled from console to console, not pacing—but moving like a predator stuck in too small a cage. At the ship's long-range comms array, he paused only long enough to issue commands, fingers cutting through the interface with clipped, surgical efficiency. His bracelet still pulsed faintly at his wrist. Not red, not yet, but a deep, unstable gold that shimmered like a warning. It wasn't indecision. It was suppression—barely holding back the fire beneath.

She could feel it through the bond.

That tension.

That heat.

He was keeping it leashed. Just. Every few seconds, he reached back—without looking—and touched her. A hand against her ankle. Beneath her shirt to her bare shoulder. The back of her neck. It was unconscious. Instinctual. Like he was making sure she was real. Or maybe, making sure he still was.

The screen flickered, then steadied.

“Alpha Legion secure channel established,” the ship announced.

Tor’Vek didn’t hesitate. His voice became a weapon.

“This is Third of Alpha Legion. Experimental facility has been neutralized. Selyr is confirmed active. Request immediate extraction protocol for Earth-based human: female, designation Maya...” He spared Anya a brief glance. “You humans use two names, yes?”

“Yes. Anderson.”

“Designation Maya Anderson. She may be under Selyr’s influence. Intercept with caution. Coordinates to follow.”

He turned to her, jaw locked. “Give me her location.”

Anya sat up straighter, fighting through the fog in her head. “Berkeley. California. United States of America. She lives off-campus with three roommates. She usually walks to class—rain sends her to the bus stop on the corner near the café. She studies computer science and always has her headphones in, half-lost in whatever coding

world she's building. If anyone tries to stop her on the street, she probably wouldn't even hear them. And... And she's my twin, so she'll look exactly like me."

He nodded once and transmitted the information in Vettian code, voice crisp, efficient. No emotion. No hesitation. But when Anya mentioned they were twins—"she'll look exactly like me"—something in his eyes shifted. Just slightly. As if she'd said something utterly confusing.

Of course. That would explain why Selyr would see Maya as a viable substitute.

The moment the message was confirmed and encrypted, he shut down the comm link and turned back to her.

As the screen dimmed, his hand returned to her ankle. Not gently, but firmer this time, as if the act of letting go, even for a few seconds, had cost him something he wasn't willing to name. Or repeat.

Anya didn't pull away. "Thank you for putting out that distress signal for Maya."

He slid his hand upward along her leg. His touch didn't say you're welcome—not even close.

It said mine.

Her brows drew together, and she asked quietly, "Do you really think she could be under Selyr's influence?"

He didn't answer right away. His thumb moved in a slow, deliberate stroke over her skin, the motion more about keeping himself under control than comforting her.

"It is possible," he said at last. "He would use anything to reach us. A voice we trust.

Aface we love. If he has taken her, altered her, returned her, it will not be as leverage. It will be as a weapon.”

“So what now?”

Tor’Vek’s gaze slid to her, then back to the console. “Now we find Selyr. And we end him.”

She swallowed hard, the air too tight in her lungs. Her thoughts spiraled—what if he was right? What if killing Selyr would end it all? But how could she gamble Maya’s life on a theory? If Selyr had her, if he was experimenting again, there might not be a “later” to fix this.

The pressure from the bond swelled against her ribs, tense and conflicting, echoing every pulse of the storm building in him. She needed a plan. She needed control. And more than anything, she needed to believe they still had a choice—one that didn’t require sacrificing her sister.

“No,” she finally said. “We go to Earth. We find Maya.”

His posture shifted, the tension tightening across his shoulders. “If we kill him, your sister is no longer in danger.”

“And if he has her already? If he moves her before we get there?” Her voice cracked. “If he uses her and we’re too late?”

“The only way to be too late is to waste time.”

Anya rose to her feet, fists clenched. “She’s not bait!”

“No,” he agreed. “She’s a variable. A dangerous one, if we allow her to remain in his

reach.”

“So which is it?” she demanded. “Earth or Selyr?”

He took a moment to consider and she could tell that everything in him urged they go after Selyr. Then he looked at her. “Earth,” he conceded.

She turned away from him, pulse hammering in relief. As their disagreement had grown, so had the pulse of the bracelet—flaring red. She needed distance to think, to breathe, to escape the overwhelming heat of his logic and fury pressing in from every angle. But she’d barely taken two steps when the bond flared violently, his need for proximity hitting her like a shove between the shoulder blades.

He grabbed her again, his voice low and rough. “Do not walk away from me when the bond is unstable.”

Her chin lifted, eyes flashing. “I can’t stand still just to keep you calm.”

“Then do not make me choose between calm... and keeping you alive.” His voice dropped. “We are both injured. We will not continue this while impaired. You will come to the medbay. Now.”

She stared at him, chest heaving. Then she ripped her arm away and said coldly, “Fine. Let’s get checked out.”

The bond between them pulsed with dissonance—hot, flaring, unsettled, like it refused to allow them separation even for breath.

He took her arm again. Not painfully, but with the force of flaring rage barely restrained. His grip was tight, his breathing sharp. The bond pulsed hot between them, aggressive in its demand. His touch wasn’t about control. It was about

containment—of the fury that surged every time she stepped too faraway.

Anya remained silent. She could feel the heat of him behind her, the way his fingers curled tighter like he needed her tethered as much as she needed space. Her instinct screamed to fight—her sister was still out there, her world still collapsing—but logic told her what Tor’Vek already knew: neither of them could win this argument bleeding and bruised.

She allowed herself to be turned, his hand never leaving her. Her thoughts raced with conflict. Every cell in her body urged her to keep fighting, to tear herself free and demand more time, more answers—but something inside her knew she wouldn’t win that way. Not now. Not like this.

His rage bubbled too close to the surface, and the bond between them buzzed with volatile tension. So she let him guide her. Not because she agreed. But because she could feel the edge he was walking—and if she pulled too hard, they might both go over.

The corridors of the ship were dim and sterile as he led her down the narrow companionway. The hum of power coursed beneath the floor, steady but distant, like it belonged to a world still catching up with them. Every step pressed them closer—physically, mentally—the bond never letting up.

When they reached the medbay, the doors hissed open. White light spilled out, too bright after the chaos. Tor’Vek guided her inside, releasing her only once the scanner lowered over the table.

And then, finally, he stepped back.

Just enough to let the machine begin its work.

Just enough to feel the ache of distance begin to burn.

She lay back, tense and raw, as the auto-scanner slid down over her body. Soft blue light shimmered over her skin, casting soft halos over every bruise, every scrape. The machine clicked and hummed, whirring as it compiled the results, and she felt warmth spreading across her chest and down her spine as the regeneration sequence began—cellular repair targeting damaged tissue, bruised muscle, smoke-scarred lungs.

Her breathing eased incrementally. The ache in her ribs dulled to a throb. Her lungs expanded without burning, her body slowly remembering what calm felt like. But her attention never shifted from Tor’Vek. Not for a second. The scanner was healing her body, yes—but it was him she watched. The unreadable lines of his posture. The way he stared too long at the screen. The quiet tension gathering in the air around him like a storm about to break.

He stood without moving, arms crossed, his body a fortress. But something shifted in his stance. Not a flinch. Not even a breath. Just the smallest edge of stillness, too precise to be casual.

The readout finished with a final tone.

He stared at it.

Didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

She frowned. “What is it?”

No answer.

“Tor’Vek.” When he remained silent, she pushed harder. “Tor’Vek, answerme!”

His eyes remained locked on the data. The golden light of the screen reflected in the violet planes of his irises, making them shimmer with eerie luminosity. They looked unblinking, inhuman—like the data wasn’t just being read, but absorbed, computed, folded into some deeper, colder logic he hadn’t yet decided to share.

She sat up, heart thudding. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Silence.

She swung her legs off the table and stood. Her voice cracked. “Tell me.”

He looked at her then. Finally. And when he spoke, it was low, absolute.

“You are perfect.”

“And that’s somehow wrong?”

“No one is perfect. It is impossible.”

The words hollowed the air between them.

Anya’s mouth opened. Nothing came out. Her knees threatened to buckle, and she clutched the edge of the exam table, her fingers digging in as if clinging to the only thing in the room that hadn’t changed. Her mind tried to reject the words, to rewind time by seconds, minutes—anything to erase the impossibility of perfection. The hum of the scanner, the sterile brightness of the room, even the warmth left by the healing light—all of it vanished under the deafening silence between them.

“Did he do something to me?” She turned away from Tor’Vek and began to pace,

arms wrapped tight around her middle. “Did he change something in me?”

“Unknown.”

She kept pacing. Each step tugged her farther from him, and each time, the bracelet flared. Not with heat—yet—but with pressure. As though cautioning her. As though punishing the space between them.

Behind her, she heard him exhale—sharp, disciplined, but edged with something wilder. Like a predator restraining its lunge. The sound wasn’t a sigh. It was a warning. A signal that his grip on control was slipping, inch by inch, heartbeat by heartbeat.

When she reached the far wall, the bracelet pulsed again. A burst of red-gold shimmered at her wrist. She froze.

A breath later, she felt him.

The bond surged.

He was across the room in seconds.

He didn’t speak. Didn’t ask.

He grabbed her wrist—not to hurt, not to dominate. To connect himself before the fire inside consumed them both. His fingers closed around her with a desperation that wasn’t frantic, but deep-rooted, elemental. She felt it through the bond—his need to hold something real, something steady, while everything else within him threatened to detonate. Letting go wasn’t an option. Not for him. Not now.

The red in his bracelet ignited like flame.

His eyes turned molten.

He stripped off her shirt in one motion, fluid and deliberate. The fabric skimmed over her skin and hit the floor in a whisper, but everything inside her screamed. Her breath caught in her throat. Not from fear—but from the raw intensity rolling off him in waves.

The room felt smaller, hotter. Her heart thundered. Part of her wanted to push him back, to get space and air and clarity. But the other part, the one thrumming in sync with the bond, couldn't stop staring at him. Couldn't ignore the way her skin prickled where he touched her. Couldn't forget what it felt like when the craving overtook them both. She should pull away. She didn't. She couldn't.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you,” he said roughly, “I need your skin on mine.”

Anya tried to protest, to speak—but he was drawing her to him again, his hands firm and urgent, like the space between them had turned toxic and fast, like the only way to stop the burn was to bury it in her.

She inhaled sharply.

Their bodies collided, chests rising in sync, breath catching on contact. The bond flared like a detonation—all-consuming, unfiltered impulse surging between them in a wave that nearly knocked her back. Her fingers fisted in the belt of his trousers as the craving roared through her veins. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't sweet. It was need, pure and primal, fed by his rage and matched by something just as wild in her.

And as they stumbled together toward the narrow berth tucked in the corner of the medbay, he growled against her throat—low, furious:

“What fresh hell has Selyr created with his fucking remote?”

Anya felt her pulse kick. Everything in her wanted to respond—demand answers, scream that this wasn’t fair, that this wasn’t the life she’d imagined just hours ago. But the bond screamed louder. The fire in his eyes wasn’t just rage—it was desperation. And beneath it, something cracked and raw, chained to her.

Words failed her. No protest came. No reply formed. Not with his breath ghosting against her cheek, not with the heat of his body surrounding her like a force field. Every instinct screamed to run—but another, deeper pull kept her rooted.

It wasn’t just the bond. It was the knowledge that he needed her—truly needed her. That she might be the only restraint left keeping him from fracturing entirely. Her shirt was already on the floor, and she stood wrapped in his arms, bare and burning. The hunger emanating off him wasn’t just heat—it was desperation, vibrating through her bones like a sirencall.

Her hands found his jaw, fingers stroking the edge of heat along his skin. She held steady, body unmoving even as her mind reeled. There was no safety in distance. Only in him. Only in this fragile, furious closeness that held them both together.

His grip on her waist tightened. His breath shuddered out like it cost him something.

“I can feel it,” he bit out, his voice low and guttural. “He has combined the rage with the craving. I am fighting it with everything I have... and losing.”

“Let me help you fight it, Tor’Vek. Let me help you back from the edge.”

Her hands braced against his chest, but he didn’t release her. Wouldn’t. His forehead pressed to hers, breath harsh and uneven. “I need you, Anya. Your touch tempers the rage. Your body quiets the craving.”

He exhaled shakily, voice turning more ragged with each word. “But this—just this— isn’t enough. You’re already in my arms, and it’s still not enough. I need more. I need you wrapped around me, skin to skin, breath for breath, until the bond settles... or I burn from the inside out.”

His voice dropped to a growl. “Because I am losing control.”

Her response wasn’t words—it was action. She reached for the belt of his trousers, tugging at the clasp, eyes locked on his. There was no coyness, no hesitation. The bond had them both now, fully, utterly, and she didn’t care if it was programming or instinct or something older and more terrible. She wanted him. Needed him. Because this was the only way to reclaim herself from the rush still pulsing through her chest like an aftershock she couldn’t escape.

He caught her wrists, but didn’t stop her. Just held them there, against his chest, as if to say, Yes. But my way . His eyes met hers for one drawn-out breath, and something passed between them—heat, defiance, surrender—all tangled up in the bond. Then he moved.

He stripped his clothes fast, clinical, every movement sharp with urgency. Then he lifted her, and her legs wrapped around him automatically, like they’d done this a thousand times before. Maybe they had. Maybe in some other reality where they weren’t fugitives, weren’t broken, weren’t burning alive. The thought hit like a bruise—because that life, that version of them, was the one they were fighting to create here. Desperate. Uncertain. But theirs to claim.

He set her down on the medbay berth, following her down, his weight pressing her into the cool surface with bruising intensity. The metal beneath her was hard and unyielding, but it didn’t matter—because he was everywhere. His chest crushed against hers, hips aligned, one thigh pressing between her legs, spreading her open as if he already owned the space between them.

The bond screamed between them, no longer pulsing but roaring—an electric surge that ignited every nerve ending. She could barely draw breath, not from pressure but from the overwhelming, soul-deep hunger that bound them together, body to body, pulse to pulse.

He didn't whisper soft promises.

He didn't ask.

He took.

And she gave.

Their mouths clashed, all teeth and tongue and desperate hunger. He kissed her like he needed it to survive, devouring every breath she offered. His hands roamed with a ferocity that bordered on feral—spreading her thighs, cupping her breasts, dragging his thumbs across her nipples until she gasped against his mouth.

He gripped her hips and drove into her, his thrusts deep, relentless, demanding. She met him with matching fire, her fingers clawing down his back, urging him on. Their bodies collided in rhythm, skin slapping skin, each motion an act of surrender and battle all at once.

Every movement was a defiance—of what she had feared she would become, of everything they were told the bond would dictate. With each surge and thrust, she seized back control, not just of her body, but of her fate. She met him, matched him, giving as good as she got—and in doing so, reclaimed herself.

She reclaimed herself from Selyr. From the programming.

This was her choice.

Her control.

The harder he pushed, the tighter she clung—not to calm him, but to support him.

She wouldn't let him spiral. Wouldn't let the rage win.

She pulled him back, every time he lost the rhythm, every time his breath turned too ragged. Her mouth found the sensitive place beneath his jaw, her teeth grazing skin in a silent warning. Her nails dragged across his shoulders, leaving faint welts in their wake, a reminder that she was still there—guiding him, refusing to let him drown in the storm of his own craving.

Until the bond stopped pulsing red and the rage ebbed from his body like a fever finally breaking, its fire quenched by touch and will and her unwavering presence.

Until the craving gave way to something steadier—something that no longer tore at them, but wove them together. It pulsed low and warm, the fever breaking into a slow, fierce intimacy. No longer hunger, but connection. No longer chaos, but a bond reforged by choice.

At last, his strength gave out. His arms shook and his breath came in ragged bursts as he collapsed against her, panting, spent and silent, his body sinking into hers like it had nowhere else to go. They remained knotted together, his cock still locked deep inside her, the thick base holding them as one. It was a joining neither could break, a link that throbbed with each breath—aliving reminder of the bond that had just rewritten them both.

And finally, finally Anya exhaled.

Chapter8

THE QUIET after was almost worse than the storm before.

Tor'Vek sat on the edge of the sleeping platform, his breathing still uneven, his hands braced loosely against his knees. The heat of their joining still clung to his skin, but it was not enough to explain the churning pressure in his chest.

Anya lay curled on her side beneath a blanket, her bare shoulders rising and falling with every slow, shuddering breath. She looked impossibly small, fragile in a way that reached beneath his armor and struck something raw.

The air in the cabin was heavy with the scent of her—warm, sweet, uniquely hers—and it wrapped around him like a noose. The bond between them pulsed irregularly against his wrist, dragging the memory of her softness, her surrender, deeper into his consciousness.

He had not just claimed her body. She had let him touch something more precious, something unguarded and real, and now it pulsed between them, alive and undeniable. It was a gift he had no right to accept—and yet, he craved it more fiercely than he had ever craved survival itself.

The bracelets should have been calmer now. Satisfied.

Instead, they pulsed off-rhythm, almost—angrily.

Tor'Vek flexed his hand, studying the dark band encircling his wrist and forearm. It

glowed faintly in the low light, the runes buried in the metal occasionally sparking with restless energy.

He should be burning.

Final Flight should have begun in earnest. It was the terminal phase of an Intergalactic Warrior's life cycle—agenetically programmed, irreversible biological shutdown triggered at the end of their 400-year service, marked by escalating heat flashes, emotional instability, and ultimately, total cellular collapse.

After mating, after emotional destabilization, the chemical surge within his body should have triggered a cascade of irreversible biological events: heat flashes, loss of cognitive control, Final Flight overtaking what remained of his logic.

But there was only a faint, flickering unease deep inside him.

An absence where there should have been fire.

He rose silently, moving to the examination table. The smooth surface lit beneath him and began its assessment. Scrolling diagnostic data appeared across the diagnostic screen. It found minor damage which it quickly corrected. But nothing about his Final Flight, as though it had ceased to exist.

Yet the bracelet's pulse against his skin felt... wrong.

He sat up and shut down the diagnostic screen with a curt swipe of his hand.

Behind him, Anya stirred, a soft, involuntary sound escaping her lips. She shifted, the blanket dipping, revealing the long curve of her back—pale, vulnerable, impossibly delicate. Her hair tumbled across the pillow in a silken wave of gold, and along the line of her shoulder, faint bruises and bite marks—his marks—stood stark against her

skin. Evidence of how completely he had claimed her. Evidence of how completely she had lethem.

Tor'Vek clenched his jaw. He could feel her emotions fluttering through the bond—confusion, lingering fear, the sharp ache of longing. She was vulnerable. She did not know if she could trust him.

He shared that uncertainty more than he dared admit.

Some part of him, buried deep beneath years of discipline and centuries of cold logic, wanted to cross the room and gather her against him. To feel her warmth seeping into his skin. To shield her from the consequences he could no longer control. To apologize for what he had taken—and what he could never give back.

His hands flexed at his sides, aching with restraint. The need to bury himself in her softness, in her trust, coiled tighter and tighter, a dangerous thread pulling taut inside his chest. A thread he did not dare follow, because once he started, he feared he would never stop.

The yearning he felt was dangerous—a vulnerability he could ill afford. Attachment was a liability, one that could be exploited, twisted, used against him. And in his world, liabilities were not just costly. They were fatal. The wiser course was distance. Detachment. Cold efficiency. And yet, standing there, watching her small, sleeping form, he felt the first cracks spider through the walls he had spent centuries erecting. Cracks he could neither explain nor repair.

Despite that... the urge remained, twisting tight and dangerous in his chest.

He crossed the room in three strides, pulling on his trousers and fastening the closures with sharp, proficient motions. As he tugged his vest over his shoulders, Anya shifted onto her back, blinking up at him with bleary, confused eyes.

“Tor’Vek?” Her voice was soft, uncertain.

He turned, the words on his tongue stiff and unfamiliar. “You shouldrest.”

A faint line appeared between her brows. “Where are you going?”

“Monitoring the ship’s course.” It was not a complete lie.

She watched him for a long moment, her fingers tightening on the blanket as if she could draw it higher, shield herself from more than just the cool air. Fragile. Bared. Her gaze dipped, lashes lowering, and Tor’Vek caught the faint tremor in her arms, the shallow hitch of her breathing. The bond between them quivered, delicate and unsettled, feeding him a flicker of her uncertainty—and the lingering, painful hope she had not yet extinguished.

It stirred something dark and protective inside him, an impulse he crushed ruthlessly as he turned away.

It also stirred something dangerous inside him—an need so potent it threatened to undo every shred of discipline he possessed. It whispered of claiming her again, more deeply, more irrevocably, binding her to him beyond the bracelets, beyond logic, beyond salvation. It whispered of surrendering to the bond that pulsed and flared between them, a firestorm waiting only for his consent to ignite.

His jaw tightened, and he moved heavily toward the helm.

He sat, the seat creaking under his weight. His hands hovered over the controls, but for once he did not touch them. His gaze drifted toward the viewport, where stars streamed past in an endless, cold procession.

Anya’s quiet movements behind him kept skimming against the edges of his

awareness. His need for her stretched so thin he could hardly bear it. His shirt rustled as she dressed and he realized she had nothing else to wear. He'd have to do something about that. Then the soft pad of her bare feet across the deck.

She moved to the secondary console, pretending to check the ship's system statuses. But he could feel the tension vibrating off her in uncertain waves.

Their bond pulsed—erratic. Disjointed. Hungering.

Tor'Vek closed his eyes briefly. He had intended to keep her safe, detached. But she had already slipped past his defenses in ways he could not explain, weaving herself into the hollow spaces he had long ago forgotten existed.

He thought he had armored himself against such intrusion, yet with a few whispered words and trembling touches, she had breached him more completely than any enemy ever had. It terrified him—not because he feared her, but because he feared himself. What he might become if he allowed himself to want her. What he might destroy if he failed to hold the line.

“We need to talk,” Anya said, her voice breaking the uneasy silence. She wrapped her arms around herself. “Before... before we get to Earth.”

Tor'Vek tensed, though he already suspected the direction this conversation would take. The bond pulsed too urgently, emotions too raw to be ignored. His mind, trained to calculate and dissect, had been tracing the inevitable lines since the moment their bodies had joined. They had crossed a threshold not easily undone.

“Talk about what?” he asked.

She stared at him, frustration flashing in her blue eyes. Her emotions battered the fragile link between them, stripped and unguarded. “About us. About this.”

She lifted her arm slightly, the bracelet glinting in the dim light, the symbol of their binding, their impossible entanglement. Her voice carried a sincerity he could not ignore, a plea tangled in defiance, challenging him to stop pretending he did not already know the truth—that this bond, this woman, was changing everything inside him.

“It is a biological bond,” he said flatly. “Engineered to produce emotional and chemical dependencies.”

Anya flinched, as if he’d slapped her. “You think that’s all it is?”

He forced himself to remain still, submerging himself in the cold, familiar logic that had preserved his sanity for centuries. Detached. Irrefutable. A necessary barrier between what he felt and what he allowed himself to acknowledge. But beneath that armor, something primal stirred, furious and resisting—an instinct that whispered this bond was not just biology. It was choice. It was danger. It was salvation. And it was already too late to run.

“What else could it be?” he asked.

Anya took a shaky breath. “It feels real to me. More real than anything I’ve ever known.”

Tor’Vek looked away, the muscles in his jaw clenching. “Feelings are unreliable indicators of reality.”

“Maybe,” she whispered. “But they still exist.”

The silence between them thickened, echoing against the vast space between her yearning and the steel cage he fought to rebuild around his own heart. The bond pulsed with their unspoken words, the tension so thick it became a tangible force,

gravity drawing him toward her even as every instinct screamed to resist. He knew if he spoke, if he let himself slip even an inch, he would never find his way back to the cold distance he needed. And yet, standing there, with her heart laid bare before him, he found he did not want to.

“This should not be happening,” he said, his voice rough, the words dragged from somewhere deep and unwilling. “And yet, it is.”

“When we get to Earth,” she asked, voice barely above a whisper, “are you going to leave me there?”

Tor’Vek hesitated. Once, he might have convinced himself the logical answer was yes. Sever the bond. Reclaim autonomy. Protect them both from further weakness. But logic had no place here. He could no more leave her than he could sever his own heart from his body. It was no longer just about her—it was about them. The two of them.

He met her gaze, saw the raw vulnerability there—and the stubborn, reckless hope.

“It would be safer for you,” he said finally. “But no. You would be in constant danger if I left you on Earth.”

Anya’s mouth trembled. “Would you leave me if Selyr was dead?” Her voice cracked slightly on the last word, but she did not look away.

Tor’Vek turned back toward the viewport, the stars blurring in his vision.

He knew the truth, as surely as he knew the laws of physics that guided the stars. If Selyr weren’t an issue, he might have convinced himself he could let her go. Might have buried the ache and carried on.

But not now.

“I do not know,” he said, the admission scraping against everything he had ever been.

“As I said... It would be safer for you to return to Earth.”

He heard her breathe out, a soft, wounded sound.

“I don’t want safe,” she said fiercely. “I want real. Even if it’s messy. Even if it’s hard.”

He closed his eyes, feeling the bracelet burn against his pulse.

Real. It was a hard word for him to accept.

Nothing in his life had ever been real. Only duty. Survival. Domination. The antiseptic cadence of existence without meaning. Until her. Until the fierce, impossible light of Anya, burning through every fortress he had built around himself. She was the anomaly he had never accounted for, the one variable that defied logic, and now that he had tasted what it meant to truly belong to someone—to something beyond duty—he knew he would never again be able to pretend otherwise.

Anya moved closer, her presence a warm pressure at his side.

“I know you feel it too,” she said, voice thick with unshed tears. “I can feel it through the bond.”

He said nothing.

She reached out, fingers stroking his hand, tentative but brave.

The bond flared between them, a surge of heat and longing so fierce it stole his breath.

“Tor’Vek,” she whispered.

He finally turned to her, and for one blistering, searing moment, all his walls crumbled. The crushing isolation he had lived with for centuries gave way to her unwavering hope. It was not just lust or biological compulsion that bound him to her now—it was something deeper, something elemental and fierce. Something beyond the bracelets. An acknowledgment that he had found a mate not merely by design, but by fate. She was his. Entirely, irrevocably. And for the first time in his existence, he did not want to run from what he could not control. He wanted to wrap himself in her—in them—and damn the consequences.

He wanted her.

Not because of the bracelet. Not because of engineered biology.

Because she was Anya.

Before he could speak, the ship shuddered violently, throwing them both off balance. Gravity seemed to tilt and twist around them, the floor pitching like the deck of a storm-tossed ship.

Tor’Vek instinctively reached for her, his body reacting before thought could intervene, but the chaos of the ship’s tremor sent them stumbling in opposite directions. The sudden violence of it ripped the fragile moment between them to shreds, replacing aching intimacy with the hard, metallic taste of imminent danger.

He turned sharply, just in time to see Anya stumble against the bulkhead, her bracelet striking the metallic surface with a hollow clang.

The air between them shifted instantly.

The pulse from his bracelet flared—hot, searing—and a corresponding surge answered from hers.

Tor’Vek’s chest tightened painfully.

He rose swiftly, reaching her in two long strides. “Any—”

His voice was raw, jagged with the surge of protectiveness and something deeper he could not name. He caught her shoulders in his hands, steadying her, feeling the way her entire body shuddered against him. The ship lurched again, throwing sparks from the nearby console, but for a moment, his entire focus narrowed to the woman in his grasp. She was more than his bondmate. More than duty. She was life—and he would not let anything tear her from him.

She gasped, her hands clutching at the wall as if it could steady her, her body swaying dangerously with the ship’s lurch. Panic flickered across her features, but beneath it Tor’Vek caught a flicker of something else—determination. She would not crumble, even when the universe itself seemed to buckled under her feet. Her courage, even in the face of terror, only tightened the band around his chest, fueling the savage need to protect what was his at any cost.

“I—I don’t know what happened—” Her voice broke, thick with rising panic.

Tor’Vek extended one hand toward her—then stopped himself.

The craving in her eyes hit him like a physical blow, knocking the breath from his lungs with its burning intensity. It was not a polite hunger, not a whispered plea—it was a feral, desperate need that burned through the bond with stunning force. His body reacted instinctively, every muscle rigid, every nerve ending alight. The ship could have torn itself apart around them and he would have still felt her need, as tangible as a hand fisting in his chest, demanding not just his touch—but him. All

ofhim.

And an answering rage twisted inside him, sharp and vicious, demanding an outlet. It was a wildfire racing under his skin, fueled by the bond's chaotic surge and the primal instinct to claim, to fight, to dominate whatever force threatened what was his. The taste of it filled his mouth like blood and iron, and he gritted his teeth against the urge to tear apart anything—anyone—that dared to come between him and Anya.

He pulled his hand back into a fist against his thigh, the tendons straining under the force of his restraint. Every instinct screamed at him to seize her, to bury himself in her warmth and steady himself against the chaos tearing through him. His muscles locked rigidly as he forced the primal urge down, planting himself in discipline and willpower, even as the bond between them throbbed with unbearable demand.

“The bracelets have—shifted,” he said roughly. “Emotion modulation compromised.”

Her wide blue eyes locked onto his, pleading and terrified, shimmering with unshed tears she refused to release. In their depths, he saw the raw, unguarded trust she placed in him—trust he did not deserve yet could not bring himself to reject. The bond flared painfully between them, binding them closer with every heartbeat, making a mockery of the barriers he had once thought unbreakable.

The ship jolted again, harder this time. Alarms blared to life across the consoles.

Navigation override engaged.

Autopilot locked.

Coordinates rerouted.

They were no longer on course for Earth.

Tor’Vek’s hands flew over the controls, fingers moving with mechanical precision, rerouting power, attempting manual overrides, but the bond flared erratically between them, clouding his focus.

Anya stumbled forward, grabbing his upper arm, her face pale, her breathing shallow—and through the bond, he felt the surge of her craving crash into him, unfiltered and urgent. The fierce need radiating from her was impossible to ignore, a potent force that tangled with his own rage, dampening it slightly, stabilizing him even as the ship pitched wildly. Her nearness was both a balm and a threat, and every instinct he had warred between protecting her and claiming her all over again.

“Can you stop it?” she gasped.

Tor’Vek gritted his teeth, fighting his ungovernable fury. “Attempting.”

The ship shuddered violently again, pitching sideways. Tor’Vek grabbed Anya, pulling her against him as systems flashed red across every screen. The bond pulsed wildly, the craving from Anya and the rage from Tor’Vek colliding between them like a living storm.

He released her reluctantly, forcing her into the copilot seat and fastening the crash restraints as he locked into his own. The distance between their separate chairs was a jarring, unwelcome reality. Every inch between them frayed the fragile stability he had clawed back, the bond pulsing frantically as if trying to span the physical gap. His hands tightened instinctively around the restraints, muscles trembling from the effort to stay connected when every instinct urged him to tear free and pull her back into his arms.

The main screen shifted, displaying the incoming planet—harsh, mountainous, and unfamiliar, its surface broken by jagged cliffs and swirling clouds the color of bruises. Violent weather systems clashed across the landscape, and vast stretches of

wilderness promised little safety and even less mercy. A wild world, teeming with danger, every inch of it an open threat to their survival.

“The atmospheric turbulence is extreme,” Tor’Vek said tightly. “If we breach at this speed...”

He didn’t finish. He didn’t have to.

Anya’s fingers found his wrist, clutching desperately. Her touch steadied the bond for one precious heartbeat.

He managed a few quick reroutes, slowing their descent marginally—but not enough to shift the inevitable. Every calculation, every frantic adjustment only bought them seconds, not salvation. The ship’s systems fought him at every turn, sluggish and unresponsive under the foreign override. A thin sheen of sweat broke across his brow as he forced the engines into a reduced burn, trying to blunt the worst of the coming impact. It was not enough. It would never be enough.

Tor’Vek glanced at her, memorizing the fierce determination in her wide blue eyes—a resilience that burned as brightly as any warrior’s before a final stand. It cut through the haze of rage and desperation crowding his senses, erasing everything but the singular purpose that remained: protect her. Protect what was his.

“Hold on,” he growled.

They broke through the atmosphere in a scream of fire and metal.

Chapter9

THE SHIP veered hard to port, alarms screaming through the cockpit. Anya slammed back into her seat, the restraints biting into her shoulders as the floor tilted beneath her.

Tor’Vek’s fist smashed into the control panel, a sharp crack of metal giving way under the blow. Sparks erupted from the console, a jolt of static electricity shooting up his arm as the ship shuddered in protest. Asnarl tore from his throat, low and vicious. The rage he’d barely held back for hours surged dangerously close to the surface, and for a moment, she thought he might rip the entire console apart with his bare hands.

“Stabilizers offline,” the ship’s AI droned, maddeningly calm as another series of red lights flared to life.

Anya fought the impulse to fling herself at Tor’Vek, her muscles straining against the restraints as desperate need and fear waged war inside her. The craving tore through her, sharp and urgent, almost impossible to resist. Her body screamed to fling herself at him, to bury herself in his heat and strength, but the belts across her chest and waist pinned her firmly in place.

“Tor’Vek!” she gasped. “Can you—?”

“I know,” he barked, his hands flying over the remaining operational controls. His fingers moved with brutal precision, fighting the ship’s erratic spins.

The deck pitched again, the restraints digging deeper into her body, bruising her ribs

and shoulders with every violent jolt. Tor’Vek yanked at his own straps, one arm snapping free just in time to slam a stabilizer lever back into position.

“Brace,” he ordered, his voice a hard command.

There was no time to argue. No time to think. The ship jerked erratically as he fought for a controlled landing, guiding the crippled vessel toward a clearing below.

They hit the deck with bone-jarring force, the impact reverberating through every part of the ship. The emergency dampeners kicked in at the last second, absorbing most of the shock, but not enough to prevent the vicious blow that whipped Anya against her harness.

Sparks rained from damaged panels, and the smell of burnt wiring filled the air. Systems groaned under the strain, the deck vibrating beneath their feet as warning lights flashed erratically across the console, the sharp stench of burnt metal heavy in the air. But the core engines held. Life support remained intact. The ship was battered, scorched, and leaking in places—but it was still whole. Damaged, but repairable.

Anya gasped, the breath knocked from her lungs. But she was alive. Shielded by Tor’Vek’s quick actions, by the ship’s final desperate efforts to protect its passengers.

His body moved in the seat beside her, massive and trembling with exertion. The bond between them vibrated with frantic, pulsing energy.

For a moment, neither of them moved, locked in their seats. The world tilted back and forth around them, the ship settling deeper into the earth with creaks of protesting metal.

Then, slowly, Tor’Vek disengaged his remaining restraint with a sharp jerk. His hand

reached across to Anya, fingers working the release mechanism on her harness with brisk, competent efficiency.

“You are intact?” he demanded, his voice rough with strain.

“Y-yeah,” she managed, her voice shaking. “Thanks to you.”

He said nothing, but his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. He rose to his feet in a smooth, predatory motion and offered his hand.

She took it without hesitation, her fingers curling around his. His grip was firm, steadying her as he pulled her from the chair.

Outside, something exploded far off in the distance, sending a fresh vibration through the deck beneath them. Tor’Vek’s head snapped up, his expression darkening.

“We must move.”

Anya nodded, adrenaline sparking through her veins. Whatever had forced them down wasn’t finished with them yet.

Tor’Vek hesitated, scanning the cracked control panel. His fingers moved swiftly, activating what systems still responded. “Ship, atmospheric analysis.”

“Processing,” the AI replied. A moment later, it added, “Breathable. Slightly elevated particulate matter from crash debris. No toxins detected.”

Tor’Vek gave a short nod and turned back to Anya. “We can breathe the air.”

Without releasing her hand, he led her toward the hatch. Despite the ship’s battered state, the core systems whirled to life at his command, the door sliding open with a

heavy hiss. Damaged but salvageable.

A faint tremor vibrated through the scorched floor beneath their feet, and somewhere beyond the broken hull, steam hissed into the air.

The hatch groaned as it lowered, a plume of acrid smoke curling into the cockpit.

Before stepping out, Tor’Vek paused and crossed to a storage compartment near the hatch. With swift efficiency, he retrieved a lightweight field jacket—the smallest he could find—and a pair of durable leggings designed for flexible movement, and boots. Without a word, he handed them to Anya.

“Put these on,” he said, his voice rough. “You will need protection against the elements.”

Anya yanked the field jacket over Tor’Vek’s shirt and shoved into the leggings, her fingers fumbling in haste. The boots followed, a bit too large, but serviceable. She coughed against the pungent smoke, pulling the jacket’s collar up over her mouth and nose, blinking against the sting in her eyes. The outside world looked even worse up close—an endless stretch of jagged, blackened earth, churned and scarred as if by countless impacts.

The air was heavy, almost greasy, filled with the scent of scorched metal and something sharper, more organic. The gravity here felt slightly skewed, each step oddly weighted, as though the planet resented their presence.

Tor’Vek descended first, scanning the terrain with sharp, predatory efficiency. He reached back, his hand closing firmly around Anya’s wrist, guiding her down the ramp after him. The contact sent a shudder down her spine, her craving flaring to life like a flash fire, searing through her nerves with alarming speed. Her heartbeat skittered, not entirely from fear.

She stumbled as her boot caught on a twisted piece of wreckage. Tor’Vek caught her again, yanking her flush against his body with a speed that left her breathless.

“Stay close,” he said, his voice low and rough in herear.

No need to tell her twice.

The bracelets pulsed, heat radiating from them in slow, rhythmic waves that matched the frantic pace of her heart.

They moved quickly, weaving through the debris field scattered around the ship. Every breath Anya took tasted like smoke and iron. A high-pitched whine echoed in the distance, followed by another distant explosion. Whether it was lingering environmental instability from the crash or something else entirely, Tor’Vek stiffened beside her, his instincts sharpened. Something was wrong—and whatever it was, it was still out there.

Tor’Vek steered them toward a craggy outcropping of rock—the only shelter visible in the barren wasteland. Systems aboard the ship were failing rapidly. Unstable reactors could trigger a secondary explosion at any moment. A low overhang of stone jutted outward, barely big enough to shield them from view, but offering the only available protection in the open wasteland. It would have to do.

Anya scrambled under the outcrop, crouching low. Her limbs trembled from more than exertion. The bond between them vibrated with chaotic energy, her own emotions amplified by his proximity—fear, exhaustion, and a yearning so intense it made her dizzy.

Tor’Vek knelt beside her, his large frame half-curved around her in a way that felt fiercely protective, even as tension radiated off him in waves.

She sucked in a breath, battling a sharp spike of panic that tried to take hold. Fear clawed at the edges of her mind, but she forced it back, latching onto a thin thread of determination. She had survived this far. She could survive a little longer. She had to. “Yourship...”

“Damaged but repairable,” he confirmed, checking a watch-like device on his wrist before scanning the sky. Was it connected to the ship’s AI? A reasonable assumption, all things considered. “Hull breaches minor. Engines stable. Life support operational.”

Anya exhaled shakily. That was something, at least.

She shifted slightly, and that’s when she saw it—a thin line of blood trailing down Tor’Vek’s side, disappearing beneath the torn edge of his uniform.

“You’re hurt,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

He dismissed it with a curt shake of his head. “Superficial.”

But she didn’t miss the way his jaw tightened.

Without thinking, she reached out. Her fingers swept over the warm, blood-slicked skin just above his hip. The bond flared so fiercely it stole her breath—his pain, his need, his restraint all slamming into her at once.

Tor’Vek went rigid.

“Do not,” he bit out, his voice a low, broken growl.

She snatched her hand back as though burned, her chest heaving.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

He closed his eyes for a long moment, fighting for control. When he spoke again, his voice was rough but steadier. “It is... not your touch that wounds. It is the bond.”

Her heart twisted painfully in her chest.

They crouched in silence, the air between them thick with unspoken things. The heat of Tor’Vek’s body pressed against her side, and the slow, ragged draw of his breath filled the small space between them, each sound a reminder of the volatile need they both struggled to contain. Around them, the world crackled with distant threats. But here, beneath this battered outcrop, the greater danger felt terrifyingly close.

And it was not out there.

It was inside them.

Tor’Vek shifted slightly, his thigh contacting hers, and the bond pulsed again—hot, hungry, and impossible to ignore. Anya’s breath hitched, the shock of sensation slamming through her so hard she had to lock her knees to keep from lunging at him. Every nerve ending screamed for more, for touch, for release.

Anya bit down on a whimper. She squeezed her hands into fists, nails digging into her palms. It didn’t help. Nothing helped. The desire tore through her like a living thing, curling low and hot in her belly, flooding her with an ache that was no longer just fear or adrenaline.

She needed him.

Not rationally. Not sensibly. Her body, her soul—whatever the bracelet had touched inside her—screamed for it.

He felt it too.

She could see it in the strain rippling through his massive frame, the way his hands flexed against his thighs, the way his breath sawed in and out of his lungs like each inhale was a battle. His eyes—still faintly lit with that impossible violet glow—locked onto her, and for one harrowing second, she thought he might lose the last thread of control holding him back.

Tor'Vek shifted closer, his movements sharp and deliberate. His large hand came up, hovering near her jaw but not touching. His restraint was palpable, carved into every tight line of his body. But the bond between them pulsed harder, demanding, aching.

Anya swallowed hard. “What’s happening to us?”

His voice was a ragged rasp. “The bond is escalating.”

“I can feel it,” she whispered.

The need clawed at her, raw and unrelenting. She wanted to touch him, to press against him, to ease the roaring ache tearing through her.

His hand dropped to his side, fingers flexing once before tightening into a twitch of barely suppressed violence, a tremor of rage running through his entire arm. He exhaled a hard breath through his nose, the effort of holding back evident.

“If I lose control,” he said, his voice low and vicious, “there will be nothing gentle about it.”

She knew. God help her, she knew.

Still, she whispered, “Then don’t.”

The words cracked something inside him.

With a growl that sounded ripped from his chest, he closed the distance between them. His hands found her waist, his grip rough but trembling with restraint. He yanked her closer until there was no space between them, the heat of his body searing through the thin material of her borrowed clothing.

Anya gasped, her fingers flying up instinctively—not to push him away, but to steady herself against the solid wall of his chest.

Tor’Vek dropped his forehead to hers, his breath hot and ragged against her skin. “You calm it,” he whispered. “When you are near.”

Her heart thundered against her ribs. “Then stay close.”

A low sound escaped him, half anguish, half triumph. His arms tightened, hauling her more firmly against him as though sheer proximity could relieve the storm of rage still burning beneath his skin.

Anya’s craving surged so violently it left her breathless—a brutal, desperate need to tear away the last barriers of clothing between them and feel him, all of him, skin to skin. She wanted to drag him down over her, have him take her again and again until the hunger inside her was nothing but ash.

The bracelets pulsed again, a deep throb vibrating through their bodies, syncing heartbeats and breaths into a chaotic rhythm that crashed through them like a tidal wave.

Anya squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the world, the danger, the terror—and the staggering need building between them. A flash of guilt twisted through her, fear whispering that if she surrendered to this craving, she might lose

more than her body—she might lose herself.

Tor’Vek’s lips brushed the shell of her ear, a touch so light it sent a shiver skimming down her spine. “If I give in...” he began, but the words broke off, as if he couldn’t voice the fear clawing inside him.

“We survive first,” she whispered back. “Everything else... later.”

For a moment, neither moved, their need to endure pressing down on them harder than the gravity of this alien world. Then, reluctantly, Tor’Vek loosened his hold, enough to shift them into a more defensive position beneath the rocky outcrop.

Anya sagged against him, her body trembling from adrenaline, exhaustion—and something deeper. Something terrifyingly raw.

Tor’Vek remained alert, his arms partially around her, every muscle tense in readiness. The heat of his body radiated against her side, and the slow, ragged pull of his breath grazed her ear, each sound a sharp reminder of the tension pulsating just beneath the surface. Protecting her. Centering himself.

Their battle wasn’t over. It had barely begun.

“We must find a safer location,” Tor’Vek said at last, his voice low and rough against her ear. “This position is too exposed.”

Anya nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Her whole body still hummed with want, but the urgency of survival gave her a tenuous grip on focus.

“How far?” she managed to croak.

He tilted his head, activating the comm link to the ship’s AI. His hand remained

firmly wrapped around her waist, as if the idea of letting go even for a second was intolerable. “Status on immediate surroundings,” he commanded.

“Visual obstructions detected. Elevation required for optimal mapping and threat assessment,” the AI responded calmly.

Tor’Vek’s jaw tightened. “We climb.”

Her stomach twisted. She hated climbing—especially now, when every ragged breath and trembling muscle threatened to send her hunger spiraling out of control—but she nodded tightly, knowing they had no choice. “That means we go up, right?” she managed to joke.

Tor’Vek’s mouth quirked—a micro-expression, almost invisible. A tiny spark of warmth flared in Anya’s chest, absurdly out of place given their situation, but impossible to deny. For a heartbeat, it was just the two of them—no crash, no enemies, no fear—only the fragile thread pulling them closer.

“Affirmative.”

Anya blew out a breath, willing strength into her limbs. “Then let’s move before we both turn into sitting ducks.”

He helped her to her feet, his hand never leaving her body. The second they broke full contact, the bracelets pulsed harder, sending a wave of destabilizing heat between them. Anya stumbled, and Tor’Vek yanked her back into his side without hesitation.

“Contact stabilizes,” he muttered, half to himself.

They moved cautiously across the broken terrain, the ship looming behind them like a wounded beast. The terrain was treacherous—craters, jagged rocks, patches of

unstable earth that crumbled beneath their feet.

Several times, Anya faltered—sometimes from sheer physical exhaustion, sometimes from the desire clouding her senses and making her limbs clumsy. Each time, Tor’Vek caught her, steadying her with a touch that grew rougher, less restrained. His instincts, sharpened by the bond, were no longer purely protective. There was a possessiveness to them now, proclaiming that bled through every gesture.

When they reached the base of a sharp incline, Tor’Vek paused, scanning the horizon. He cursed softly in a language Anya didn’t recognize.

“What?” she gasped.

“Movement. Unknown entities. Approximately six hundred meters west.”

Anya’s blood turned to ice. “Marauders? Selyr used Marauders.”

“Doubtful. More likely natives.”

He turned to her, the faint glow in his eyes intensifying. “We climb. Faster.”

He boosted her upward first, his strength a terrifying contrast to the gentleness with which he handled her. Once she scrambled onto a ledge, he followed with fluid, predatory grace.

They climbed in silence, the bond between them burning hotter with every agonizing foot. Sweat slicked Anya’s palms, her muscles trembling, each step a battle against her own weakening control. When Anya slipped near the top, Tor’Vek caught her again—this time pulling her flush against him, her back against his chest, one arm locked around her waist.

She felt his breath against the curve of her neck, the brutal tension in his body barely contained.

“Tor’Vek—”

“Move,” he rasped. “Before I forget myself.”

Heart hammering, she surged forward, scrabbling over the lip of the incline. Tor’Vek hauled himself up behind her in one swift movement, immediately positioning himself between her and the threat below.

They crouched low, hidden by a natural rise in the terrain. Below them, indistinct figures moved through the wreckage—scavengers or worse.

Anya pressed closer to Tor’Vek, instinct overriding caution. His body tensed, vibrating with the effort to stay still.

“Endure,” he whispered.

She nodded, swallowing the frantic pulse of want tearing through her.

They stayed like that, silent, as the figures drifted further into the distance.

The desperate need didn’t vanish. It clawed deeper under her skin, simmering hotter with every heartbeat.

But survival—together—came first.

And for now, it was enough.

Chapter10

TOR'VEK CROUCHED over Anya, his body a solid wall between her and the creatures that prowled the wreckage below. His rij vibrated softly against his wrist, feeding him raw environmental data, but he barely needed the input. Instinct—hot, violent, twisting under his skin—already told him everything he needed to know.

They were not Marauders.

The ship's scan confirmed it. Primitive hominids. Low intelligence. Minimal technology. But numerous, opportunistic, and dangerously unpredictable.

Tor'Vek exhaled slowly through his nose, the heat of rage prickling under his skin, his muscles twitching with the roaring impulse to rise and crush them all. Every muscle in his body vibrated with restraint, adam straining against the flood of fury unleashed inside him.

Beneath him, Anya shifted, her body sweeping against his. The light contact seared across his awareness, a brand of heat against the cold steel of his rage.

She made a soft, broken sound—half whimper, half gasp—and he realized with brutal clarity that she was fighting her own war.

Lust.

The bond between them pulsed, a low throb that matched the frantic pace of her heartbeat. Her scent—sharp with fear and sweeter with craving—hit him hard,

scraping against the frayed edges of his control.

His fists curled into the dirt, fingers digging into the broken soil as he forced himself to stay motionless. Protection was paramount. Logic demanded it. But his body—the primitive, brutal core of him—wanted something else entirely.

To seize. To claim. To mark.

His jaw locked. His rij chimed quietly again, drawing him back from the edge. Environmental threat: Moderate. Recommend immediate disengagement or escalation of deterrent force.

He chose.

Subvocalizing the command, he triggered the rij's defensive pulse.

A soft, invisible shockwave rippled out from the ship, triggered remotely by Tor'Vek's command through his rij, carrying a frequency calibrated to disrupt nervous systems without causing lasting harm.

Below them, the hominids shrieked—araw, animal sound—and scattered in a chaotic tangle of limbs and hoarse cries. Some fled into the dense foliage. Others dropped to the ground, writhing briefly before scrambling to escape.

The tension in the air fractured, the immediate threat scattering like dust on the wind.

But the tension inside him did not ease.

It sharpened.

He shifted his weight subtly, his body still covering Anya, his hand flattening

instinctively against her lower back to keep her in place.

She trembled beneath him, her small frame vibrating with need and terror, her pulse a frantic drum against his senses.

Tor'Vek closed his eyes for a heartbeat, wrestling his instincts back into their cage.

They were safe.

For now.

But if he stayed this close to her much longer, safe would mean surrendering to the violent, ravenous need tearing through him—a need that might shatter both of them beyond repair.

He forced himself to lift his head, scanning the clearing with sharp, ruthless precision. No more movement among the wreckage. The primitive creatures were in full retreat, their disorganized ranks broken.

The rij fed him new data: the environmental scan was complete. Terrain mapped. Immediate threats catalogued. No other life signs within kilometers.

Good.

Tor'Vek subvocalized a new command, pulling a streamlined map overlay onto his visual field. There were scattered depressions and fissures farther out—possible natural shelters—but none offered the defensive integrity of the ship itself.

Returning was the logical choice—but even as he clung to strategy, the searing bond between them eroded logic with every pulse, dragging him closer to a breaking point he could no longer ignore.

He shifted his attention back to Anya. Her body still trembled under his hands, her skin hot through the thin fabric separating them. Her breathing was shallow, ragged, her body trembling with feverish heat as the craving gnawed at what little strength she had left.

“We are returning to the ship,” he said, his voice rough with restraint. “It offers better protection.” His hand tightened fractionally against her spine. “You will stay close.”

She nodded, a jerky movement, her eyes wide and luminous in the dim light. He could see the struggle etched into every line of her body. Her craving clawed at her, just as his rage gnawed at him.

It would be a race—one that would end with either survival or surrender, with their bodies lost to need and their minds swallowed by the bond.

Which would break first: their bodies—or their wills?

Without another word, Tor’Vek rose, hauling her against him with rough urgency, the suppressed desire vibrating through his every movement. Holding her was agony—the searing heat of her body pressed against his, the scent of her pheromones thick in the air, each ragged breath from her mouth scraping over his control like a blade. Every instinct demanded he take, possess, claim—but he forced himself to move, to endure, knowing that surrender would be absolute. Her arms wrapped around his neck instinctively, her legs gripping his hips as he lifted her completely.

The instant their bodies locked together, the bond surged—ajolt of pure, electric need slamming through them both. Their heartbeats thundered in wild synchrony, muscles seizing with the force of restraint. Heat poured off their bodies, ablinding, urgent energy that made Tor’Vek’s vision blur for a heartbeat.

Every inch of Anya’s soft, trembling form molded against his hardened frame,

fanning the firestorm roaring through him. The bond howled in his blood, demanding more, demanding everything, as they clung to the shreds of control slipping fast from their grasp.

Anya choked on a soft cry, burying her face against his throat.

Tor'Vek set his jaw and moved, every step hammering his control thinner, weaker.

They had to reach the ship.

Before it was too late.

Tor'Vek moved swiftly, despite the ache of his injury, navigating the broken terrain with Anya clutched tightly against him. Every stride jarred her closer, his need for her outweighing the pain from his wound. Every heartbeat deepened the dangerous, burning awareness between them. The broken ground shifted treacherously underfoot, but his focus never wavered from the fragile burden in his arms—fragile only in body, never in the force she exerted over him.

She buried her face against his throat, her shallow breaths burning against his skin. Her scent—sweet, sharp, and searing with hunger—wrapped around him, making his blood thunder in his veins.

His muscles flexed beneath her weight, bunching with each stride, vibrating with the brutal, contained force of his rage and the answering pull of her desperate need. Every step became a war against the primal instinct to stop, to claim her here and now with no thought to the danger still surrounding them.

The desire radiating off Anya battered Tor'Vek relentlessly, a stabbing intensity that made his heart slam against his ribs and sent a dangerous tremor through his locked muscles. He could feel her slick heat against him, her need so raw and potent it

stripped the air from his lungs.

Every tiny shift of her body against his own was a torment, stoking the fire under his skin until his restraint burned to ashes. Her nails dug into his shoulders, a desperate, pleading pressure he felt in every nerve. He welcomed the bite of her touch. It was a sharp pain that held him to purpose.

Tor'Vek snarled, locking every muscle to keep from throwing her down and losing himself completely. The bond between them pulsed harder with each step, a feral drumbeat in his blood, sharpening both their struggles to a razor's edge. His pulse roared in his ears, deafening him to everything but the feel of her against him, the scent of her soaking into his skin.

None of this was normal. He was a creature of logic, bred for discipline and control. He had lived his entire existence mastering emotion, not surrendering to it. But with her trembling against him, soft and searing and impossibly vital, he found he no longer gave a damn. Control was an illusion. All that mattered now was her—needing her, protecting her, taking her.

He felt her shaking against him. Heard the tiny, gasping breaths she fought to suppress. Smelled the intoxicating proof of her desperate need. She clung to him, thighs tightening around his hips with each jarring movement, breasts flattening against the hard planes of his chest.

Every instinct in him roared to answer her, his fists clenching so hard his knuckles ached, his vision darkening at the edges with the violent, consuming need to take her. To sink into her heat and fuck her until the rage—and the world—disappeared. His hands tightened possessively on her thighs, his fingertips digging into the soft flesh as he fought to hold himself back.

“Hold on,” he rasped, his voice a broken growl, half-command, half-plea.

Anya whimpered, squeezing her legs tighter, her hips grinding against him in helpless friction. Tor'Vek's breath hitched violently, his entire body jerking under the onslaught of sensation. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed against her, a brutal reminder of how close he was to losing every shred of control he still clung to. The friction set his blood ablaze, the sensation short-circuiting his every thought but one—get her safe, then claim what already belonged to him.

His control shredded a little more with every step. It felt like walking through fire, every muscle locked, every breath a battle.

The ship loomed ahead, battered but still standing, a distant promise of shelter they had to reach. He tightened his hold on her and pushed harder, the pounding of his boots against the cracked earth echoing the violent rhythm of his heart.

They had to make it.

Or they would tear each other apart before they ever reached safety.

They were nearly at the ship when the last threat revealed itself.

Two primitive hominids burst from the undergrowth, their guttural cries cutting through the smoke-heavy air. They carried crude weapons—clubs fashioned from scrap metal and stone—but it was not the tools that made Tor'Vek pause.

It was the look in their eyes.

Desperation. Hunger. The feral awareness of cornered predators willing to risk everything for a kill.

The instant Tor'Vek spotted the threat, he pivoted sharply, shifting Anya behind him with a force that brooked no argument. His body snapped into a defensive stance,

arms wide, muscles locked, shielding her as the rage within him roared to life, placing his body between her and the danger.

The moment their contact broke, the bond inside him bucked violently. Rage exploded through him unchecked, aflood of primal fury that tore through the fragile dam of his restraint. His body coiled with lethal purpose, instincts snapping free of the last chains of civility.

A snarl ripped from deep in his chest—a harsh, savage sound no human throat could have made. It rolled out over the clearing like a thunderclap, primal and raw, a warning and a promise.

The hominids faltered.

But they didn't retreat immediately. They circled, warily, their shoulders hunched, clubs twitching in their grips. One bared his teeth in a silent, desperate challenge, a broken snarl that exposed jagged, yellowed fangs. Tor'Vek answered in kind, peeling back his own lips in a cold, deliberate display—his sharp gold-capped canines flashing like molten daggers in the smoke-heavy light. The other hominid let out a high, nervous yip, trying to summon courage that dissolved before it reached his trembling legs.

Tor'Vek didn't move. He let them see him. Really see him. The cold, unrelenting force barely held in check beneath his skin.

The bond between him and Anya pulsed frantically, her terror a rapid drumbeat against his mind, fueling the rage snarling beneath his skin even as it connected him to a single, brutal purpose: protect her.

He could feel her standing behind him, frozen, too afraid even to breathe. And through that bond, something sharp and agonizing twisted deep inside him. He would

not let them reach her.

Tor'Vek let the rage uncoil fully within him, letting it bleed into his posture, his bearing. His hands flexed slowly at his sides, the long bones of his fingers curling into claws. His violet gaze locked onto the nearest attacker, burning with a feral light that dared them to move.

One took a hesitant step forward. Foolish.

Tor'Vek lunged a single step—fast, a whipcrack of motion that snapped a brittle branch underfoot—and bared his teeth, muscles rippling beneath his skin in a flash of brutal warning.

The creature shrieked and stumbled back, the stink of its fear flooding the clearing. Sweat and unwashed flesh and terror clung to the heavy, stagnant air, filling Tor'Vek's nostrils, feeding the beast that still clawed inside his ribs.

They hesitated, the first snarling and lifting its club half-heartedly, the other beginning to back away.

Tor'Vek bared his teeth wider, letting a low, rumbling growl vibrate from his chest, a sound meant for creatures that understood dominance by instinct, not intellect.

With a strangled cry, the first broke and ran, crashing back into the underbrush. The second hesitated—abreath from death—before following, stumbling in its panic.

Tor'Vek didn't pursue. He could have. Every muscle in his body screamed to give chase, to dominate, to obliterate any threat to what was his—a possessiveness so fierce it twisted against his instincts, a flicker of resentment cutting through the hunger, questioning if he had become more beast than warrior. His limbs trembled with the restraint it took not to hunt them down, not to spill blood on the earth and

silence the primal hunger once and for all.

But he stayed rooted where he was, fists flexing uselessly at his sides, the rage snarling unchecked inside him. Only the knowledge that Anya waited just behind him, vulnerable and trembling, gave him the tether he needed to hold the line.

He stayed still until the stench of fear faded into the acrid haze that still clung to the clearing.

After a moment, breathing hard, he turned back to her. The instant his hands closed around her waist again, the rage bucked and recoiled—still wild, but caged once more by her touch.

He stood there for a long moment, his forehead dropping briefly to hers, the brutal tempo of his heart hammering against her skin. The bond between them crackled with wild, chaotic energy—terror, need, relief—all tangled into something neither of them could name.

Slowly, methodically, he bent and scooped Anya into his arms, yanking her against his chest with a ferocity that bordered on desperate. Her softness slammed against his body, the frantic hammer of her heart syncing with the raw, uneven pounding of his own.

He clutched her closer, so close she could barely breathe, his fingers digging into her waist as though imprinting her into his flesh. The bond between them roared to life, surging hot and wild, drowning out the rage still thrumming through his blood. He pressed his forehead to hers, breathing her in like she was oxygen and he had been suffocating without her.

For a long, searing moment, he simply held her there, reveling in the jolt of connection, the wild, reckless need that gripped him tighter than any logic ever had.

Only then did he turn and stride toward the ship, her body shielded within his.

Anya hadn't said a word the entire time, her hands trembling where they clutched at the fabric of his shirt, her white-knuckled grip betraying the terror she refused to voice.

She didn't need to.

He could feel the way her heart pounded against his chest, the way her fingers dug into his shoulders, the way her body vibrated with a cocktail of fear, awe, and something darker. Something needier.

Tor'Vek didn't slow. He crossed the clearing in long, ground-eating strides, the battered hull of the ship looming larger with every step. The hatch slid open at his approach, a faint hiss escaping as the systems engaged.

He carried her inside.

And the door sealed behind them with a heavy, irrevocable clang, cutting off the outside world with brutal finality. Inside, the ship's interior loomed around them, dark and cold, the lights flickering sporadically and the hum of damaged systems sputtering in uneven gasps. Panels hung loose from the walls, and the sharp scent of scorched wiring tainted the air.

Tor'Vek kept Anya pressed against his chest, his muscles locked around her like she was the only thing holding him upright. Her scent—a sweet, wild mix of fear and defiance—filled his senses, and the silky length of her hair against his jaw made his entire body clench tighter, anchoring him to the one thing still holding the rage at bay.

Every muscle in his body tautened with a brutal demand for more—more of her scent, more of her warmth, more of her breath against his throat. The bond between

them pulsed hot and frantic, aliving thing that refused to be ignored.

He set her down with palpable reluctance, his hands sliding up to cup her face, skin-to-skin, his thumbs sweeping over the delicate line of her jaw. Instantly, the bond recoiled the moment he tried to pull away, the rage he'd fought to suppress stirring once again.

Anya stumbled slightly as her feet touched the floor, still gripping his shirt for balance. Her eyes, wide and luminous, locked onto his.

"Are you... okay?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

Tor'Vek read everything she did not say in the rigid set of her shoulders, the wide-eyed tension barely masked by false calm. Fear twisted beneath her skin, sharp and pungent, but there was more—abrittle thread of trust, trembling and fragile. Her lips parted as if she wanted to plead with him, to beg him to stay in control, but no words came. She did not need to speak. He saw it all in the raw, unguarded openness of her gaze.

He didn't answer immediately. He couldn't. Logic told him he needed to finish scanning the ship, ensure they were alone, assess any damage—and frustration snarled through him at the hesitation, at the betrayal of his own discipline. He, who had survived wars and devastation without a falter, now stood frozen because of one fragile human female.

Because the bond had other ideas.

His gaze dropped to her mouth—lush, parted—and something raw surged inside him. The craving he'd held at bay in the clearing returned with brutal force, amplified by the closeness, the scent of her fear, the desperate trust vibrating between them.

“No,” he rasped, voice low and dark. “I am not okay.”

Her hands flexed against his chest, uncertain.

He caught her wrists before she could pull away. Not rough, but unyielding. His thumb pressed against the frantic pulse at her wrist, feeling it hammer beneath her skin. The sensation sent a fresh surge of hunger roaring through him.

Her pulse was his now.

Her breath.

Her fear.

“Tor’Vek...” she whispered, but it wasn’t a protest. It was a plea she didn’t understand herself.

He bent his head, forehead grazing hers, his breath catching in the scant space between them—hovering there, fighting the brutal urge to seize her—before dragging in her scent like it might secure him against the pull of chaos. The bracelets pulsed unevenly, a low, insistent vibration that scraped against his senses and wrapped tighter inside his bones.

“The bond demands contact,” he said, each word roughened by restraint he was rapidly losing. “I must—”

He broke off, jaw clenching.

Must what?

Claim her?

Connect himself to her?

It no longer mattered.

His hands slid up her arms, over her shoulders, until they cupped her head. She trembled beneath his touch but didn't pull away. Her fear was there—bright, sharp—but so was something else. Something that burned just as hot.

Slowly, deliberately, he lowered his mouth to hers, hovering for a breathless second—giving her the barest moment to flee—before closing the final inch.

He kissed her.

The contact turned savage, searing, stamped with the brutal possessiveness of a male who had chosen his mate and vowed in the marrow of his bones that nothing—no force, no enemy, no fate—would ever tear her from him. His mouth claimed hers with a brutal hunger that screamed mine—a declaration carved into skin and breath and soul.

Heat exploded between them, molten and unrelenting, his body surging closer until there was no space left, no barrier between skin and breath and need. His hands framed her face, strong and determined, thumbs sculpting her cheeks as if trying to memorize the fragile, exquisite shape of her.

Anya gasped against his mouth—a sound that only fed the beast inside him. He growled low in his throat, deep and possessive, tilting her head to deepen the kiss. Her fingers fisted in his shirt, helpless and clinging, pulling him closer when he had no intention of letting her go.

The bracelets vibrated harder now, reacting to the emotional escalation—an urgent warning of how close he hovered to losing control, or perhaps a dark encouragement

to surrender to the bond's inexorable pull. Tor'Vek no longer knew. Or cared. All that existed was the taste of her, the delicate, fierce heat of her mouth opening to his, the way her body trembled against him, not in fear, but in surrender.

He kissed her like a drowning man finding air, like a warrior driven past reason into raw instinct. With the consuming, savage need of a man who had fought the universe itself—and lost to the one thing he could not defeat.

Her.

Her .

Chapter 11

ANYA COULDN'T breathe. Her lungs seized, her heart slammed painfully against her ribs, and the heated imprint of Tor'Vek's mouth still burned against her lips.

The kiss left her wrecked, her entire body pulsing with confusion and heat. When Tor'Vek finally pulled away, it was only by a fraction. His forehead dropped against hers, his breathing harsh and uneven, and she could feel the tension radiating off him in waves like he was fighting some brutal internal war.

The bond between them snapped tight, alive wire of need and fury and something darker she couldn't name.

Her hands were still flattened against the hard muscle of his chest beneath his shirt, feeling the rapid hammer of his heart. She wanted to pull away, but some instinct deeper than fear kept her rooted in place.

His voice rumbled low, stripped and rough. "I will not take what you do not give freely."

The words stunned her. Not just the meaning—but the sheer force behind them, the way his restraint felt like a chain yanked tight around a predator ready to strike.

Her breath hitched, her entire body caught between terror and something hotter, something dangerous.

The craving between them surged, raw and violent, making her ache with a need she

didn't understand—ascorching, liquid heat pooling low in her belly, tightening her thighs, and sending shivers racing across her skin with every heartbeat. It pulsed through the bond, louder than thought, drowning out everything but him.

When he staggered back a step, it was as if the bond itself recoiled, and the low growl that tore from his chest made her jump.

“Do not move away,” he insisted harshly, his voice like crushed stone.

She nodded without thinking, driven by something primal and inexorable.

Tor'Vek dropped heavily onto a battered bench near the ship's damaged wall, pulling her down with him. She landed astride his lap, and his arms locked around her, steel-hard and immovable. Not forceful. Not demanding.

Necessary.

Her pulse pounded in her ears, her breathing ragged and shallow. The bond throbbed low and deep, tying them together, binding her to the impossible heat of his body.

Tor'Vek exhaled roughly, a harsh, searing rush of heat against her throat that made her shiver. He pressed his face into the crook of her neck, inhaling like he could drag her scent straight into his lungs and keep it there.

“I cannot be away from you,” he growled against her throat.

The words weren't an apology. They were a brutal, alpha truth, a possession laid bare without shame.

She shivered, her fingers threading instinctively into his thick, black hair laced with stark white—the unearthly mark of what he'd told her was his Final Flight. The silky

locks slipped through her fingers, both alien and aching beautiful. She tilted her head just enough to see him: the hard, masculine lines of his face, every angle a study in power and ruthless elegance.

His amethyst eyes glowed with an unearthly light, piercing her with a gaze so raw and consuming it stole her breath. His bronzed skin stretched over thick cords of muscle, radiating heat and strength, a living fortress wrapped around her. Everything about him screamed otherworldly, lethal—and heartbreakingly magnificent. She held him closer, unable to resist the magnetic pull of the warrior who should have terrified her, but instead made her feel... claimed.

And in that moment, tangled together, breath for breath, heartbeat for heartbeat, she understood:

There was no her.

There was no him.

There was only them—caught in a bond that neither of them could break, no matter how dangerous or inevitable the fall might become.

Anya barely dared to breathe.

The heat of Tor'Vek's body pressed against hers, the low, savage throb of the bond pulsing like a second heartbeat beneath her skin. His forehead still rested against hers, their breaths tangling, but something had shifted—something darker, hungrier, clawing its way to the surface.

Slowly, he lifted his head, the faint brush of his breath skating across her skin, hot and uneven, sending a fresh shiver down her spine.

She fought to make sense of it, fought to cling to logic. Her voice broke through the silence, a whisper full of fragile denial. “It’s you. You’re the one losing control, not me.”

It had to be him. It had to be his craving alone, not hers. Not hers. His amethyst eyes burned, the glow fierce and unrelenting. His jaw flexed like he was grinding stone between his teeth.

“You are not wrong,” he said, his voice low and vibrant. “But it is not entirely me, either.”

Anya blinked, the words slicing through the haze clouding her mind. “What’s not?”

He shifted slightly where they sat, straightening just enough to cage her more firmly on his thighs, his body brimming with tension. His chest heaved once, a harsh, reluctant breath dragged from his lungs, like breathing itself was a battle he was losing.

“You feel it. The craving,” he growled. “Do not deny it.”

The air between them crackled. She opened her mouth, instinct screaming to protest, to refute, to shove him away—to do anything but yield. Her heart pounded so violently it drowned out reason. But when she tried to form the words, they died on her tongue. No denial came. No protest. Only the aching silence that hung between them, pulsing with heat and inevitability.

Tor’Vek pinned her with his gaze, the sheer force of it slamming into her like a physical blow. His eyes glowed brighter, twin embers of ruthless intent, and she felt the air shift—thicker, hotter, alive with a dangerous promise.

Every muscle in his body tensed, hard and unrelenting, as if he were holding himself

back with the last fraying strands of willpower. Anya felt it too, the fierce restraint vibrating against her skin, making her pulse jump wildly.

It should have terrified her—maybe it did—but excitement curled low in her belly, molten and breathless, answering his raw need with a hunger of her own she could no longer deny. She flinched with the force of it, instinctively shrinking into herself, but it was too late. The primal thing inside him—the creature that had long been buried under logic and control—fractured, stretching awake.

He leaned in slightly, so close she could feel the untamed passion pouring off him, the faint exhalation of his breath against her skin. His hands gripped the edges of the bench, not to release her, but to chain himself in place. Fornow.

Every fiber of him screamed to take. To claim. Toown.

And Anya knew—with bone-deep certainty—that if she reached for him now, there would be no comingback.

He leaned in even closer, their bodies nearly pressed together, and the world narrowed to the sound of his voice—rough, edged, feral.

“This craving is not a weapon pointed only at me. It reaches for both of us. Tell me I am wrong.”

Her mouth trembled. She whispered, “You’re wrong.”

But the bond throbbed harder, pulsating with the truth they bothknew.

Anya’s breath caught as she watched him, every inch of her body a live wire, hypersensitive to the scorching drag of his gaze. Her skin felt too tight, too hot, as if the very air between them had thickened and heated, tasting electric on her tongue.

She felt the invisible sweep of his stare like a slow, searing caress, igniting every nerve and setting her entire body trembling with a desperate, wild need she could no longer contain. She felt it like a caress—slow, molten, searing—lingering on the flushed curve of her throat, the frantic rise and fall of her chest, the tremble that tightened her thighs against this.

She saw his hands twitch against the bench, the restraint in him palpable, aching to strip away the last fragile inches separating them. Heat pooled low in her belly, desperate and wild, her skin tingling under the weight of his unspoken hunger. Tor’Vek’s jaw clenched, his entire frame drumming with the raw, primal need to touch, to taste, to claim—and she knew, without question, that she wanted it too.

He reached out—slowly, deliberately—and caressed her jawline with the backs of his fingers. The contact was featherlight, careful, but it was electric, sending a jolt of fire spiraling through her nerves. Her lips parted on a gasp she couldn’t contain, her pupils blowing wide until her eyes were nearly swallowed whole by desire. Every inch of her skin tingled where he touched, and her thighs clenched instinctively around the empty ache building inside her, desperate for more.

“It’s the bracelet,” she whispered, almost pleading. “That’s all.”

The bracelet against her wrist pulsed viciously, contradicting her.

Tor’Vek’s voice dropped, rough silk against her fraying nerves.

“Affirmative.”

Her heart twisted, the ache spiraling low and sharp as she met the molten heat of his stare. Need wrapped tight around her chest, making every breath a struggle. Her thighs pressed even harder against him, the pulse between her legs throbbing with an aching, undeniable want. She could feel the tension coiling in his body, matching her

own—ashared hunger so fierce it left her trembling.

Her voice broke free, soft and visceral. “Then why does it feel likemore?”

He had no answer.

But she could sense the matching ache tearing through him, violent and inexorable.

He sat there, breathing hard, his muscles trembling with the need to act—to seize, to claim, to make her his in a way no force in the universe couldundo.

And then—

He gave her the choice.

Tor’Vek stilled, his entire body going taut. His hands hovered just inches from her skin, vibrating with the effort it took not to touch her again. His eyes blazed down at her, burning, waiting.

One heartbeat.

Two.

Three.

Anya moved first.

Her fingers lifted—slow, tentative, trembling with the war raging inside her—and fisted into the front of his shirt. Fear clawed at her, but it was drowned beneath the tidal pull of need, fierce and undeniable, sweeping her closer to the edge she could no longer resist.

The instant she touched him, Tor’Vek snapped.

He seized her with a snarl, crushing her against his chest. His mouth found hers in a brutal clash, a collision of need so fierce it shocked her system into flames. The kiss shattered what little control she had left, consuming her, devouring her breath, until there was nothing but Tor’Vek—hot, relentless, and absolutely inescapable.

Her fingers ripped at his shirt, desperate for something to protect her from the overwhelming torrent he unleashed. His hands roamed her body with desperate reverence, mapping every curve, every quiver, every shudder.

And when she whimpered, arching closer, surrendering without words—

He lost the last shred of his control.

His golden canines flashed in the dim light. He buried his face against her throat, inhaling her, scenting her, marking her with the fierce scrape of his teeth—primal claim burned into her skin.

Anya cried out softly, not in fear, but in desperate, overwhelming need.

Tor’Vek growled low in his throat, a sound of possession so deep it vibrated through her bones. He dragged his mouth along her throat, finding the delicate curve of her shoulder, and marked her again, the bond between them flaring hot and vicious and unstoppable.

Anya barely registered the broken sounds escaping her throat—not words, not even cries, just pure, unadulterated need tearing free. The bond between them throbbed wildly, a raw, living force that pulsed in time with the frantic beat of her heart, binding them closer with every shuddering breath. Tor’Vek’s mouth seared a trail across her throat, branding her with every scrape of his golden canines, every ragged

breath.

When he finally lifted his head, his amethyst eyes blazed—not with anger, not even hunger, but something rawer. Something deeper.

Worship.

He stared at her like she was something holy. Something he could destroy with a touch—and something he would destroy himself to protect.

Rough hands skimmed up her sides, greedy for her warmth, her softness, but reverent too. Her skin was satin over muscle, heated and hypersensitive under his callused palms. Every stroke left goosebumps trailing in their wake, her body arching into his touch like a flower straining toward the sun, helpless and instinctive.

His hands found the jacket she wore, fingers working with barely restrained urgency to strip it from her shoulders. He tossed it aside without care, his palms immediately moving to the hem of her shirt. In a single, breathless motion, he pulled it over her head and discarded it, as well, baring her to the heated press of his hands, which flattened possessively against her now exposed waist. His hands trembled, just once, before gripping her with iron strength, as if centering himself.

“Anya,” he growled, his voice fraying with desperation.

She didn’t know if it was a warning or a prayer.

She answered him the only way she could—arching against him, pressing her mouth to his, opening for him, inviting him deeper.

Tor’Vek moved then, one arm sweeping under her thighs, the other cradling her back. A soft, startled gasp escaped her lips, and her fingers clutched reflexively at his

shoulders, feeling the pure power of him.

Her heart thundered wildly, her body straining closer to him as he lifted her from the bench like she weighed nothing, his body moving with fluid, dangerous purpose. His hands tightened as he carried her across the narrow cabin, and every step sent a pulse of anticipation through her blood.

He set her down on a battered sleeping platform, his body coming over hers immediately, bracketing her in, caging her without cruelty. The overwhelming heat of him surrounded her, his weight pressing her into the mattress in a way that should have been suffocating—but instead felt achingly right.

Trapped beneath him, her heart hammered with helpless anticipation, her body arching instinctively into the delicious pressure, welcoming the dominance she had no will to resist. His massive form trembled with the effort to stay gentle when everything in him howled to claim.

For one breathless second, he hovered there, drinking her in. The hunger in his face appeared stark, but it was the reverence that undid her—the way his fingers traced the curve of her cheek, the way his thumb tenderly traced her lower lip.

“You are mine,” he rasped.

There was no question. No demand.

Just truth.

He kissed her again, slower this time but no less desperate. His hands stripped away what little clothing she had left, baring her inch by quivering inch. Every time a new piece of skin was revealed, he paused—as if memorizing her with his mouth, his hands, his breath.

When he laid her bare before him, he froze. His gaze devoured her, dark and possessive, drinking in the sight of her naked body with raw, unapologetic hunger. Every muscle in his massive frame flexed as he fought the brutal instinct to cover her, mark her, claim her in a way no force could undo. His amethyst eyes gleamed, savage and unrelenting, as he let her see the feral hunger he could no longer contain. A warrior stripped of logic, reduced to the most primitive truth he had ever known. She was his, and no power in existence would change that.

“Perfect,” he said, so quietly she almost missed it.

Anya reached for him, needing to feel him, needing the weight of him against her. Her hands slid under his shirt, pushing it upward, and Tor’Vek let out a low, broken sound as he yanked it over his head and tossed it aside.

His body was a study in bitter perfection—massive, scarred, beautiful. The black and white streaks in his long hair caught the low light, giving him the look of a fallen star or some dark, ancient god.

She ran her hands over the hard planes of his chest, over the thick cords of muscle in his arms, and he shuddered under her touch. It felt as though her hands branded him, her touch claiming him in ways that no oath or law ever could—an unspoken demand he would never, could never, refuse.

“Anya,” he growled again, almost as if warning her. Almost as if begging her to understand what she was doing to him.

But she knew. And she wasn’t afraid.

“Please,” she whispered, the word trembling with need.

He groaned—a savage, wrecked sound—and surged over her, claiming her mouth

again as he pressed her down into the mattress. His body covered hers completely, the heavy heat of him searing through every inch of her. His mouth left hers only to blaze a desperate path down her throat, across her collarbone, lower still. He cupped one full breast in his rough palm, weighing her, his thumb grazing the stiffened peak until she whimpered, arching helplessly into his touch.

Tor'Vek growled low, the sound vibrating through her body, and lowered his mouth to her breast, drawing one tight peak into the heat of his mouth. He suckled her with slow, devastating pulls, his teeth lightly grazing, nipping just enough to make her cry out—abroken sound of pure, frantic urgency. His hand moved to her other breast, massaging, kneading, marking her with the heat of his possession. She writhed beneath him, every nerve ending sparking to life under his mouth, his hands, his worshipful brutality.

She parted her legs instinctively, welcoming him, and he settled between them with a low, primal sound that vibrated deep in his chest.

He kissed her like a man dying, kissed her until she was drowning in him, until there was nothing left but the frantic beat of their hearts and the unbearable pull of their bond. In a few swift, abrupt moves, he shed the last of his clothing.

When he finally— finally —pressed inside her, it was with a brutal, desperate thrust that tore a gasp from both of them. Anya cried out, the sheer width and force of him stretching her beyond anything she had known. His cock vibrated against her most sensitive flesh, the ridged mounds at its base throbbing with a maddening pulse designed to stimulate, to drive her higher until thought itself burned away.

Every pulse sent a new shockwave tearing through her, her inner muscles clenching uncontrollably around him, desperate and greedy for more. The relentless vibration scraped her nerves raw and sweet, her body trembling violently as she surrendered to the overwhelming pleasure he wrought inside her.

He held himself still for a fraction of a heartbeat, his jaw grinding as he fought for restraint, his forehead pressed tight against hers, their breath mingling in shattered, broken gasps. His body shook with the effort to remain gentle—but the bond between them had shattered civility.

When he surged forward again, she felt it—the slow, ominous swell of the knot beginning to build at the base of his shaft, locking him deeper, tying him to her in a way no one or nothing could undo. The vibrating mounds pulsed harder against her slick walls, driving sharp, exquisite shocks through her core with every shuddering heartbeat, until she was gasping, writhing, unable to escape the relentless pleasure he tore from her.

“I will not hurt you,” he rasped against her ear.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, dragging him deeper, her entire body straining toward him, welcoming him, needing him.

“You won’t,” she whispered, and it was the truth.

With a low growl, Tor’Vek began to move—slow at first, almost gentle, each thrust careful and controlled, as if he was terrified of breaking her. But it wasn’t enough. The bond between them demanded more.

He surged deeper, harder, his control unraveling as Anya met him thrust for thrust, her own body desperate for the devastating fullness of him. Her nails raked down his back, and he snarled against her throat, his teeth scraping lightly over her skin.

“Mine,” he growled again, the word a vow, a branding.

She felt it, deep in her bones. Felt it in every savage, reverent touch, every desperate kiss.

When she shattered beneath him, Tor’Vek followed instantly, roaring her name as he slammed deep, his knot swelling, locking them together in a primal, unbreakable hold. The vibrating mounds on his cock throbbed in tandem with their bond, sending waves of pleasure crashing through her until she was sobbing his name, lost in him, with him, utterly claimed. Their bond flared white-hot and endless, binding them in a connection deeper than flesh, beyond logic, beyond any force in the universe.

They collapsed together, tangled and shaking, the aftershocks rippling through their bodies, through their bond, which now hummed quietly between them—out of sync but aching close, their rhythms struggling to find true accord. Anya could hear every frantic beat of his heart, feel every trembling breath he took, the sensory flood overwhelming her until there was no separation between her pulse and his need.

The faint, uneven vibration from the bracelets pressed against her skin and into her bones, a reminder that they were no longer two—but not yet perfectly one. The ragged sounds of their breathing filled the space around them, mingling with the bond’s imperfect beat, and with it came the heavy, undeniable certainty that neither of them would ever be the same again.

He didn’t let her go.

He couldn’t.

And Anya didn’t want him to.

She clung to him, feeling the broken thunder of his heart pounding against hers, the ragged hum of their bond wrapping tighter with every breath.

They had crossed a line that could never be uncrossed.

She was his. He was hers.

And the universe would have to burn before either of them letgo.

Chapter12

TOR'VEK GUIDED Anya toward the auxiliary console, keeping her close enough to reach if the rage clawed free again, but not so close he would forget himself entirely. His hands lingered against her back a moment longer than necessary, the craving to pull her closer, to lose himself in her touch, almost overwhelming his iron will. The beast inside him roared to feel her skin against his, to drag her into the cradle of his body and never release her. But he tore himself away with brutal, scraping restraint, every muscle screaming in protest.

The bond between them throbbed at the separation, a low, restless vibration under his skin. He ignored it. Barely. Her scent clung to the air, teasing him, stirring the craving deeper. He caught a glimpse of her from the corner of his eye—her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her teeth worrying her lower lip, her body shifting subtly as if aching to move closer to him but too uncertain to act.

“Tor’Vek,” she whispered, the sound so soft he almost missed it over the ship’s creaking frame.

His muscles locked. The bond twisted hard, demanding he turn, touch, take.

“I am here,” he said, his voice rougher than he intended.

She took a half step closer, her hesitation bleeding into the bond, bittersweet and electric. He could feel the hunger radiating from her—uncertain but no less real. A mirror to his own.

He gritted his teeth, fighting the instinct to seize her and never let go.

“Stay close,” he growled, the words a harsh command.

Anya nodded, wide-eyed, her pulse fluttering against the delicate skin of her throat. A single glance from her cut deeper than any blade. Seeing her trembling but standing, terrified but still reaching for him, only deepened the savage craving inside him—to protect her, to mark her, to bind her so completely to him that nothing in the universe could rip her away. And when she edged closer, stroking his arm, the bond flared in vicious, aching relief—a silent scream between them.

He moved through the ship with brutal precision, surveying the damage. Panels hung half-torn from the walls. Wiring snaked across the floor in dangerous, sparking coils. Emergency lighting flickered overhead, casting the cramped interior in a sickly, uneven glow.

Tor’Vek clamped his jaw shut against the snarl threatening to break free.

Structural integrity—compromised but stable. Life support—limping but functional.

Propulsion—

He ripped open the engineering access panel and cursed in three languages.

The main coupling for the compression core was cracked clean through, the jagged metal edges blackened from the overload. Worse, the stabilizer array—the component necessary to regulate thrust during flight—was melted beyond repair.

He could jerry-rig minor systems. Bypass auxiliary circuits. Patch hull breaches with scrap. But without a functional stabilizer, the ship would tear itself apart the moment it attempted a jump.

Tor’Vek closed his eyes, drawing in a rough, unsteady breath, fighting the tidal surge of fury that threatened to drown him. His body tensed against the flood, every instinct screaming for the feel of Anya’s skin against his, for the calming weight of her touch. Her silent presence filled the cramped space, her scent, her heartbeat—and somehow it made the hunger sharper, not softer, until every muscle in his body ached with the desperate need to tear down the walls between them.

He needed a replacement part.

And he would not find it here.

A soft sound—the whisper of movement—drew him back. Anya shifted near the console, hugging her arms around herself. Vulnerable. Waiting. Wanting.

The bond bucked and twisted inside him, screaming for contact, for her touch, for the reassuring heat of her body against his. It lashed through his nerves like a whip, brutal and relentless, until every rational thought frayed beneath the primal need clawing at his insides.

Tor’Vek crossed the distance between them in two strides, seizing her by the hips and dragging her flush against his body. The moment their skin touched, the roaring inferno inside him eased—not extinguished, but caged.

He buried his face against her throat, breathing her in like a dying man starved for air.

Anya stiffened for a heartbeat, then melted into him, her hands curling in the fabric of his shirt.

The bond pulled low and steady, easing the worst of the rage. Not erasing it. Never erasing it.

He needed more.

His hands slid lower, fingers digging into the curve of her hips, supporting himself then thrusting upward beneath her shirt to the bare flesh beneath. Delicious. Utterly delicious.

“I need you close,” he rasped against her skin, the words torn from him, raw and unwilling. “The ship—” Fury lashed at his restraint. “The compression stabilizer is destroyed. Without it, this vessel will tear itself apart the moment we attempt flight. There is no replacement here.”

She nodded, silent, trembling against him. But then her small hands slid up to cup his face, her touch featherlight yet unshakable. “We will find a way,” she whispered fiercely, her voice trembling with conviction. “I trust you.”

The bond pulsed in answer, the relentless storm inside him easing just enough for him to breathe, to believe. Her faith wrapped around him tighter than any physical touch, forging him when every rational thought had slipped away.

He forced himself to release her after a moment, though it felt like tearing flesh from bone. He needed to work—needed to think—or they would die here.

Grinding down the primal craving still gnawing at his insides, Tor’Vek turned back to the gutted propulsion systems.

He scavenged what he could, working with savage efficiency. Temporary power conduits. Emergency patch kits. Field welders. His hands moved on autopilot, each action a brutal assertion of control over a situation spiraling beyond his reach.

He spoke aloud, cataloging damage for Anya’s benefit as much as his own.

“Hull breaches patched. Secondary life support functioning at sixty-three percent. Communications array offline. Propulsion offline. Primary flight controls—unresponsive.”

He tore another fried component free and tossed it aside with a snarl.

“We require a compression stabilizer to achieve controlled flight.”

He glanced over his shoulder.

Anya met his gaze head-on, her spine straightening, her chin lifting with quiet defiance. Fear flickered in her eyes, yes, but it did not own her. She was afraid—and she was still standing. Still fighting. For herself. For him.

“Can we find one?” she asked with amazing calm.

Tor’Vek shook his head once, grim. “No there.”

Determination flickered in her expression, hardening into fierce resolve. She masked whatever fear might have glimmered there, lifting her chin, her spine straight and unyielding. Even through the bond—thick with tension—he could feel the steady hammer of her will: strong, unbroken, standing with him no matter the cost.

Tor’Vek crossed the room again and crushed her to him, needing the connection, needing her. Her warmth soaked into him instantly, her scent flooding his senses, raw and heady and achingly familiar. It was like breathing her into his bloodstream—an instant, primal balm against the chaos raging inside him.

Her small hands fisted in his shirt, her body trembling against his. The bond pulsed harder now, as if sensing the rising storm in him and trying—futilely—to secure them both.

He growled low in his throat, a savage sound of need and fury, and pressed her back against the nearest wall.

She gasped, her body arching into his instinctively, and the desperate craving exploded loose.

His mouth found hers, wild and demanding, and she opened for him without hesitation. His hands roamed her body with ruthless reverence, needing the feel of her, the taste of her, more than he needed oxygen.

When he finally tore his mouth from hers, they were both gasping for air, their bond a wild, thrumming storm between them.

Tor'Vek rested his forehead against hers, struggling to find words.

"We are not safe here," he said, voice ragged. "We must stabilize the ship."

Anya nodded, her hands clinging to him.

He kissed her again—hard, brief, desperate—then forced himself to step back.

It was like cutting out his own heart.

He stalked to the engineering console, keying through the surviving systems, trying to formulate a plan. Fury and helplessness surged through him, tightening his chest until every breath felt like dragging molten metal through his lungs. His fingers punched commands into the cracked display with savage precision, each keystroke an act of bitter defiance against a universe determined to strip everything from him.

He could bypass certain flight protocols, force a manual launch sequence, but without stabilization, the ship would disintegrate under thrust. They needed an alternative.

He needed time.

Time they did not have.

The bond pulsed violently, warning of another storm building inside him.

He looked over at Anya, his vision sharpening on the tense, fiercely coiled strength in her body, the way she watched him—not with fear, but with a blazing, unshakable trust. It struck him like a blade to the heart, a bond forged stronger by her faith. It terrified him, this fragile, staggering gift she offered so freely, even as it strengthened the part of him that refused to break.

And he knew:

He would burn the universe to keep her safe.

He just needed one more miracle.

TOR'VEK braced both hands on the edge of the engineering console, forcing his breath to even out. His muscles tight, his skin burning with the need clawing at him from within. He had work to do—a mission to survive.

The bond linking them did not care.

It snarled through him, dragging his attention back to Anya like a lodestone to the sun. Her scent wrapped around him, sweet and wild, making his blood thunder. Her presence battered at his self-control with every heartbeat.

He gritted his teeth, pushing through another system diagnostic, punching keys harder than necessary. The screen flashed red.

“Structural integrity at thirty-eight percent.”

Another warning siren screamed through the cabin.

Tor’Vek slammed a fist into the console’s frame, feeling the satisfying crack of metal under his hand.

Movement flickered at the edge of his vision.

Anya.

She shifted, her body arching unconsciously toward him, her small hands skimming the nearby bulkhead as if seeking something solid—seeking him .

The bond lashed. Hard.

Tor’Vek crossed the distance in a single brutal step, grabbing her by the hips and hauling her against him. Her gasp was swallowed as he crashed his mouth to hers, savage, unyielding. His hands gripped her thighs, lifting her without thought, pinning her high against the nearest wall.

She clung to his shoulders, her legs locking around his waist instinctively. The heat of her, the scent of her, the sheer undeniable life of her drowned him.

His mouth tore down her throat, branding a savage path along the delicate line of her pulse.

“Tor’Vek...” she gasped, her voice trembling but not with fear—with need.

“I cannot...think...without you,” he growled against her skin, the words broken, desperate.

He rocked against her, the hard, desperate line of his cock grinding against the thin barrier of their clothes. She shuddered, her fingers fisting in his hair, her mouth seeking his again with frantic hunger.

He kissed her like he was dying—because in that moment, without her, he might have.

When he finally tore himself away, it was with a brutal, ragged snarl. He set her down—too roughly, too fast—but he caught her shoulders to steady her, drawing her scent deep into his lungs, like a man desperate for oxygen.

“Stay,” he ordered roughly. “Where I can reach you.”

She met his gaze, her breathing ragged but her spine straight, defiant. Her fingers stroked his jaw as if locking him in place, her lips swollen from his kiss but her voice steady when she rasped, “I am not leaving you.”

Tor’Vek spun back to the console, the taste of her still on his lips, his pulse a war drum in his ears—he had to think, had to move, had to fight past the dizzying need clawing at his mind.

Another status report blinked.

“Atmospheric control degraded.”

He cursed under his breath, scanning for a solution.

Another pulse from the bond.

He bit back a crude word, knuckles white against the console.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her shift again, adjusting the torn edges of her

shirt, the bare glimpse of her smooth skin flashing like a beacon to every fraying nerve inside him.

He lost the fight again.

In two strides, he pinned her over the console itself, pressing her down across the cold, cracked surface. His hand flattened against the small of her back, keeping her in place as he bent low, drawing the heated scent of her into his lungs.

“I need...” His voice broke.

Anya twisted her head to look back at him, her pupils blown wide, her breathing ragged.

“Then take,” she whispered.

It shattered what little restraint he had left.

He dragged his hands up her sides, feeling every desperate tremble under his palms. His mouth found the exposed line of her spine, branding her with kisses and bites that spoke of reverence and raw, desperate need.

He rocked against her, the desperate pulse of his cock aching for her. A rough growl ripped from his throat as he yanked down her leggings, his hands shaking with urgency. He shoved them over her hips, baring her to his touch, and the vibrating mounds along his cock flexed in helpless anticipation, each pulse scraping against his restraint. The sensation tormented him as much as it tormented her, a brutal echo of the bond clawing through their blood.

She cried out, her body arching back into him without hesitation.

He bit down on the soft flesh at her shoulder—not to hurt, but to mark her, branding her ashis.

The bond flared hard, a wild surge of heat and light behind his eyes.

She whimpered, her hips pushing back into him, her voice breaking on a desperate, pleading cry. “Please, Tor’Vek. I need you.”

The last of his control snapped and he tore open his trousers.

He gripped her hips in his rough hands, positioning her, his cock throbbing and ready. In a single, hard thrust, he buried himself inside her, locking them together with a groan so raw it shredded his throat.

He plunged into her, repeatedly. Desperately. And a violent surge of heat and light exploded through the bond, crashing over him as her body clutched him tight, welcoming him, completing him in a way nothing else ever could.

He took her, faster and harder, the pleasure surging with need and erupting into an intense, endless craving that drove him on and on. He wanted it to last forever, prayed for it to last forever. Not that it did. His climax ripped through him, over him and into him, his knot swelling larger than he could ever recall.

Anya gasped, her forehead pressing against the console, her body trembling as he held her there, deep and locked within her. They stayed that way for a long moment—gasping, shuddering, too wrecked to move.

When she finally sagged in his hold, Tor’Vek gathered her into his arms, cradling her gently. He carried her to the tiny sanitation chamber, moving with gentle care, as if she might break if he jostled her too harshly.

He set her down, stripped away the remnants of their clothing, and cleaned her with steady, careful hands, murmuring low words she barely understood. Words in his native tongue—promises of protection, whispered declarations of ‘mine,’ and ragged prayers to whatever gods still listened that he might be worthy of her. His touch was tender, calming the frayed edges of her body and mind.

When he finished, he pulled her close again, wrapping her in an oversized ship blanket, shielding her from the cold air and the harsher reality waiting outside.

“Stay close,” he murmured against her hair, voice rough with emotion. “I need you close.”

She curled against him, her breathing steady, her touch strong and sure. Her hand skimmed over his chest, not seeking reassurance but offering it—a silent vow that she would be his mainstay as much as he was hers. Strength, fierce and unshakable, radiated from her slender frame.

Only then—with her pressed firmly against his side, the bond pulsing low and steady, the echo of danger still thick in the cold air—did Tor’Vek allow himself to think about what had to be done next.

He could not lose himself. Not yet. They were still vulnerable. Still trapped.

Reluctantly, Tor’Vek forced himself to ease away from her, every fiber screaming in protest. Anya pressed her hand to his chest, feeling the strong hammer of his heart beneath her palm. She smiled faintly—a smile full of courage, tenderness, and the kind of strength he could lean into without shame. Their bond shimmered, fierce and imperfect, but unbreakable.

She tilted her chin up, her voice steady and low. “We fix the ship. Together.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face and forced himself to return to the emergency systems, even as every fiber of him bellowed to rip her away from the workstation and take her again and again.

Another siren blared.

Another flashing red warning.

“Hull breach imminent.”

He cursed savagely, tearing open another access panel, working like a man possessed.

His hands moved fast, reckless, sealing emergency bulkheads, diverting power—but it was like bailing water from a sinking ship with bare hands.

Anya stumbled to him without hesitation, reaching for him.

The moment her hand slid across his back, he lost the battle again.

He spun, grabbing her, dragging her to the floor with him, pinning her under his weight. Anya didn't flinch or shy away. Instead, she pushed up against him, her nails scratching urgently down his back, pulling him closer with fierce, steady strength. She met his need with her own, drinking in his scent and warmth with every frantic breath. Not moving. Not taking.

Just breathing.

Her hands framed his face, her palms steady and warm, supporting him in a way nothing else could. She pulled him closer, their breath mingling, her strength a lifeline against the chaos raging inside him.

“I’m here,” she whispered.

The bond throbbed. Wild. Beautiful. Broken.

Tor’Vek dropped his forehead against hers, his body trembling with the brutal force of his need.

He would destroy himself for her.

Tor’Vek gathered her close once more, losing himself in her steady strength. Together, with her pressed against him, they moved back to the console. She remained at his side, her hand stroking his every few heartbeats, her quiet presence an unspoken vow of endurance.

He worked with brutal focus, bypassing damaged systems, locking down critical functions—and every time the bond snarled through him, every time rage threatened to surge, she was there, reassuring him with a touch, a glance, a whisper of faith.

Piece by piece, he stabilized the battered ship as much as he could. But the missing stabilizer loomed over them, a silent reminder that survival—and the fragile bond stitching them together—hung in the balance, their future teetering on the edge of collapse.

Tor’Vek finished sealing the final bulkhead, the emergency system flickering weakly to life. For a moment, there was only the rasp of their breathing and the low, fractured hum of recovering machinery.

Then the lights shifted.

A cold, silver shimmer sparked in the center of the restored bridge.

An image flickered into being—distorted, crackling—but unmistakable.

Selyr.

The hologram resolved into the tall, gaunt figure of the Vettian scientist. His pale skin gleamed under the harsh emergency lighting, and his yellow eyes burned with malevolent satisfaction.

“Well, well,” Selyr drawled, his voice slithering through the damaged comms. “Still alive. Remarkable.”

Chapter13

ANYA STIFFENED beside Tor’Vek, instinctively pressing closer. He shifted in front of her without thought, his stance shielding her body from the projection, though it posed no immediate physical threat.

A jagged surge of light pulsed through the chamber—erratic, sharp, followed by a sputter of static. The hologram collapsed, then re-formed with a crackle of light.

Selyr’s figure sharpened into view, more stable now, yellow eyes gleaming with delight. He didn’t smile—not yet. He savored .

“Ah,” he said, his tone low and crawling. “Iprojected the odds of one of you surviving the crash landing at sixty percent. Both? Forty. So this is quite remarkable.”

Tor’Vek said nothing, but the heat under his skin grew molten. He stood locked in readiness, his senses razor-sharp with threat, every nerve drawn tight like a bowstring ready to snap. The urge to lunge, to rip apart the smug image before him, thundered inside him, feral and rising.

He flexed his hands at his sides, the sinew in his forearms like cables strained to rupture. His breathing slowed, every exhale a battle against the instinct screaming for release. He stood locked in place, vibrating with fury barely leashed, a war machine held together by discipline—and crumbling inch by inch under the strain.

Anya, pulse hammering, lifted her chin and snapped, “Your experiments are going to fail, Selyr. You’re not as brilliant as you think.”

The hologram's head tilted in mock sympathy. "Ah, the fragile human, still clinging to hope. How adorable."

Tor'Vek surged forward a step, a jagged snarl ripping low in his throat—a sound closer to a growl than speech. Lethal fury pulsed through him, his body ready for a fight.

Selyr chuckled, a grating sound that buzzed and warped through the unstable transmission before stabilizing again. His figure sharpened with malicious clarity, his expression twisted in open enjoyment of the fury he'd provoked.

Only Anya's trembling hand, brushing lightly against Tor'Vek's clenched forearm, kept him from lunging. Her touch was a fragile thread of warmth against the blaze of his rage, at a time he did not know he needed until it was there. His muscles vibrated with restrained violence, but her fingers—small, steady, human—leashed him more effectively than any chain. The killing instinct wavered, then receded, forced back by the bond sparking between them, fierce and stubborn in its own right.

Selyr cocked his head. "You've noticed the shift, haven't you? The cravings, the rage. The way the bond claws at you, physically and emotionally, every time you try to fight it."

Tor'Vek's voice cut in—quiet but sharp. "We have noticed."

"You did this," Anya said, voice shaking but steady. "You changed something in the bracelets, didn't you?"

Selyr's smile widened, slow and cruel. "Of course I did. A little override embedded under the primary logic layer. You did not think I would let the two of you simply bond in peace, did you?"

Anya muttered beneath her breath, “It would have been nice.”

He gave a soft, condescending sigh. “It would have been—entertaining—to see you fail on your own. But no, I decided to accelerate the process. Your precious bracelets now betray you with every heartbeat. Craving. Rage. The more you resist, the faster you burn.”

Anya’s breath hitched. Her gaze darted to her bracelet. The silver surface shimmered with faint white light, the runes etched along it shifting subtly. “What do you mean... burn ourselves alive?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention?” He clicked his tongue. “How could I have forgotten? Your bracelets now have a countdown cycle which I’ve activated.”

“A countdown to what?” Tor’Vek demanded, voice rough with barely leashed fury.

“Ah, so delicious.” Selyr’s tone turned singsong. “A countdown until the bracelets explode.”

Tor’Vek took another step forward, the craving in his chest surging—hot, corrosive, impossible to contain. “How do we stop it?”

The scientist tilted his head to one side, mockery gleaming in his gaze. “Why do you think you can?”

Anya cut in, her voice sharp and defiant. “Because dead subjects don’t generate data.”

Selyr’s smirk flickered. Barely. But Tor’Vek saw it. That slip in confidence. “Clever, clever girl. Yes, it’s possible there’s a way to stop the countdown, but it won’t be easy.” His smile turned razor-sharp. “You’ll be pleased to know I’ve taken the liberty of accelerating the instability cycles. Craving. Rage. Desire. Destruction. All feeding

into each other, growing louder the longer you fight them. Should you surrender to your needs—your craving—the countdown only accelerates.”

Tor’Vek took a single step forward, muscles locked. “You fucking piece of shit,” he snarled, the words tearing from his throat, raw and brutal. “When I find you, Selyr, I will tear you apart with my bare hands.”

The hologram rippled with amused contempt. “So emotional. So crude and basic.” He gave a mock shiver. “I love it. It will make your inevitable detonation so much more... spectacular.”

Tor’Vek surged another half-step, muscles bunching to strike, rage clawing up his spine.

Anya’s trembling hand skimmed against his forearm—a featherlight touch. He stiffened, breath heaving, fury poised to ignite.

Tor’Vek exhaled through his teeth, forcing the killing urge down. The tremor in his arms stilled, eased by her fragile, steadying presence.

Selyr’s hologram tilted its head, voice laced with mockery. “That’s right, primitive human. You creatures know all about raw emotion. You excel at it. But for an Intergalactic Warrior to sink to such brutish lows—how exquisitely humiliating.”

Anya’s lips curled into a cold smile. “Funny. You talk a lot for someone who hides behind projections.”

The hologram flickered, Selyr’s eyes narrowing, the amusement bleeding into something harder—a flash of real anger, brief but unmistakable.

Tor’Vek straightened subtly, sensing the shift—and smiling, grim and silent.

“Where was I?” Selyr went on, with forced cheerfulness, “There is a way out for you two. The ship’s central stabilizer was, regrettably, destroyed in the crash. Fortunately, there is a backup located at a remote access panel. Seven kilometers northwest. Buried in a valley system laced with rock storms and structural collapse.”

Tor’Vek’s voice sliced into the silence. “How do you know about the stabilizer?”

Selyr’s grin sharpened. “Because I gave it a little... encouragement. Your ship’s primary stabilizer had a perfectly healthy operational life expectancy—until I embedded a microscopic stress fracture in its core matrix. Under the strain of atmospheric entry, it was only a matter of time before it burned out.” He chuckled, low and cruel. “A simple push in the right place. Physics did the rest.”

Tor’Vek’s jaw tightened, but his voice emerged cold and measured. “You tampered with our systems while we were still imprisoned. Forced our ship to this planet and then destroyed our primary stabilizer, stranding us here. How long have you been planning this?”

Selyr lifted a brow, mock innocence etched across his face. “Oh, long enough. Long enough to ensure you’d be crazed with rage and craving, and beautifully dependent on one other. It’s all part of the experiment, after all. The real question is—how long can you last before you destroy yourselves?”

“The countdown,” Anya stated flatly.

“Exactly,” Selyr continued, savoring every word. His eyes gleamed with malice. “Fortunately for you, there is that backup stabilizer I mentioned. But one misstep, and either the environment will kill you... or your emotions will.”

His grin widened. “As you humans say... tick tock. The countdown has already begun. Forty-eight solar units, give or take. Retrieve the part, reinstall it, and perhaps

the installation will pause the countdown—assuming you survive long enough to findout.”

A pulse of white light surged from the bracelet on Tor’Vek’s wrist.

48:00:00

Anya gasped.

Selyr leaned in slightly, voice dropping. “I’d say good luck, but... you will not survive long enough for luck to matter.”

The hologram wavered—and vanished.

Silence thundered in the chamber.

Tor’Vek stood frozen.

The tendons in his arms stood out like cords. His breath hissed between his teeth. Muscles rippled with the effort not to tear the nearest console off its hinges. The faintest tremble ran down his arms.

He was losing the battle.

Anya cast one last lingering look at the space once broadcasting Selyr’s hologram and brought her attention back to Tor’Vek. She stepped to him, slowly, and laid a shaking hand against his forearm. Not gripping. Just touching.

His jaw tightened further.

But he didn’t pull away.

The tremble stilled.

For a breath. Two.

And then, quietly, he lowered his fists.

Not a surrender.

A choice.

Hope.

ANYA CROUCHED beside the half-scorched supply crate as she worked through twisted metal and dust. Her pulse hammered in her throat, matching the erratic surges of heat and craving pulsing from the bracelet locked around her wrist.

“Found ration cubes,” she said, forcing her voice steady. “Not many, but they’ll keep us moving.”

Tor’Vek took them silently, but his hand swept against hers—deliberate, necessary touch—and for an instant, the crushing pressure inside her chest eased. His attention was fixed on the schematic projected from his rii. It hovered in the air above his forearm, glowing pale blue. The glow stuttered in and out of focus as if struggling against the chaos building inside him.

He pointed to a blinking node. A knot tightened in Anya’s stomach. Seven kilometers through hostile territory. Then a maze of darkness and uncertainty. For a heartbeat, the sheer scale of what lay ahead threatened to swamp her—a cold wave of fear breaking over the bond. She clamped it down, swallowing it hard, and focused on the steady pulse of contact with Tor’Vek.

“The access panel Selyr indicated is seven kilometers northwest of this location.” He pointed. “Once we reach it, we will enter the subterranean sector. The final destination lies approximately 1.3 kilometers east, through these unmapped corridors.”

She tucked more rations into a sturdy pack she’d scavenged, her hands pressed against his wrist again, purposefully. Without the contact, a clawing, aching need flared inside her chest, making it hard to think, hard to breathe. “What are the odds we can make it without more surprises?”

He didn’t answer immediately. He moved to the ruined shelf near the far wall, retrieving a glow strip and testing it with a twist. It lit faintly, casting their strained faces in an unsteady light. “Unmapped means undocumented threats. The path may include structural failure zones, automated defenses, or living organisms unrecorded by baselogs.”

“Great. So... best-case scenario, we get lost. Worst-case, we get eaten.”

The words came out brittle, but she pushed through it, jamming a few wire spools and a battered multi-tool into the bag. Her shoulder bumped his arm—intentionally, selfishly—because without it, the craving clawed higher, hot and greedy, scraping along her nerves.

“How long will it take?”

“Several solar units to reach the access panel. Longer if resistance occurs or the terrain impedes us.” He reached into another storage locker and removed a handful of small, round balls, stuffing them into his vest pocket. “From there, another solar unit through the underground maze—assuming we find a path.”

He shifted, touching his shoulder deliberately against hers in turn, and she saw

it—the brief flicker of relief in the rigid set of his mouth, the slight loosening of his fists. The bond throbbed, hungry but momentarily sated by touch.

Tor’Vek pulled a sheathed sword from the weapons locker—the blade straight and gleaming despite the battered scabbard. He strapped it to his back with practiced ease, then reached into a side compartment and withdrew a compact solar gun. It emitted a faint, rising hum as he powered it up, a thin line of blue light pulsing along the length of the barrel before it steadied. Satisfied, he holstered it at his hip. Every movement efficient. Controlled. But she could see the strain in the tension ripping at his body.

He paused and glanced at her—no, studied her, as if checking to make sure she was still there. “You will stay behind me. If an attack occurs, you will not attempt to engage.”

“I get it, okay? You’re the walking weapon. I’m the... irrational emotional human liability.”

He tilted his head, the briefest flicker of something like confusion crossing his face. “You are correct about the first part. But incorrect about the second.”

A raw, aching warmth flared low in her chest—a pulse that had nothing to do with the bracelet.

Anya turned away quickly, double-checking the contents of the pack. Med disc. Glow strips. Sufficient water for twenty-four hours. Or solar units. Ration cubes. Not enough. Not nearly enough. Her breath caught in her throat, and she stole another touch—her knuckles grazing his arm.

Instant relief.

The bond’s craving ebbed just enough for her to focus.

“What about tools for the panel? I assume it’s locked. Sealed from the inside? Or accessible from the outside?”

Tor’Vek crossed to a secondary bin, retrieved a plasma cutter, and handed it to her. His fingers connected with hers during the exchange, deliberately slow, and the desperate tension coiled inside her chest eased again.

“If power is still active at the access point, this will work. If not, we will find another solution.”

“Likewhat?”

“Destruction.”

He turned back to the ruined storage lockers and dug through a hidden compartment, retrieving a compact demolition device—a flat black disk barely larger than his palm, covered with faintly glowing runes. It vibrated weakly in his grip, emitting a low hum that seemed to pulse in time with the bracelet on his wrist, promising power and devastation in equal measure. He tucked it into his belt with the same quiet precision.

“Resonance charge. If necessary, it will obliterate the access panel and anything blocking our path.”

She arched a brow, the brief spark of normalcy reassuring her. “Vague but reassuring.”

He paused by the exit, his gaze sharp and unfaltering—but the muscle in his jaw ticked. She knew the bond was clawing at him, too.

Anya shifted closer as she tightened the pack across her shoulders. His fingers closed around hers for an instant. Both of them inhaled sharply at the flood of craving tinged

with hints of rage. It surged through the bond—hot, unrelenting, desperate to devour.

For one breathless second, neither moved. The craving wasn't just physical. It wanted dominance, surrender, fusion. Then, with iron control, it ebbed—not vanished, but leashed.

“Are you ready?” he asked, voice low and rough.

She should have said no. Her heart slammed against her ribs, warning her, begging her to stop. She wasn't a soldier. She wasn't ready for what waited for them. But she swallowed hard, squeezed his hand one last time, and nodded.

“Let's move.”

They stepped into the corridor together, the stale air closing around them like a warning. Neither spoke. Neither needed to. Every shift of her hand against his, every deliberate touch kept the craving at bay—barely.

Anya felt the temperature drop as they passed through the warped frame of the bulkhead. The silence out here was different. Dense. Like the ship itself was holding its breath.

She didn't look back. Couldn't. Whatever they'd just built between them—fragile, electric, barely stable—was all they had. And it had to be enough.

Chapter14

THE AIR outside the ship struck Anya immediately—dense and sharp, the pressure heavier than Earth’s, the gravity tugging harder at every breath. Her lungs ached with the effort to adjust, and the weight of the supply pack dug into her shoulder like it had doubled. Each step forward would take more energy, every kilometer a punishment.

She adjusted the strap, wincing, already feeling the strain settle into her joints. Tor’Vek’s hand pressed lightly to the small of her back, lingering longer than necessary. She knew why. Maybe, she thought, it helped him find his strength too, against the pull of a planet that didn’t want to let them go.

“Seven kilometers northwest,” Tor’Vek said, scanning the horizon and checking it against the map hovering above his rij. His voice remained steady, but she could feel the tightness simmering under the surface.

They moved together in a rhythm that had become second nature. Their hands occasionally tangled—not by accident, but by need. There was no more pretense, no more hesitation. They touched because they had to, because distance hurt more than closeness.

She no longer pretended to pull away. There was no point—not after everything they’d already shared, after the endless occasions when his mouth had traced heat over her skin and she’d come apart in his arms. What they did now wasn’t about curiosity or obligation. It was about survival. The bond demanded closeness, and every step they took together was a silent agreement to hold the line—for as long as they still could.

“Did you always want to be a scientist?” she asked after a while, needing to hear something—anything—that wasn’t about the way her body ached to turn toward him, to press against him, to close the space between their mouths again.

Talking helped. It distracted her from the heat pooling low in her belly, from the pulse thumping in her wrists where the bracelet clung like a second skin. Conversation was a connection—maybe the only one strong enough to keep her from giving in.

He glanced down at her. “I was selected young. Aptitude determined my placement. I pursued science and medicine because they were efficient uses of my skills.”

“Efficient,” she repeated, almost smiling. “Not because you loved it?”

He considered. “I respected it. Purposeful work is preferable to purposeless.”

“You’re not answering the question.”

And she needed him to. She needed to know there was something beneath all that logic and restraint—something real. Something that wasn’t just programmed obedience or function. Maybe it was selfish, maybe it was foolish, but she needed to believe there was still someone inside him who chose what mattered. Who chose her.

His mouth tightened. For a moment, she thought he wouldn’t respond. Then he said, “There was satisfaction. Satisfaction is acceptable.”

They walked another few steps in silence. Their hands touched again, lingered, and the gnawing heat inside her eased slightly. She swallowed hard.

“What about you?” he asked. “Before this. Before Selyr.”

“I was a college student. Studying education. Close to my sister.”

“Maya,” he said quietly.

She blinked, surprised. “You remembered.”

He gave a faint nod. “Yes. You have spoken her name with frequency. But... what is she to you? A younger sibling? Older? A clone?”

Anya stared at him, thrown. “What? No. It told you. She’s my twin.”

He stopped walking. “Twin?”

“Yeah—identical twin. We were born minutes apart.”

His brow furrowed in a rare flash of visible confusion. “A biological double? Is this a form of cloning on your world?”

She gave a startled laugh. “No! It’s not cloning. It just happens sometimes. Two babies in the same womb. Genetic siblings—same parents, born at the same time.” She tilted her head, watching him with quiet curiosity. “You’re a scientist. You must be familiar with twins.”

Tor’Vek considered that, his eyes narrowing slightly as though scanning internal data. “Twins are an anomaly. Twins do not exist among the Nine Galaxies.”

Anya stumbled. “Wait—what?”

“Natural duplication is rare and biologically unstable in most known species. It is not observed in Vettian evolution.”

She stared at him. “You’re telling me there’s no such thing as twins in your entire galaxy?”

“In the Nine Galaxies,” he corrected calmly. “It is either impossible or extremely rare. When it does occur, it is typically associated with mutation or failed replication.”

She shook her head, trying to process it. “But that means... Maya and I—we’re something you’ve never seen before.”

“Affirmative.” A pause. “You are a fascinating anomaly. Both of you.”

Something about the way he said it—not with suspicion, but reverence—made her throat tighten. She hadn’t expected that. Not from him. Not from a man who barely reacted to fear or pain or even touch, except when it came from her. But in that moment, when he called her an anomaly, it felt different. Like he saw something in her that made her more than a data point. More than a liability. Unique.

And it did something strange to her. It made her feel exposed. Not just physically, with his gaze skimming over her skin like a second heat source, but emotionally. Because he didn’t look away. Didn’t scan the horizon or change the subject or tell her it was irrelevant. He just looked at her like she mattered.

The craving throbbed between them, and her breath caught as her mind flashed—not to Maya this time—but to the way his fingers had lingered on her back, the way his shirt still smelled faintly of him where it clung to her skin. She shouldn’t notice. She shouldn’t care. But she did.

She cleared her throat, but it came out shaky. “So you’ve never met anyone like me.”

“Correct.”

“And no one like her, either.”

He paused. “That is what makes anomalies significant. Singular.” Then, almost smiling, he corrected himself. “Not singular since there are two of you.”

An anomaly, then—but doubled. As though the bond hadn’t already set her apart, now biology did, too. She stumbled a little and he caught her elbow, steadying her. That touch burned—hotter than it should have.

“Yeah. Maya,” she said, her voice rough. “She’s... everything to me. I have to get back to her.”

Tor’Vek’s hand slid down her arm, catching her wrist and holding it lightly. She didn’t pull away. Couldn’t. Every cell in her body begged for the contact. His gaze locked with hers.

“You will,” he said, and something inside her chest fractured at the quiet certainty in his voice.

They pressed on, keeping close, the craving building like a storm at their backs. At one point, when they had to scramble up a crumbling ledge, Tor’Vek lifted her easily, setting her down so gently it made her throatache.

At the top, she didn’t step back. She didn’t want to. He looked different up here—like the wind stripped him down to something raw. The ridges of his jaw were locked tight, his breathing no longer measured, but rougher. His fingers twitched against her waist like he wasn’t sure if he was reassuring her or himself.

The craving, the heat—it wasn’t just building anymore. It was pushing. Hard. A storm rising in the space between them and inside him, and she could see it—how close he was to the edge. His eyes darted to the side like he was trying not to look at her, and

failing. His control—always so flawless—shuddered like it was seconds from cracking.

He stood too close. His breath brushed her temple. His fingers remained at her waist. Their bracelets almost pulsed in time, a low, insistent beat that blurred into the frantic thud of her heart.

Anya looked up. Her chest squeezed. His breath had caught for just a second. Not much—but enough. His eyes flicked to her mouth and then away, jaw clenched, like he was swallowing something dangerous. Something fragile. Something that would break if he let it out.

Her heart skipped, caught between fear and something else—something reckless. He was right there, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his skin, the bond drumming so loud it silenced everything else. And he wasn't moving away. He was fighting himself and losing. Every part of him vibrated with tension, like his body was trying to contain something it was never meant to hold. She saw it then—not rage, not logic, but the terrifying fragility of restraint. And beneath it, the wanting. Her. Only her.

Tor'Vek's eyes burned—aglowing amethyst, intense, raw.

She rose onto her toes, not knowing if it was her decision or theirs. His hand slid up her spine, and their mouths met—hot, desperate, aching.

The kiss was a collision, a clash of need and restraint. It wasn't soft. It wasn't tender. It was survival—a frantic attempt to staunch the craving, to bury themselves in something other than rage and hunger.

His mouth devoured hers, and she clung to him, fingers fisting in the fabric of his shirt. For one endless heartbeat, the world narrowed to this—heat, breath, connection.

Then, abruptly, he tore himself away, staggering back as though burned.

She gasped, reaching for him—then stopping herself just intime.

They stood there, panting, staring, the bond between them vibrating with the force of what they'd barely survived.

A sound shattered the charged silence.

Click.

Ahiss.

Anya spun, heart slamming into her throat.

From the shadows of the broken rocks ahead, creatures exploded intoview.

Hominids. Pale. Slick-skinned.Fast.

Tor'Vek shoved her behind him with a single, brutal motion and drew his sword. His solar gun blazed to life, but he tossed it aside almost immediately, favoring the blade—favoring close combat.

They swarmedhim.

He moved with lethal precision at first—acalculated machine of muscle and rage. But the precision didn'tlast.

The craving. The anger.

It unspooled inside him like a snappedwire.

He fought too hard. Too violently. When he felled one creature, he didn't stop. He drove his fists into the corpse again and again, blood splattering the rocks, his breath coming in savage snarls.

"Tor'Vek!" Anya cried.

He didn't hear her.

He was lost.

His fists didn't know when to stop.

Another creature lunged. He turned with a roar—not the cry of a man, but of something ancient and furious—and tore into it.

The first scouting wave had barely begun.

And already, Tor'Vek was unraveling.

Anya backed away, stumbling over loose rock, her breath jagged and thin. Blood sprayed in wide arcs, the air filled with the crunch of bone under fist, the screech of dying things, and Tor'Vek's low, feral growl. He was a storm now—silent one second, roaring the next, fury bleeding through every move.

She opened her wrist display, desperate for something—anything—that made sense. The countdown blinked back at her.

41:14:22

Her stomach dropped. "No... no, that can't be right."

It had been at 48:00:00 when they'd left. They hadn't been walking that long. But the digits ticked down faster now. Toofast.

Her heart slammed into her ribs. Selyr had warned them this would happen—warned the countdown would accelerate the moment they gave in to the bond, to rage or craving or both. And Tor'Vek had just lost control of all three. Or maybe it wasn't Selyr at all. Maybe the bracelets were reacting on their own, feeding off Tor'Vek's emotional spike, interpreting the violence as a signal that they weren't ready. That they were becoming unstable. That it was time to end them.

"Tor'Vek!" she screamed again, but he didn't respond. His sword had disappeared beneath a pile of bodies. He fought now with fists and blade edges ripped from the corpses themselves. His movements were no longer calculated. They were primal.

Another hominid charged.

He caught it mid-leap—bare hands around its throat—and slammed it into the rocky terrain so hard the earth cracked.

Anya staggered back, hand clamped over her mouth as bile threatened to rise. Her stomach twisted, her breath catching in her throat, but she forced herself to stay upright. She couldn't afford to fall apart. Not now.

This wasn't battle.

It was annihilation.

And he wasn't stopping.

The countdown ticked lower.

40:08:19

She blinked, trying to steady her breath, but the numbers kept slipping—dropping fast.

39:16:42

She swiped the display again, desperate, disbelieving.

38:51:03

She stumbled closer, her voice barely audible above the carnage. “You have to stop. You’re going to trigger it.”

Still no reaction. Only violence. A blur of movement and blood.

She reached for his arm.

And prayed he still remembered who she was.

His head jerked slightly at her touch. Just a flicker, a pause in motion. The next swing of his arm arced toward her—close enough that she felt the air shift, the heat of it kiss her cheek. It stopped a breath from impact, trembling midair, his muscles locked. His chest heaved with a growl caught halfway between instinct and reason. His eyes were wild, still glowing, but no longer entirely empty—just horrified.

“Tor’Vek,” she murmured, her hand still on his arm, her voice soft and trembling with something far deeper than fear. “It’s me. It’s Anya. You know me. You know me.”

She stepped in closer, letting her palm trail slowly up to his shoulder, then the side of his neck—gentle, soothing. Her touch wasn’t just contact—it was connection,

alifeline she was throwing across the storm raging in him.

Her fingers trembled against his skin, not from fear, but from the ache rooted in every fiber of her being—acaving sharpened by adrenaline, longing, and the near-loss of him moments before. It coiled through her like heat from a wire, impossible to ignore. She needed him—so badly she shook with it. But more than that, she needed him back.

She leaned in, burying her forehead against his chest. Her breath was a warm whisper over his skin as she crooned, low and rhythmic, “It’s okay. I’ve got you. You’re not alone. You don’t have to fight this by yourself. Come back to me. Come back .”

The bracelet pulsed beneath her skin—warm and insistent, like a heartbeat that wasn’t hers. It radiated outward in waves, stirring something low in her belly, joining her even as it heightened the ache building between them. Her breath hitched. It wasn’t just a reaction. It was a call.

He turned his head slowly toward her. His jaw was clenched, breath ragged. His hands opened and closed like he didn’t know what they were supposed to do anymore. But he wasn’t striking.

He crouched in the dirt, arms braced on his knees, his breath sawing in and out like he was still trying to wrestle the rage down. She followed him, sinking to her knees in front of him with trembling legs, and cupped his jawline in both hands.

His skin was burning beneath her touch. Not from fever, but from restraint—barely leashed, barely surviving it. She stroked her thumbs along the sharp edge of his face, holding him steady, forcing him to see her. To feel her.

“Come back to me,” she whispered again, the words breaking around the heat in her throat. “Please, just come back. You’re not lost. You’re still here. I’m here. We’re not

done yet.”

Another pulse from the bracelet—stronger this time.

And finally, his gaze locked with hers.

He didn’t speak. But his body stilled, his fists lowered.

The storm paused. He recovered his sword and his solar gun. Then, without a word, he reached for her.

Tor’Vek’s arms slid beneath her—one at her back, the other under her knees—and in a single smooth motion, he lifted her off the blood-slick ground. She didn’t resist. Couldn’t. Her fingers curled into his chest, seeking reassurance, chasing the warmth that still burned through him. She didn’t understand why, not fully—but it steadied her. Her body recognized safety even when her mind still reeled.

He didn’t look back.

Still didn’t speak.

Just walked.

The carnage faded behind them with every step, the twisted bodies and broken stones giving way to a clearing of jagged rock and scattered moss. He stopped only when they reached a slope just far enough away to hide the battlefield, as well as the stench and heat.

He knelt, lowering her onto a patch of moss-strewn earth beside a small, silver stream that bubbled quietly between stones. For a moment, he stayed with her, his elbows braced on his knees, chest heaving, hands still stained crimson. Then he rose without

a word and crossed to the water. He took a moment to examine it with his rij, assuring that it was safe.

Then he knelt at the edge, cupping the cool current in his palms, scrubbing it over his arms, his face, his chest. The water turned pink around his hands, then clear again. It wasn't just blood he washed away—it was the remnants of something he hadn't wanted to become.

When he returned, droplets still clinging to his skin and black-and-white hair, she met his gaze with quiet, wordless gratitude.

She touched his arm again, needing it—needing him—to steady her. Her fingers lingered this time, sliding slowly down the curve of his forearm. His skin was still damp from the stream, and it sent a fresh pulse of heat skimming across her nerves. She didn't look away. Couldn't. Not with the way his gaze locked on hers—hungry, searching, restrained only by the last thread of discipline.

Her breath caught. Heat bloomed between them again—sharp and sudden, drawn from the memory of his mouth on hers and the way he looked at her now, like he was already imagining more. She felt the shift in him too. The tightening of his jaw, the flicker in his pupils, the precise control with which he didn't reach for her.

The moment stretched.

She whispered, "You're too far."

He didn't speak. He just leaned in—slowly, deliberately—until their foreheads touched again.

Her pulse stumbled.

“I am trying not to want you,” he said against her mouth.

“But you do,” she whispered back, trembling. “And I want you, too.”

Their breath mingled. The bond throbbed.

Her hand drifted up his chest—slow, uncertain—tracing the ridges of muscle as if memorizing him by feel alone. His body flexed, muscles tightening beneath her palm like a livewire snapped too tight. His head dipped closer, the heat of him bleeding into her skin. For a second, neither of them breathed.

A heat unfurled low in her belly. His eyes had darkened—not with rage, but with restrained want—and the way his breath hitched when her fingers slid higher told her he was barely holding the line.

Then she surged up.

Their mouths met—not soft, not slow, but desperate. Raw. She kissed him like she couldn’t stop, like she’d been waiting forever, and he answered with equal heat, one hand clenching at her hip, the other sliding into her hair. The kiss turned raw—stripped of hesitation, brimming with hunger. There was no room for gentleness, no pause for thought. Need, wild and unfiltered, burned through them like a fuse too short to contain the flame.

She broke away first, her breath catching in a quiet, shuddered exhale.

The bracelet flared.

They stared at each other, stunned, breathless, trembling.

And then the screen flickered back to life.

38:48:19

She blinked. It was still dropping. But slower.

38:47:09

And slower still.

38:46:55

Tor’Vek saw it too. “It is recalibrating,” he said quietly. “The countdown... is stabilizing.”

They stared at the screen.

38:46:39... 38:46:22...

Then it ticked normally.

38:45:59

She let out a shaky breath and looked at him.

He remained still, silent. Not from indecision, but from something heavier—like movement itself might shatter what little control he had left.

His head bowed slightly. His hands were still curled into fists, now resting uselessly on his knees, but his body had begun to ease. Not relaxed, not recovered—but easing.

Her knees grazed his, and she laid a hand lightly on his shoulder. “You stopped,” she whispered. “You stopped. ”

His throat worked around the words. “I nearly did not.”

“I know.”

They stayed there in the quiet, breath syncing, hearts still racing. The bond no longer howled. It hummed—low and warm, like a second heartbeat, tender but insistent, wrapping around her nerves in a way that felt less like warning and more like promise. It wasn’t rage anymore. It was ache. Longing. Heat that lingered and refused to letgo.

Steady.

Alive.

Unbroken.

Chapter15

TOR'VEK RETURNED to the stream, washing more thoroughly, especially the wounds he'd acquired that continued to bleed. The silence wrapped around him like a second skin. Cool. Heavy. Unforgiving.

He had almost struck her.

He had come within a breath of harming the one thing tethering him to what remained of his sanity.

The bracelet pulsed softly against his wrist, syncing now to a rhythm that wasn't just his. It was hers. Theirs. Steady, if only for a moment before beating at odds once again.

Footsteps crunched lightly behind him.

He did not turn. "You should rest."

She came closer anyway, stopping just behind him. "You're bleeding again."

"It is not critical."

He heard her crouch beside him, felt the shift in the air as she reached out. Her fingers contacted his arm, light as wind, but the bond flared with it. Not painful. Just—immediate.

“Let me see,” she said, already pulling the meddisc from the small satchel they’d salvaged. She didn’t wait for permission.

The meddisc hissed faintly as it sealed a gash along his ribs. Then another. Then his knuckles. Along his jawline. Her touch came brisk but careful. He was acutely aware of every point where her skin met his.

When she finally sat back on her heels, he didn’t move. Couldn’t.

“You saved me today,” she said quietly. “Even when you were... gone.”

He closed his eyes. “That is not a reassurance. I nearly broke my oath.”

“But you didn’t.” She paused. Then added, softer, “You stopped. That matters.”

He could not look at her.

Her hand rose again, this time resting lightly on his shoulder. The warmth of her touch spread through him like sunlight through ice. A balm. A bond

“We should rest,” she said. “A few hours at most. Then we move.”

He nodded once. Finally.

They set up camp just beyond the rocks, sheltered beneath an overhang and surrounded on three sides by jagged stone. A crude defense, but one that would buy them seconds if predators returned. He forced himself to eat a ration bar while Anya dozed lightly beside him, her breathing soft and uneven.

He watched her for longer than he meant to.

When she stirred, she found him still seated beside her, sharpening his blade with slow, precise movements.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she murmured.

“No.”

She sat up slowly, wiping sweat from the back of her neck. Her skin shone in the light, flushed and damp, and a single bead of moisture tracked along her collarbone before vanishing beneath the edge of her shirt.

Her eyes met his—still heavy with sleep, rimmed with heat and exhaustion—and yet within them lived a flicker of something more. Determination. Weariness. Maybe even trust. He could not look at her and remain unaffected. Not when she looked likethat.

“What happens if I don’t survive this?” she asked.

The question struck him like a blow—sharp, unanticipated, more devastating than any blade. He set his weapon down carefully, suddenly aware of how useless it would be if he lost her. He met her gaze, and for a moment, let her see past the control.

Her brows drew together, lips parting slightly as she looked at him—really looked at him. Long, tangled strands of blonde hair clung to her damp skin, her body still flushed from the heat. But it was her eyes that struck him hardest—those wide, ocean-blue eyes, always filled with something she refused to speak aloud. Vulnerability. Courage. An ache that mirrored hisown.

He had seen those eyes wide with terror, narrowed with defiance, soft with sleep, burning with desire. He had seen her body arch beneath his, her breath catch with rapture. And still, he wantedher.

Not because of the craving. Not because of what the bracelet demanded.

Because she was his. Anya. Complex. Beautiful. Infuriating.

Necessary.

His need for her existed beyond instinct, beyond biology, beyond the limits of any bond he had ever known. It lived in his blood now, in the slow turn of her head, in the tremble of her breath, in the sweat-slick curve of her throat and the way she blinked too fast when overwhelmed. She was all soft skin and fierce resolve. And she was looking at him like she wasn't sure what he'd say. Like maybe—some part of her needed to hear it, too.

“If you don't survive this, then I fail,” he said, his voice dropping low. “And I do not fail. I have calculated countless probabilities, adjusted for every threat. But you...”

He trailed off. Something fractured just slightly in his expression. “You were never a variable I expected. Yet now every survival outcome requires you.”

She didn't speak.

“Therefore,” he said, more gently, “you will survive.”

Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came out. Then she shook her head faintly, as if trying to dismiss the weight of what he'd just said. “But—” The word caught in her throat, a fragile protest she couldn't quite voice.

“I do not fail,” he repeated simply. “Therefore, you will survive.”

But the words echoed back too softly against the silence between them. Something in her expression caught in his chest and refused to let go.

She turned away, just slightly, curling her knees against her chest. Her skin still glistened with heat, her breathing uneven. He didn't speak, only reached out and tucked a strand of damp hair behind her ear. His fingers lingered longer than necessary. She didn't pull away.

It wasn't protection she needed. Not warmth. Just him.

As he started to rise, her hand caught his wrist.

Not to stop him. Her fingers didn't shake. She didn't flinch. There was no panic in the way she reached for him—just quiet conviction. Something in her touch spoke of trust, of forgiveness, of faith he hadn't earned. Not yet.

He paused. Their eyes met again.

She exhaled softly, almost soundless, the breath hitching just enough to betray what she felt. Her fingers tightened around his wrist, and her gaze turned raw. Open.

He leaned down slowly, brushing his mouth against her temple. It was not a kiss meant to stir passion, but a whisper of something unspoken. She closed her eyes and leaned into it.

Then, quietly, she released him.

The absence of her grip was immediate. Not painful, but sharp—like waking from a dream too soon. Her fingers slipping from his wrist left behind a heat that wasn't physical. It was the imprint of her trust, her belief in him. And for a moment, he missed the contact more than he cared to admit.

Tor'Vek rose and began packing their gear. He didn't look at her again until everything was ready. Then he extended a hand.

She took it without hesitation.

They broke camp in silence—but not distance. Never distance.

Neither spoke as they climbed the first ridge, the terrain growing more jagged with each step. Sunlight baked the rocks around them, too hot, too bright, and yet the shadows always felt close. Watching.

Predators stalked them. He sensed it. Anya sensed it too. She stayed close.

At midday, she stumbled, skin flushed with heat. He steadied her with a hand to her lowerback.

“We need to rest soon,” she said, voice tight.

“One more kilometer.”

She didn’t argue.

The bond between them ached now, not with rage, but with something heavier. Hunger. Craving. A visceral need neither of them dared name.

They crested another rise—and the wind changed.

He knew the scent before he saw the threat.

The creatures were fast. Silent. Camouflaged until the moment they struck.

Anya screamed as one leapt from a rock above and Tor’Vek threw himself into its path, blade already rising.

The hunt had begun again.

The first creature landed hard, claws outstretched, all sinew and fangs and speed.

Tor'Vek met it head-on.

The force of the impact threw him backward, boots grinding into the rock. The beast snarled, its breath hot and fetid against his skin. He grunted, twisting, driving his blade up beneath the ribs. The creature howled and convulsed, thrashing with enough strength to rip a lesser fighter apart.

It diedugly.

Another lunged before the first hit the ground. Tor'Vek pivoted, blade flashing, but the second was faster—smarter. It dodged, raked claws across his side, drawing blood. The sting sharpened his focus. He countered quickly, feinting left and then driving forward with brutal precision. The blade sliced through the creature's throat in one clean arc, and it dropped, gurgling, into the dust. Only then did he spin toward the third—

Anya shouted behindhim.

The third had gone forher.

Cursing, he whirled towardher.

Toofar.

Still, heran.

Too far. Toolate.

She dodged left, fast, ducking under a sweeping arm. The slope gave under her boots, and she stumbled. The creature struck.

Her scream pierced the air as claws sliced across her upper thigh. She collapsed, clutching the wound.

Tor’Vek bellowed. It tore out of his chest raw and unrestrained—a sound born not just of fury, but fear. The sight of her blood, her scream, the split-second where she dropped and he could not reach her—it fractured something inside him.

He closed the distance in a blur, ramming his shoulder into the creature with enough force to send them both tumbling. He rolled, came up over it, and drove the blade into its neck again and again until it stopped moving.

Silence fell.

But only for a breath.

A fourth creature lunged from the shadows to his right—larger than the others, with a scar across its jaw and a predatory focus in its eyes. Tor’Vek spun, blade coming up. They clashed hard, metal against bone, claws against skin. He grunted as it drove him backward, strength near equal to his own. But he was faster. Smarter.

He ducked a swing, jammed his elbow into its throat, and slashed across its chest. It reeled—but not before landing a blow that knocked him off balance, skidding across the rocky slope.

The creature came after him.

Tor’Vek rolled, came to his feet, and drove his blade up through the beast’s jaw as it leapt. Its weight crashed into him, but it was already dead by the time they hit the

ground.

Breathing hard, Tor’Vek shoved the body aside and turned, blood pounding in his ears.

Anya.

She was on her side, propped on one elbow, her other hand pressed hard to the wound. Blood seeped through her fingers, dark and wet.

“Let me see,” he said, dropping beside her.

She shook her head. “It’s not that bad.”

“Do not lie to me.”

He peeled her hand away. The gash was long. Deep. Already swelling, the edges of the wound red and angry. It was worse than she’d admitted—worse than he’d feared. He yanked the meddisc from his satchel, thumbing the activator.

It glowed. Dimly.

He swore. It pulsed slower than before. The power cell was weakening.

He pressed it to her skin anyway. The disc hissed and sealed the wound, but only partially. The last pulse flickered, the glow nearly extinguished.

He held it up. The readout flashed orange. One, maybe two uses left.

Anya watched him, lips tight. Her face had gone pale, eyes glassy with pain, but she didn’t complain. She hadn’t made a sound since the scream—and that scared him

more than any wound.

He settled on his knees beside her and took her hand again. Her skin was slick with sweat, her pulse erratic under his fingertips.

“Breathe,” he said quietly. “Just breathe.”

She nodded, even as a tear slipped down her cheek.

Tor’Vek touched the meddisc to her thigh again to finish the job. The seal wasn’t perfect, but it was enough. The worst was closed. Infection averted. But the weakness of the tool rattled him more than he wanted to admit.

“We have to be careful,” she whispered.

“Yes. Very.”

He looked back at her leg. The bleeding had stopped. But when he checked the bracelet interface still linked to his rij, the display jolted him.

Thirty-two solar units.

Down from nearly forty.

His breath caught.

The countdown had dropped again—severely. The numbers weren’t just data. They were a death sentence ticking louder now, closer. He stared at them, the sharp jolt in his chest not from the readout but from what it meant. Not enough time. Not enough protection. And she was bleeding in his arms. He wasn’t just afraid of failing the mission. He was afraid of failing her.

She was watching him. “Thetime?”

He met her gaze. “We have lost nearly eight more solar units. Sixteen total.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, but she only nodded. “Then we have to move.”

He touched her cheek.

“You will live.”

She smiled faintly. “Good. One of us has to.”

The words hung between them like a shadow. Tor’Vek didn’t answer, but the corner of his mouth twitched in something not quite a smile. He felt it—the weight of her joke meant to distract him from the fear. Meant to keep them both standing.

He let the silence stretch just a second longer before shifting closer, fingers sweeping the back of her hand. A reminder. A vow.

His hand moved to her wrist, where the bracelet still pulsed against her skin. The bond between them vibrated softly now, the craving dimmed by adrenaline, fear, and something else he didn’t want to name.

He leaned in, resting his forehead against hers.

“You cannot die.”

“Wasn’t planning to,” she whispered.

He breathed her in.

For now, she was still here.

But she could not walk.

Tor'Vek saw the pain flash across her face the moment she shifted her weight. She tried to mask it—of course she did—but the bond betrayed her. The flare of discomfort lanced through him as clearly as if it were his own.

She took two steps. Stumbled on the third.

Without a word, he moved.

His arms swept beneath her again, lifting her. She gasped, more from surprise than pain, her arms instinctively wrapping around his neck.

"I can walk," she protested softly.

"You should not," he replied, his voice low but implacable.

She didn't argue again.

The heat pressed down on them as they moved, the jagged terrain rising ahead in an endless ripple of blackened stone. But her body in his arms was the only weight he cared about. And she—for once—let herself rest.

He held her tighter.

Because no matter how many times he told himself to remain logical, analytical, precise—this was not a variable he would allow the universe to take. He adjusted his grip around her, one hand cradling her thigh, the other steady at her back. Her temple grazed his jaw. The contact was subtle, but it supported him in a way no algorithm

ever had.

Time ticked by, far too quickly. The valley stretched out before them, narrow and winding, hemmed in by jagged cliffs on either side. It should have been a clear shot to the access panel. A direct path.

But the ground was wrong.

The earth below shimmered with heat. Cracks laced through stone like veins. Steam curled from fissures at random intervals, rising in ghostly fingers toward the blazing sky with a high, hissing shriek that echoed through the valley like a warning. The sound was sharp, alive—abreath held too long before rupture.

Tor'Vek stopped at the edge.

“That smell,” she murmured, “what is it?”

“Sulfur. And pressure.”

As if summoned by his words, a geyser erupted fifty meters ahead. Not with water—but with stone. A chunk the size of a skimmer hull launched into the air with a sound like a cannon, crashing down half a second later and obliterating the slope beside them.

Anya flinched. Tor'Vek adjusted his grip. “Put me down,” she said, already pushing lightly against his chest. “My leg is fine. I can run.”

He hesitated.

She met his gaze, firm—but her eyes flickered, just for a moment, to his mouth. The bond pulsed between them like a second heartbeat, heated and insistent. “You said it

yourself—this is going to be fast. You need both hands.”

Her voice was steady, but her breath wasn't. The craving was there, just beneath the surface, echoing his own. It churned with the same pressure building under their feet—dangerous, volatile, asingle breath from detonation. And like the geysers all around them, it wouldn't take much to explode. One touch. One kiss. One moment of surrender.

He set her down carefully. She tested her weight with a wince, then nodded. “Let's do this.”

“We run,” he said.

She blinked. “Through that ?”

“There is no other path. The panel is on the farside.”

Another geyser erupted to their left. Then a third, farther down. Shards of rock rained in all directions.

She swallowed hard. “Then we run.”

They did.

The first sprint was clean. Ten meters. Fifteen.

Then the earth hissed.

Tor'Vek grabbed her arm and yanked her left as a geyser exploded where they'd just been, the shockwave throwing them sideways. They hit the ground hard, rolled, and scrambled up.

They ran again.

A lull. Then more eruptions. Rock sprayed across the valley in unpredictable arcs. Some geysers launched debris high into the air. Others hurled it sideways in jagged arcs, slicing through the air like shrapnel.

Anya stumbled. Tor'Vek caught her wrist—his grip instinctive, too tight, lingering. Her skin burned beneath his fingers. For a split second, neither of them moved, the world narrowed to touch and breath and the low throb of the bond straining to break free. Then she blinked hard, and he released her. They weaved around another fissure, ducked beneath a jut of stone just as a plume exploded behind them.

He shielded her as boulders rained down, then shoved them forward again.

They were halfway across when the largest geyser yet blew skyward with a shriek. A boulder the size of a transport drone came down ten meters ahead, embedding itself in the path.

They veered around it, breath ragged, boots slipping on scorched gravel.

The access panel shimmered into view through the steam—a dark oval set into the rock face, gleaming faintly.

Ten more meters.

Five.

The terrain bucked beneath them as one last geyser exploded behind them, hurling a wave of dust and debris. It struck them midstride, knocking both off their feet.

Anya hit hard, rolled once, and came up gasping.

Tor'Vek grabbed her hand, dragged her to herfeet.

Together, they ran the final steps.

They collapsed against the base of the cliff, lungs burning, bodies scraped and bruised. Their shoulders touched. Their breathing staggered in sync. The bond clawed at the edges of restraint, wanting more than survival. It surged against the limits of control, wild and immediate, as if it sensed the nearness of safety and demanded a reward. Tor'Vek's pulse pounded in his throat—not from exertion, but from the need drumming through him, hot and insistent. He clenched his fists, swallowing it back. Barely.

His gaze dipped to her mouth. Justonce.

Then he lookedaway.

They'd made it. Scarred. Breathless. Inches from unraveling.

Now the panel waited. And waiting was no longer an option.

Chapter16

TOR'VEK'S FINGERS flew over the embedded panel, wrist angled sharply as he accessed the encrypted controls with his rij. The wall remained solid. Unmoving.

Behind them, the valley roared.

Anya turned at the sound—ageyser had erupted not fifty meters away, a column of stone and fire launching into the sky. A second followed. Then a third. The earth shook with each eruption, and the air vibrated with a thunder that rattled her teeth. Sharp bits of rock peppered the ridge. If that panel didn't open soon, they were going to be crushed.

“Tor' Vek!”

“It is locked!” he growled, eyes narrowing. He didn't look at her. He didn't need to. His jaw clenched, his fingers flying faster.

The next geyser erupted with a deafening crack, sending a boulder crashing into the ridge just meters behind them. Shards exploded outward, pelting their backs and shoulders with stinging impact. Anya cried out, ducking low, arms over her head. Tor'Vek stood firm, shielding her with his body. One more meter, and that rock would have crushed themboth.

Anya pressed a hand to the panel, useless but instinctive. The metal beneath her palm was hot, almost pulsing, as if reacting to their presence—or warning them away. It vibrated faintly, not from the geysers behind them, but from something within. It felt

alive.

Her stomach twisted. “Please.”

The panel blinked.

Tor’Vek slammed his palm against it—once, twice. Then it hissed, seals releasing with a low, mechanical exhale.

Steam curled outward in slow, spiraling ribbons, thick and sulfuric, like breath drawn from the lungs of something old and dying. Outside, the valley still screamed—geysers howled, rocks cracked and slammed down in punishing waves. The valley heat had baked her skin, left her aching and half-delirious with fatigue.

In front of her, the air shifted. Not cool, exactly. Just heavier. Still. The kind of quiet that settled in graveyards. Just steps away, the silence felt surgical, too clean. The shift was jarring. It made her feel as if the storm had closed a door behind them, sealing them in with something far more precise. And far more patient. The heat of it kissed her cheeks and coated her tongue in mineral bitterness. Every instinct screamed at her not to enter.

Tor’Vek stepped forward first.

Snatching a deep breath, she rushed after him, nearly stumbling in her urgency. The geysers behind them were still erupting, and she could feel the vibrations chase her down the tunnel, echoing through the metal floor. She didn’t hesitate. Didn’t lookback.

She followed.

The corridor swallowed them immediately, as smooth, rounded tunnel of dark alloy

veined with strange, pulsing seams. Their boots echoed too loud against the floor. The overhead lights flickered once—then failed. Darkness swallowed them, absolute and sudden. Anya’s breath caught, her hand shooting out to find Tor’Vek’s arm. Only the pulsing seams in the walls remained, casting the faintest crimson glow like veins in a sleeping beast.

“It appears untouched,” Tor’Vek said softly.

Anya frowned. She didn’t know if that was good or bad. The word should have comforted her—but it didn’t. Untouched could mean forgotten. Abandoned. Or worse... sealed. Not for protection, but containment. Her fingers curled reflexively against the nearest wall. Something about this place felt less like a corridor and more like a trap laid centuries ago that hadn’t yet been sprung.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out three small spheres, each no larger than a fruit pit. She blinked at them.

“More weapons?”

“No.”

He knelt and placed them on the metal floor. They twitched. Unfolded. Eight thin legs each, gleaming and delicate. They looked like mechanical spiders.

Anya swallowed. “What are those?”

“Mapping scouts,” he said. “Each one will take a different route through the structure. They feed real-time visual and sensory data to myrij.”

As he spoke, the tiny machines skittered off—one left, one right, one forward into the tunnel ahead.

Anya tried to calm her breathing. The craving hadn't vanished. It licked at her nerves, bubbling just beneath the surface of her skin, quiet but insistent—like breath against her neck when no one was there. Her hand gripped his forearm as they stood tight against one another, watching the feed begin to populate on his wrist.

She didn't move away. She couldn't. The contact connected her—and threatened to undo her.

Tor'Vek didn't look at her, but she felt the tension in him when she touched him. Controlled. Banked.

The map began to build on his screen—corridors unfolding in three glowing threads.

“That one,” he said, pointing to the middle. “A direct path to the core chamber. Minimal turns.”

A long beat.

She saw something flash across the screen—a burst of shadow, a flicker of movement, an incredibly large object. Then came a sharp, metallic crack through the audio feed—a sound like metal tearing, followed by static. The noise sent a jolt down her spine. Whatever it was, it moved fast, violently. And it saw.

The camera went dark.

Tor'Vek exhaled slowly. “The scout was destroyed.”

“What did that?” Her voice came out thin. Unsteady.

Tor'Vek didn't answer right away. Then: “Predator. Large. Aware.”

She was already backing away from the screen, as if that flicker of shadow might emerge from the corridor and swallow them whole. Her heart pounded so loud it drowned the hum of the pulsing walls. Then came a sound—low and distant at first, almost a vibration in her bones. It grew, rising into a deep, rumbling growl that echoed through the corridor system like thunder held underwater.

Whatever had destroyed that scout wasn't just dangerous—it was hunting. Her stomach churned, a cold wave of nausea rolling through her as the weight of that truth settled over her. Her legs went a little weak, knees threatening to give. She clutched Tor'Vek's arm for balance instead, nails digging into him as if the strength of his body might keep her upright. It steadied her. Barely. And it had sensed them. Maybe not seen—there was no clear image to prove that. But the timing, the precision—it had reacted. It knew they were here.

A slow, electric crawl danced down her spine—not a full-body shudder, but a needle-fine ripple of dread that burrowed beneath her skin. Her breath hitched. The sensation wasn't just fear. It was the unmistakable feeling of being watched. Hunted. As if the dark itself had taken notice of her and was deciding whether to strike.

They stared at the feed in silence. The second spider moved through a winding set of detours. The third had paused to act as relay.

The detour path was long. Collapsing. Barely intact.

But not guarded.

He tilted his head. "We go around."

Anya nodded once, the craving twisting harder in her chest. Her fingers lingered on his arm longer than they should have, the heat of his skin calling to something deeper than fear or instinct. The bond surged, restrained but electric, like pressure behind a

dam. She bit her lip, the ache in her chest flaring with the nearness of him—not just want, but need. Dangerous, rising need.

She pulled in a breath. One, then another, willing herself to focus. They weren't safe yet. She couldn't let the craving win. Not here. Not now. Her legs felt shaky, her chest tight, but she straightened her shoulders anyway.

Only then did they turn toward the unstable path.

And stepped into the dark.

The air changed the moment they crossed into the alternate corridor. Anya felt it first in her chest—atightening, like her lungs had to work harder to draw each breath. The taste of dust clung to her tongue, iron-rich and stale, and something about the silence pressed against her eardrums like it wanted to hold her in place. It wasn't just hotter—it was heavier, weighted with dust and the sour tang of decay and fatigue. Every step crunched against debris. The floor beneath them felt brittle, not built for longevity. Not anymore.

Anya kept close to Tor'Vek, connecting with him every few steps—sometimes for balance, sometimes because the craving demanded it. The bond buzzed between them, not sharp like before, but simmering. It curled low in her belly, a slow burn that refused to fade. Every time she caught the scent of him in the stale heat, it tightened. Dangerous in its quiet persistence, like a fuse too short and already lit.

Tor'Vek didn't speak. He moved with precise economy, each step measured, his gaze flicking to the ceiling every time the metal above them groaned.

“How long is this tunnel?” she whispered.

“1.3 kilometers.” His voice was low, but steady. “But the structure is not sound.”

No kidding.

They ducked beneath a hanging support beam that had come half-loose from the ceiling. Tor’Vek pushed it aside for her with a casual strength that sent shivers down her spine. Her breath hitched at the motion, the way his body moved with clean, controlled power. Not from fear. From something hotter. Something she had no name for and didn’t dare dwell on—not here, not with the floor cracking beneath them.

They pressed on.

Every few minutes, a vibration passed through the floor—like the entire corridor was shifting on its foundation. Pipes throbbed with heat, an rhythmic pulse that seemed to echo in her bones—deep and muffled, like a heartbeat buried too far beneath skin. The warmth radiating from them wasn’t just uncomfortable. It felt alive, like something waiting.

In one section, the walls narrowed to barely more than a crawlspace, forcing them into single file. Tor’Vek led. Anya followed, watching the line of his back, the strength in his shoulders, the way he kept one hand hovering just behind him in case she slipped.

“I’m fine,” she said softly.

“I am ensuring that you remain so.”

The bond pulsed at those words, low and heated. Her eyes flicked to his mouth as he spoke, lingering a half second too long on the shape of it—the control in his voice, the strength in his jaw.

It made her wonder what it would take to make that control slip. The heat rose higher in her chest, restless, clawing. If she didn’t move, if she let herself dwell, she’d lean

in. It was like a hand pressed to the base of her spine—joining, yes, but also provoking. Her skin felt too tight, her heartbeat irregular. She wanted to lean into him, to touch more than just his arm, but she forced her feet forward instead.

A sudden snap echoed above.

Anya froze. So did he.

A hairline crack split across the ceiling. Dust rained down. Then the corridor shifted—just enough to tilt the floor beneath their boots.

“Move,” Tor’Vek said sharply.

They did—fast, running now, ducking under more sagging beams, skipping over fractures that split wider with every step. Heat rose from the floor in waves, and her skin prickled with warning.

Ahead, the tunnel yawned into a slightly wider chamber—reinforced, at least by design.

But as Anya sprinted toward it, the floor beneath her feet gave way.

There was no warning. Just the sudden, sickening lurch of nothing beneath her, the terrifying feeling of weightlessness where a solid floor had been. She screamed, arms pinwheeling, gravel and dust exploding upward as her boots skidded over the edge.

Panic surged, wild and blinding. Her heart punched her ribcage. The corridor blurred around her.

She dropped.

Her fingers scraped over crumbling metal—slipped—then caught.

Her body snapped to a halt, dangling by one hand from the jagged edge. Her other arm flailed, searching for anything—nothing. Pain shot through her shoulder like lightning, white-hot and blinding.

She was swinging.

Above a drop that had no end.

Her breath came in shallow gasps. Her fingernails tore at the metal, scrabbling for purchase as her grip started to slip. One finger. Then another.

She dug in, hard, the edge biting beneath her nails. Blood smeared the metal. Terror eclipsed everything else. There was no room for thought, no room for the bond. Only the breath catching sharp in her throat and the cold truth vibrating through her bones:

She was one fingernail away from dying.

She gasped, feet kicking in empty air.

“Tor’ Vek!”

He spun and lunged for her, dropping flat, arms outstretched. His hand locked around her wrist, holding iron-strong just as her grip gave away.

She dangled.

Below her, the corridor plummeted into darkness. The air rising from it was cold and sour, thick with the reek of oxidized metal and something ancient—something wrong. It kissed her face like a whisper, damp and breathless. No bottom. No echo.

“Don’t let go,” she gasped, nails digging into the edge oncemore.

“I will not.”

She tried to find footing, but the wall crumbled beneath her boots. Tor’Vek shifted, dragging her up centimeter by centimeter. His other hand caught her elbow, then under her arm, and with a final surge of strength, he hauled her over the ledge.

They crashed back onto solid ground together, breathless.

She rolled to her side, panting, then let out a shaky laugh that was part hysteria, part relief.

“Next time, let’s pick the path with fewer death traps.”

Tor’Vek didn’t answer right away. He just stared at the collapsed floor behind them, eyeshard.

“We will not go back that way,” he said atlast.

Anya swallowed. “So... monster it is.”

He nodded once. The motion was quiet, resolute—but it struck something in her. Not dread. Not even fear. Just the heavy certainty of what waited ahead, and the way he’d already accepted it. Her mouth wentdry.

And together, they pushed onward.

The new corridor was strangely intact. Still dim, still narrow, but the groaning and fracturing had stopped. Every footstep echoed longer than it should have. No more shifting walls. No more falling floors.

It should have been a relief. Her muscles even started to loosen, just a little. But something about the too-perfect stillness unsettled her. The silence pressed in too tightly, like a sealed chamber with no air left. After the chaos behind them, this quiet didn't feel earned. It felt borrowed—and about to be reclaimed.

Tor'Vek's pace never changed, but she could feel the tension in him just the same. She matched his rhythm, each step deliberate. Her shoulders slowly unlocked, but her instincts remained on high alert. The farther they went without disruption, the more exposed she felt. Like whatever was waiting had decided to let them come closer. Just for now.

The corridor went on longer than she expected. They passed ancient doors sealed shut, rusted wall plates covered in dust, and small, delicate symbols etched into the floor like a forgotten language. Once, they stepped over the shattered remains of one of the spider scouts, legs crumpled, sensor dark. She didn't ask what had done it. She didn't want to know. Her mind already supplied the image unbidden—massive claws, gleaming black, curled around crushed metal. A single glint of intelligence in whatever eyes had stared through that feed. The thought made her throat tighten. If she acknowledged it, she'd never keep moving.

They were close. She could feel it. A shift in the air pressure, a faint charge on her skin.

She looked at Tor'Vek. He nodded once. The final turn was just ahead.

Anya didn't speak. Neither did Tor'Vek. Not even the bond stirred—just a low, distant flicker in her chest, like it was holding its breath along with her.

The silence here wasn't safety. It was anticipation—looped, breathless, the kind that made your skin crawl before anything actually happened. Anya's heartbeat filled the void, too loud in her ears, and even the sound of their steps felt like an intrusion, like they were walking into the lungs of something ancient, and it had just

inhaled—waiting to exhale when it chose to end them.

The corridor opened into a chamber.

Not massive. Not grand. Just... still. Rounded walls. A high, concave ceiling. In the center stood a pedestal no taller than her waist. And floating above it—without visible suspension or support—was what she assumed to be the central stabilizer.

Anya stared at it.

It was beautiful. Smooth crystalline lines, humming with soft blue light. She took one step closer.

“Careful,” Tor’Vek said.

“Is it active?”

“No. But this entire place may be reactive.”

She nodded, forcing herself to breathe slower. The bond twitched slightly at his nearness, but she ignored it. They had made it. They were here. She took another step forward.

Nothing happened.

She circled the pedestal, fingers twitching with the instinct to reach. “This is it, right?”

“It is the stabilizer,” he confirmed. “Compatible, assuming it is undamaged.”

“I don’t see damage.”

Tor’Vek stepped beside her, gaze locked on the device. His jaw flexed. “I will remove it.”

“No,” she said, before she even knew why. “Let me.”

He turned to her. “You are still—”

“I’m steady. I promise.” She held his gaze, her hand resting lightly on the pedestal’s edge. “And if something goes wrong... you’ll get me out.”

A pause.

Then he nodded.

Anya reached forward.

She touched the stabilizer. Cool. Solid. It hummed at her touch. But it didn’t resist. No alarms. No vibrations.

She lifted it.

And the lights overhead flared.

They both spun. Tor’Vek’s body shifted to shield her, his sword in hand. But nothing emerged.

The light dimmed again. Silent warning—or countdown. She didn’t task.

Tor’Vek’s jaw was tight. “We move.”

She nodded and secured the stabilizer to her chest with the cross-straps from their

gear. The surface was glassy-smooth, but dense, like lifting a contained storm. The crystal buzzed faintly against her skin, the cold edge of it sharp through the fabric of her shirt. She adjusted the weight automatically, but it pulled her posture inward—like it wanted to fold her around it. Carrying it felt like a promise. And a dare. The moment it touched her, the weight of it sank deep—literal, but also something more. The future. The cost of failure. The monster that waited beyond.

As they turned back toward the exit, the corridor moaned.

It didn't sound like a structural groan this time. Anya froze, her body instinctively locking down. Her eyes darted to Tor'Vek. He had gone still too, his gaze already scanning the dark. Her pulse thudded in her ears. The sound didn't come from the walls. It came from something in them.

It sounded like breath—drawn slow and deep, as if something massive had just woken and was taking its first inhale in ages. Not mechanical. Notwind.

Alive.

Chapter17

THEY MOVED in silence, the stabilizer secure against Anya's chest. Behind them, the pedestal chamber remained open for several long steps—until the corridor's walls shifted with a hiss and a deep mechanical grind. Hydraulic locks engaged, and slabs of metal slid across the opening, sealing it shut.

Tor'Vek's steps were measured, blade still in hand. The final glimmer of chamber light vanished behind the sealed door, swallowed completely by shadow.

They had no choice now.

The path back was blocked. There was only one direction left.

Toward the monster.

Anya didn't speak. Her breath stayed quiet, shallow, as if sound might draw the thing waiting up ahead. The bond between them didn't hum—it bristled, tight and alert. She felt it crawl like static under her skin, tingling at her wrists, the back of her neck, a subtle prickle that made her muscles lock just a little tighter. A warning system. Alive wire.

They passed the junction where the scouts had split.

The shattered spider still lay there, legs bent at grotesque angles, as if something had enjoyed breaking it.

Tor’Vek stopped.

He crouched beside it, examining the fractured casing. The broken pieces flaked beneath his touch, delicate as dried bone. Its inner components were warped—compressed inward, not shattered. No scorch marks. No electrical interference. Just pure, brutal force. Tor’Vek turned the fragment slightly, analyzing the entry vector, eyes narrowing. Whoever—or whatever—had done this hadn’t just destroyed it. It had known exactly where to strike.

“What do you see?” Anya whispered.

“Force,” he said. “No burn. No heat. Just pressure. Blunt. Precise. Intelligent.”

Herose.

She followed his gaze down the corridor ahead. The air there looked different. Not just thicker—but distorted, like heat shimmer rising from pavement, bending everything beyond it. Aweight pressed at her skin, subtle but wrong. As if the space itself remembered violence. As if it hadn’t wanted to let that thing pass—but hadn’t dared stopit.

Her pulse ticked faster.

They kept walking.

Every step forward felt like descending into something deeper than shadow, into something deliberate. Like walking into the narrowed throat of a predator just before the jaws clamped shut. The corridor widened just enough to let them think they had space, but the ceiling dropped low and tight, stealing what little air remained. Anya could feel the pressure build behind her eyes, like the walls were pressing closer with every step.

They turned a corner.

Then another.

And then they heard it.

Low. Wet. Rhythmic.

Breathing.

It wasn't behind them.

It was ahead.

The corridor had drawn them here—step by step, turn by turn—into the deepest point, the narrowest passage, the one place they'd be at their most vulnerable. And now it waited.

Tor'Vek slowed. His arm shifted back instinctively, contacting with Anya's abdomen—not forceful, but firm. A silent command. She felt the pressure of his palm, steady and unyielding, and it pulled her into the shelter of his body without thought. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. Every part of him said one thing: I will stand between you and what comes.

Tor'Vek reached for the holster attached to his belt and pressed a sidearm into her hand—sleek, compact, already primed. "Use this if I fall," he said quietly, his voice steady as stone.

Something inside her cracked.

She curled her fingers around the weapon, its weight pressing down like it belonged

to another version of her—one braver, steadier, more willing to kill. Her throat closed. The thought of him falling—of his body hitting the floor, still and broken—shattered through her like a jolt of lightning.

“You won’t fall,” she said fiercely, lifting her chin. Her voice shook, but the words didn’t. “You’re not allowed.”

He didn’t answer.

He didn’t need to.

The air was so still it hurt to breathe. She could see the curve of the corridor now. Another turn. Another blindspot.

Tor’Vek moved.

Three steps.

He stopped.

Anya waited. Blood roaring in herears.

Then, quietly, he looked over his shoulder. “There is no cover. When it sees us, it will strike.”

She nodded, mouth dry. Her palm was slick around the grip of her weapon.

Tor’Vek adjusted his stance.

Then—

A noise.

A shape.

The thing emerged from the darkness like a nightmare made flesh.

Tall. Crooked. Its movements too fluid for something so massive. Its skin was plated in overlapping slabs of dark, slick tissue—like armor formed from rot and oil. The stench hit them next: acrid, organic, metallic. It punched up into Anya's sinuses, made her eyes water, her throat close. Her stomach clenched, twisting up with nausea. She turned her face away on instinct, coughing once, hard. Death after too much time—stale, intimate, and thick enough to taste.

It had no eyes. No face. Just a long ridge of slitted grooves, like the fossilized gills of some extinct predator. The slits flared once, then pulsed. Breathing. Smelling. Knowing.

And its hands—too many fingers, jointed in all the wrong places—dragged claws as long as her forearm across the floor, the sound sharp and slow, like metal sighing its last breath.

It didn't rush.

It savored. Each step calculated.

Anya's stomach flipped. Her fingers tightened on her weapon.

And through the haze of terror, the bond flared—just once. A desperate, craving pulse like a last cry for contact. Her body remembered the heat of Tor'Vek's mouth, the way his touch burned steady through chaos.

She didn't look at him.

She didn't have to.

He was already stepping forward.

Not fast. Not reckless. Deliberate. Like he was calculating angles with every step.

Anya adjusted her stance, holding the stabilizer tighter against her chest. The strap bit into her shoulder. She didn't dare loosen it. She didn't dare let it shift. The stabilizer was too important—fragile, volatile, irreplaceable. One jolt too hard and it might shatter, taking their mission with it. But God, it was cold. It radiated through her like an echo of the creature's breath.

The thing kept coming.

Its claws whispered over the floor, drawing shallow lines into the alloy. With each step, its body distorted—shifting subtly, like its bones weren't fixed. It had to duck to fit beneath the corridor's low ceiling, and the way it folded its body was wrong. Limbs bending where there should be none. Definitely no eyes, but it tilted its head toward Tor'Vek first, then her—as if weighing its options.

The air grew tighter. Anya's pulse beat against her ribs like it wanted out. Her mouth went dry. Her hands ached from gripping the weapon too hard. She couldn't run. Not with the corridor sealed behind them. Not with the stabilizer strapped to her.

Tor'Vek stopped. Just meters ahead of it now.

The thing stopped too.

A pause. Then a breath—wet and thick—from deep inside its body.

Tor'Vek's voice was low. "When it strikes, I need you behind me."

Anya nodded.

But the bond flared again. She could feel it pulse along her spine like it knew the moment was close. Knew what they both were about to risk.

Tor'Vek lifted his blade, shifting his weight slightly.

And then the creature moved.

No screech. No charge. It lunged with horrifying silence, a blur of darkness and too many limbs.

And they braced for impact.

The corridor behind them had already sealed. But now another sound came—a second groan, lower and closer. Somewhere deeper in the corridor—nearer to the creature than to them—a thick slab of alloy began to descend with a deep, grinding drag. Whether it was triggered by the creature's presence, their motion, or something watching them from unseen systems, Anya didn't know. But it moved like a warning. Or a cage. It moved slow, deliberate, cutting off even the illusion of retreat.

A shudder ran through the floor, like the structure itself understood what was about to happen. Dust sifted down from above. The light dimmed. Every escape vanished in that sound, every second forward sharpened into a single truth:

They were trapped.

And whatever happened next, there would be no one else. No reinforcements. No way out. Just them, the stabilizer, and the nightmare blocking their path.

Tor’Vek was the one who moved first.

He didn’t wait for the creature to strike. Didn’t hesitate. His body reacted with the clean, violent grace of instinct honed by war. The monster lunged—and Tor’Vek lunged back, not to meet the blow, but to beat it to the centerline. To own the moment before impact.

They collided in a blur of movement, motion made flesh and steel androt.

No clash of blades. No dramatic impact. Just raw speed and the sickening sound of bone snapping under pressure. He dropped low, swept the blade up with a force that should have carved the thing in half—

—but it twisted.

Toofast.

Too fluid.

The blade sliced clean through one of its many limbs, sending a black arc of fluid hissing against the corridor wall. The smell that followed was worse than before—acid and decay and something alive . The creature screamed without sound, its torso pivoting in a way no spine shouldbend.

Anya watched in horror as the creature’s claws tore into Tor’Vek’s forearm, shredding through his sleeve and into his skin. Blood welled fast, bright against the black fabric. He didn’t cry out—but she saw the way his body jolted, the brief stumble in his step, the flash of raw pain that crossed his face before he forced it down. He was still fighting—blade slashing to the creature’s midsection, an elbow to its ribs, abrutal kick to its knee—but it wasn’t enough. Not yet. Not fast enough. Not critical enough.

And Anya couldn't fire.

Tor'Vek was too close. The corridor too narrow. All she could do was wait, her finger tight on the trigger, eyes darting for an opening. She moved along the wall, keeping distance between herself and the stabilizer strapped across her chest. If she fell, if it cracked—if the stabilizer shattered against the corridor floor—it wouldn't just end the mission. It might kill them both.

She couldn't think about that.

The monster twisted again, one clawed hand swiping toward her now.

Tor'Vek turned in an instant. He didn't block—it was too far. He threw his body into its side, slamming it against the corridor wall. Flesh slapped alloy. Anya stumbled back as black fluid sprayed.

"Now!" he shouted.

She fired.

Twice.

The impact slammed into the creature's shoulder, spinning it just enough for Tor'Vek to strike again. This time his blade drove deep—through muscle, joint, bone. The creature shrieked, this time audibly, a wet, splitting wail that echoed like static in her skull.

It thrashed.

One massive limb caught Tor'Vek in the ribs and threw him against the wall with a sickening thud.

“Tor’ Vek!”

He dropped but didn’t stay down. Blood smeared the wall where he’d hit, but he was already rising, blade still in hand. Limping. Focused.

The creature staggered. Anya saw its movements slow—fluid leaking from multiple wounds, its limbs spasming. It was dying.

It knew it.

That was when it turned toward her again, almost as though the stabilizer drew it.

She raised the weapon.

And fired.

Once. Twice. Then again.

The last shot punched through the creature’s neck joint—what passed for it—splintering vertebrae and severing the long column of muscle beneath. Its head jerked sideways with a wet crack, limbs twitching once in spasm before collapsing all at once like a puppet dropped from a great height. The creature buckled—collapsed to its knees, then flat. A final hiss escaped its lungs, like the air leaving a ruptured tank.

And then it stopped moving.

For several long seconds, Anya couldn’t breathe. Not from exertion. Not from fear. It was as if her lungs had locked shut, stunned by what they’d just survived. Then the dam broke. Her breath came too fast—ragged, uneven, tearing past her lips in quick, shallow gasps. Her hands shook.

Tor'Vek stood above the creature, panting, his blade still poised.

"Is it dead?" she asked, struggling to hold back her sobs.

He didn't answer for a beat. Then: "Yes."

He turned toward her. Blood streaked his temple. His side. But he was alive.

And so was she.

And the stabilizer? Still intact.

The silence that followed was worse than the fight itself. It settled over them thick and absolute, broken only by the staggered drag of exhaustion through their lungs and the distant hum of corridor systems that no longer sounded neutral. Anya's legs nearly gave. Tor'Vek lowered his blade, slowly, as if unsure it was safe to let go. They exchanged a glance—no words, no comfort, just the shared shock of survival.

Because now they had to keep moving.

And there was no strength left to spare.

The creature's body cooled slowly, its limbs twitching once more before falling still for good.

Then came the hiss.

Behind it, the thick slab of alloy that had sealed the corridor began to retract. Slow. Mechanical. Not a surrender. A release. As if something had watched and waited, and now that the fight was over, it had no more use for confinement.

Anya's pulse spiked all over again. The timing was too perfect. As if the walls themselves had been watching, calculating. As if this wasn't coincidence at all—but something orchestrated. Her skin crawled with the sense of being observed, of a presence just beyond perception pulling strings she couldn't see.

She turned to Tor'Vek, her voice low. "Was this a test?" The bond flickered faintly between them, strained and crackling—tainted by adrenaline, but alive. Even in this moment, with the reek of blood in her nose and death at their backs, her body registered his nearness. The sweat on his neck. The heat radiating off him. How badly she wanted to reach for him—and how wrong it would be. How necessary.

He didn't answer. But his jaw tightened. He checked the bracelet countdown and stiffened. Twenty-two solar units. He jerked his head in the direction of the access panel. "We need to move."

They moved. Fast.

Tor'Vek led the way forward, every motion swift and deliberate, weapon still in hand. They stepped through the new opening, past the crushed remains of the creature. Past the fluid it had spilled. Past the smell of death.

And back into the crumbling corridor maze.

It felt emptier now. But not safer. The air had a different weight to it—too quiet, too still. Every step echoed back at them sharper than before, and somewhere beneath it all was the faint, irregular pulse of vibrations underfoot, like the structure was waiting to shift again.

They navigating a new route through the maze. A spider-scout carcass marked one of their turns, silent witnesses to everything that had happened. The walls groaned again, but held. The cracks widened underfoot, but didn't break.

When they reached the final tunnel leading to the access panel, Anya nearly collapsed.

But she didn't.

Because the valley still waited.

Steam greeted them first. Then the familiar sulfur burn in her nose. Then the sound—the eerie, churning rumble of pressure building beneath rock.

It was worse than before.

The geysers screamed like ruptured engines—piercing, deafening, primal. Columns of steam shot skyward with bone-shaking violence, and the air split with every eruption. It was less sound than shockwave, rattling Anya's teeth and clawing at her ears like a living thing.

The terrain beneath their feet vibrated as if the planet were trying to shake them off.

Tor'Vek didn't hesitate. He gripped her arm, then his hand slid down to the stabilizer strapped against her chest.

A pang of resentment rose up sharp in Anya's throat—irrational, immediate. It felt like surrender, like handing over the one burden she'd managed to carry all this way. But under it, another feeling coiled tighter. Relief. Bone-deep, unwanted, undeniable.

She hated that she felt it. Hated how heavy her limbs had become, how much her body craved the reprieve.

"I'll take it," he said.

“No,” Anya shot back, breath ragged. “I’ve got it.”

“It is heavy. You are already exhausted. We need speed.”

“I said I can carry it.”

But his hands were already working the strap, fast and firm. His knuckles grazed the side of her chest, and the contact was fleeting but electric. Her breath caught.

He met her eyes. Too long. Too steady. Something passed between them—hot, magnetic, edged with everything they hadn’t said. The bond flickered, not sharp this time, but slow and coiling. She felt it in her stomach. In her throat. In the low ache between her legs she refused to acknowledge.

The air between them tightened like a held breath—charged, intimate, inappropriate. And yet neither of them moved.

“If you slow down because of the stabilizer, we both die,” he said, voice rougher now.

The words should have broken the moment—should have snapped her back into the urgency of survival—but they didn’t. They deepened it. His voice, low and raw, slid under her skin, clinging somewhere hot and irrational. She felt it in her chest, her pulse, her breath. In that suspended beat between motion and instinct, she wanted to pull him closer. To close the space. To stop pretending the craving wasn’t mutual.

But she didn’t.

She hesitated—just for a second—then gave a tight nod, the moment splintering but not breaking.

He slung the stabilizer onto his back in a single motion, gripped her arm again, and

launched forward.

“Move.”

They sprinted.

They sprinted ten meters—clean, fast, no steam, no shifts in the earth. Then a geyser exploded just behind them, launching a plume of ash and stone high into the sky.

Anya ducked instinctively, the heat scalding her cheek.

They kept moving—dodging fissures, timing their steps to the rhythm of the explosions. The ground cracked again, and a boulder shattered against the cliff wall, spraying shrapnel across their path.

Anya stumbled. Tor’Vek caught her.

They paused in the shadow of a jagged ridge as two more geysers erupted simultaneously, one left, one right. Her back pressed to his chest, his arm braced in front of her, holding her steady. For one suspended breath, the planet howled around them—and neither of them moved. She could feel the hard rhythm of his pulse at her spine, the tremble of restraint in the way his hand curled and didn’t grab her waist. It wasn’t the fear that undid her in that moment. It was how badly she wanted to turn and kiss him.

She was panting now. Legs shaking. Skin damp with sweat and fear.

“I can do it,” she snapped, before he could offer to carry her.

“I know.”

He helped her up anyway.

The final stretch was a sprint between eruptions. They darted, weaved, dropped, and ran. Twice more the earth lurched underfoot. Once they slid sideways across loose stone, barely catching their balance.

But they made it.

They burst past the final ridge and dropped to the gravel just outside the reach of the geysers. Both breathing hard. Both alive.

Tor'Vek looked at her.

She nodded, already setting her sights on the seven kilometers of fractured terrain ahead of them, each meter a blur of heat, danger, and exhaustion. Her legs ached. Her lungs burned. Every part of her felt bruised and stretched too thin—but the only option was forward, through hominid territory, through whatever else this cursed valley held. The ship was still far beyond the next ridge, and every step between here and there would cost them. But there was no time to rest. No strength to spare.

She gritted her teeth and started forward.

There wasn't a moment to waste.

They moved through the valley in silence.

The geysers still raged behind them, but here—beyond the chaos—the landscape had fallen into a waiting stillness. No more explosions. No shifting ground. Just cracked earth and long shadows.

But they weren't alone.

Anya noticed them first. Figures on the ridges, just at the edge of her vision. One, then another. Then more. Hominids. Dozens.

They didn't attack.

Notyet.

They lingered like ghosts—on both sides of the ravine, behind them, always out of reach. Watching. Growing in number. The tension was a physical thing now, coiling in the air like a drawn wire ready to snap. Anya could hear it in the shuffle of footsteps along the ridgeline, in the wet panting of unseen mouths, in the scrape of claws over stone just behind her. The soundless watching had gained a rhythm—apresence. The kind that made her skin prickle and her every instinct shout run. The longer they walked, the thicker it became, until every step felt like it echoed through a silent scream.

Anya said nothing. She didn't need to. Tor'Vek saw them, too. His hand tightened on the hilt of his blade, but he didn't draw it.

Notyet.

They pressed on. Seven kilometers of fractured terrain stretched behind them by the time they saw the familiar rise of the ship's hull, half-buried in the slope. The sky above had darkened to a burnt orange, casting the valley in an eerie, apocalyptic glow.

At their backs, the hominids crept closer. Still watching. Still waiting. Their growls were low, rhythmic, almost like a drumbeat.

Anya stumbled once. Tor'Vek caught her instantly, strong hands steadying her, but he didn't let go. His touch lingered, scorching. The contact sent a jolt through her—sharp, uninvited, and far too welcome. She should have pulled away. Should

have focused. But the way his fingers curled, the solid heat of his body behind her, it stole her breath.

The craving surged, not in hunger, but in a pulse of helpless awareness. She wanted more. Even here, even now. The craving flared through her like lightning—sharp and instantaneous. She could feel his pulse through his fingers. Rapid. Tense. As if the bond itself were fighting to stay buried beneath the weight of everything else.

“Do not let go of me,” he said, voice low, almost ragged. “Therage...”

“I wasn’t planning to,” she whispered, and they didn’t break contact until they reached the ship.

Tor’Vek keyed in the sequence. The hatch slid open with a low hiss.

They stepped inside, sealing the door behind them. Locking it.

Almost instantly, a thunder of fists and claws slammed into the hull from outside. The metal groaned under the first impact, then again. Screeches echoed through the valley—high, warbling, furious. The ship rocked gently as something large hurled itself against the side.

Anya flinched, heart slamming into her ribs. The sound wasn’t just rage. It was anticipation. It was hunger.

Her skin crawled with the pressure of it. Like she could feel them pressing in through the metal, taste the battle in the back of her throat.

Tor’Vek didn’t speak. He moved directly to the ship’s core housing. The stabilizer pack came off his shoulders with a heavy breath, and he snapped it into place. A deep growl thrummed through the deck beneath them as the ship’s power came on, a growl

practically overrun by the screams of the hominids pounding against the hull.

Anya held her breath. Despite everything, the bond between her and Tor'Vek pulsed hot and tight and low in her belly like it wanted to drag her straight into his arms. Her pulse fluttered in her throat, sharp and uneven. Every part of her felt overexposed, vibrating—lungs too tight, hands damp, skin flushed like she'd been kissed too hard and not long enough.

Outside, the hominids lost what little restraint they'd clung to. Their growls became snarls. Screeches. Fists slammed against the hull in a brutal, syncopated rhythm. The metal began to shake under the weight of it—not just from force, but from numbers. Clawed hands scraped along the viewports. One face—pale and snarling—smeared blood across the glass as it shrieked something guttural and almost human. They weren't just building to attack.

They were seconds away from unleashing it.

Frantically, she watched her bracelet.

The countdown ticked.

And kept ticking.

She blinked, waiting for it to stop.

It didn't.

The numbers kept falling.

Her stomach turned over, hard and sudden, like she'd been dropped from a height. A slow, sick chill crept up her spine, and her knees nearly buckled. Her hands pressed

against the edge of the console, white-knuckled, as if she could will the numbers to freeze.

They didn't.

Chapter18

THE SHIP groaned beneath them, as if it too sensed the weight of decisions that could no longer be delayed. Every component around them vibrated with pressure—from the failing systems, from the pounding fists outside, from the truth they could no longer ignore. There would be no second chances. No more corrections. Whatever came next, it would have to be enough.

Tor’Vek tweaked a final setting for the stabilizer in its core socket, fingers slick with blood from his own palms. Atremor rolled through the deck—deep, low, seismic—as the interface flared to life. He reached up, adjusted the thermal bypass limiter, then recalibrated the auxiliary circuits manually, rerouting excess pressure through the shield dampeners. The panel finally flashed green. It should have been a victory.

It wasn’t.

Outside, fists and claws pounded against the hull—feral, unrelenting. The shrieks of the hominids rose in a discordant chorus, shaking the air. Something heavier struck near the starboard intake, warping the metal with a sickening crunch.

Anya flinched. “Tell me that fixed everything. The countdown?”

Tor’Vek didn’t look up. His bracelet still ticked away.

12:09:22 12:09:21 12:09:20

Not accelerating. Not stopping. Just bleeding time.

“Stabilizer held,” he said, voice like stone. “Decay rate has slowed, but the countdown remains active. We have twelve solar units.”

She made a choked sound—half laugh, half sob—and blinked fast, fighting to pull herself together. She dragged her fingers down the sides of her thighs, then clenched them tightly, forcing the tremor from her hands. The panic didn’t vanish, but it hardened into something sharper. Something she could use. “Twelve hours to live.”

A harsh screech tore through the ship’s comms.

Tor’Vek spun toward the source, body already bracing, as a fractured blue shimmer burst to life above the interface. The light jittered, warped—then resolved into the shape of Selyr.

He was grinning.

“Fascinating,” Selyr said, clasping his hands behind his back, ever so arrogant. “Even knowing your odds, you obeyed so predictably. Retrieve, install, hope. It is remarkable how desperate organisms will cling to even the thinnest promise.”

Tor’Vek stepped forward, muscles coiled. “Speak your final variables, Selyr,” he said, low and razor-sharp. “I want to hear the last data point from a failed experiment.”

“You thought survival would be simple?” Selyr retorted with a sneer. “Retrieve the part, plug it in, and live happily ever after?”

“Yes,” Tor’Vek said simply.

Selyr paced slowly in front of the camera feed, every movement deliberate, almost theatrical. He lifted a hand, stroking it across the top of a console just off-frame, as

though fondly revisiting an old experiment. His expression was one of mock sorrow, his eyes lit with malicious amusement.

“How quaint. You’re still under the illusion that effort earns outcome—that if you fight hard enough, bleed deep enough, love fiercely enough, you win. But the universe does not care how much you want to live. It only watches to see how well you suffer. Oh no, precious creatures. Life—real life—is a predator, not a puzzle. It waits, teeth bared, for those foolish enough to think the game ends with a button press and a blinking light. You survive one trap only to step into the next.”

Anya stepped forward, her eyes ice-cold. “Hear this, you sadistic bastard—watch us survive anyway. Watch us burn your world down on the way out. I hope the last thing you see is my face.”

Selyr’s brows lifted, amused. He leaned closer to the feed as though studying her, tilting his head like she were some particularly interesting insect. “Ah, the fire. You always had it, even under sedation. Always fighting. Clawing. Useless, of course, but entertaining. You want to die with purpose? Fine. Die trying.”

Around them, the ship shuddered again. A pipe somewhere above them groaned under the strain, spraying a thin hiss of steam into the air. From outside came a new sound—something sharper, more frenzied. The pounding had escalated into a full assault, fists and claws hammering with rabid fury against the hull. Metal shrieked. A panel near the aft corridor buckled inward with a deafening crunch.

Tor’Vek turned away from Selyr and dropped his voice to a whisper. “We need to take off. Now.” He swiveled back to face Selyr. “We will die with purpose. But your eyes will close long before ours.”

Selyr’s laugh sliced through the static. “Priceless. Truly. You still think you’ve won, don’t you? All that effort, all that pain—and for what? A few more minutes of

breathing? Delightful. I do so enjoy your suffering.”

Tor’Vek narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t listening to the words.

He was studying the shadows behind Selyr—the fractured blue lighting set into smooth concrete walls, the glint of silver piping, the curved architecture that mirrored the access corridor they’d just come through. The same recessed wall panels, the same flickering overhead strip-lights. Local. Underground. Nearby. The bastard hadn’t left the planet. He was close. Too close.

“You are not aboard your station,” he said coldly. He pressed a series of buttons for the onboard computer. “You are transmitting. And you are close.”

Selyr’s smile faltered.

Anya came up beside Tor’Vek. “Where are you hiding, you cowardly freak?”

“Clever,” Selyr said, smile returning with a twitch. He slowly stepped backward into the shadows, just enough to reveal more of the curving wall behind him—sleek, metallic, unmistakably from the same underground corridor Tor’Vek and Anya had just fled. The recessed lighting behind him pulsed dimly in the same flickering pattern they’d seen in the corridor beneath the access panel—the same pale-blue hue, the same humming power lines embedded along the seam of the floor. The wall material even bore the same scarring from water erosion. There was no doubt. He was inside the same or a similar underground complex. “But cleverness is irrelevant now. The clock ticks, and I have already won.”

The feed snapped to static.

Tor’Vek stared at the empty space where Selyr’s image had been, his jaw tightening. That cut wasn’t timed for drama. It was panic. The bastard realized he’d exposed too

much—lighting, architecture, proximity. He feared a trace. And well he should.

“Coward,” Tor’Vek muttered, echoing Anya’s opinion.

He accessed the ship’s scanners to sweep for residual signal bleed. Then he tapped his rig. His HUD flashed a coordinate spike, triangulated from the transmission’s bleed.

He swore. “The bastard is still on this planet. Subterranean base, eight kilometers southeast. I will fly us low. Fast.”

“We kill him,” Anya said.

He nodded once. “We kill him.”

The ship shuddered again, the outer hull screaming beneath the hominid assault. The pounding was no longer random—it was focused, concentrated, like a single, united force determined to breach. A seam near the portside joint cracked with a metallic snap, and lights overhead flickered as something tore free outside. The noise swelled to a crescendo of claws and shrieks, and the ship’s frame groaned like it might finally give way.

Tor’Vek dropped into the pilot seat, Anya in the chair adjacent.

There was no time left for fear.

Only the mission.

And the end.

The ship launched like a wounded animal, thrusters screaming as Tor’Vek yanked it up from the blood-soaked clearing. Fists and claws battered the undercarriage even as

they lifted—furious hominids clinging, striking, trying to rip through before they escaped. The hull shrieked. Something scraped violently across the outer plating, carving a long, jagged line along the portside hull. One of the rear stabilizers stuttered before catching again, barely. Smoke curled up through a hairline fracture in the ceiling.

“Structural integrity down to sixty-eight percent,” Tor’Vek said. His hands gripped the controls with surgical precision, but even he could feel the trembling in the yoke. “We will hold. Fornow.”

Anya sat beside him, tense but focused, one hand gripping the edge of her seat, the other resting near the emergency manual override. Every tilt and lurch jolted through her bones, but her eyes never left the viewport. She was calculating, scanning, waiting for the moment everything might go wrong. The ship wasn’t flying—it was defying death with every shuddering breath. And the planet felt alive beneath them, furious they’d dared to escape.

The moment they cleared the ridge, the ship hit turbulence hard enough to rattle their teeth. Sharp, chaotic winds clawed at the hull, tilting them sideways in a sudden lurch. The inertial dampeners spat out a warning chime as the compensators lagged behind, struggling to keepup.

Anya gritted her teeth, her hand flying to brace herself. “Come on,” she hissed under her breath. “Hold together. Just a little longer.”

Tor’Vek caught the way her breath hitched, her posture clenching tighter as if something beneath her skin was clawing its way out. He did not need the bond to read it—though the bond screamed all the same. The surge was building in both of them, sharp and electric. It wasn’t fear. It was something hotter. The bond stirred like a live wire braided through his spine and hers, syncing their pulse, their fury, their hunger.

Anya's hand flew to the dash as she was thrown sideways. Her bracelet flared, and she gasped. "Tor'Vek—"

"I feel it," he bit out. The craving. The rage.

The emotions tore through both of them like a surge in the bond. Not lust. Not quite. It was need sharpened to a blade—desperate and unrelenting. Hunger, yes, but laced with rage. Not at each other, but at everything. At the trap they were caught in. At the dying ship. At the universe that kept them on the edge of survival. His hands didn't falter on the controls, but every muscle in his body coiled as the bracelet slammed a molten surge through every nerve ending.

He saw Anya shift, the subtle arch of her back betraying the internal battle she refused to voice. She was fighting—fighting herself, fighting the craving, and losing ground. Her fingers twitched at her sides, flexing once, twice, then curling into her thighs as if she could attach herself there. He felt her heat, her pulse, the tremor that traveled from her bracelet into the air between them.

She didn't speak. Neither did he.

But her silence rang like a scream in his skull. It clawed at the edges of his thoughts, louder than any alarm. She did not need to speak—her restraint, her trembling composure, echoed through the bond with such clarity it might as well have been a shout. He heard everything in what she didn't say: the rage, the hunger, the unbearable ache of holding back.

And yet, neither of them spoke.

The ship dipped violently as they cut over a canyon. Anya pitched forward and Tor'Vek's hand snapped out, catching her. The moment they touched—

Heat, violent and immediate, surged between them.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't soft. It was raw and explosive, a collision of craving and fury that punched through the bond like a burst of starlight through space. Her breath caught, eyes flying wide. His hand flexed involuntarily, holding on instead of letting go.

The bond roared to life.

It slammed into them like a shockwave—hot, visceral, and absolute. Tor'Vek's vision tunneled, the cockpit vanishing around him. All he could feel was her—the heat of her skin, the rhythm of her breath, the visible tension in her body that echoed his own.

His control wavered at the edges, frayed by the pulse of the bond crashing through his system like a seismic wave. She was volatility in a closed system—heat, pressure, and ignition point all in one. Every movement, every micro-shift in her posture triggered his instincts like a proximity alarm. She was a tactical variable he could not neutralize, a gravitational constant pulling him out of formation.

It was not lust. It was not affection. It was the need to possess and protect and destroy anything that stood in the way of that connection.

He gritted his teeth. He would not give in. Not here. Not now.

But her presence filled his senses like gravity, and even his resolve bent toward her.

Tor'Vek held himself rigid, jaw clenched as the bond dragged him toward her like gravity. Every rational command screamed at him to let go. Every instinct screamed louder to pull her closer.

He didn't move. Neither did she.

But they were no longer separate. The bond blurred every boundary, folding time and fury into something breathless and hot. Every inch of space between them vanished without either of them leaning in. They were already there.

He held her too long. Her fingers gripped his forearm—tight, possessive, like she didn't trust the world not to steal him away.

Neither pulled away. Couldn't.

Their eyes met. Her lips parted, and Tor'Vek watched the tremor there—the urge to speak, to surrender, to rage against what bound them and what kept them apart. He could feel it. Not just the hunger, but the ache beneath it. The chaos inside her echoed his own.

He didn't want the words. He wanted control. And the moment he saw her falter—just slightly—his breath caught.

What would she have said, if she had spoken?

He would not ask. Could not afford to know. Not yet.

Just breath. Just heat. And the bond—alive, hungry, waiting.

He dropped his hand like it burned, breath ragged, heart pounding too fast for control. For one second more, his gaze stayed locked on hers, the bond still singing between them like static in his blood.

Then he turned back to the controls. His voice came low, clipped, steadier than he felt. "Focus. We are nearing the target. We finish this first. Then we will face whatever this is. After."

It wasn't a promise. But it wasn't a denial either. It was the only truth he could give her in that moment—gritted between teeth, carved from restraint. He could not offer hope, not when the sky was about to fall. But he would not take it from her, either.

She didn't argue.

But her hands stayed clenched in her lap, white-knuckled, the only outward sign of the storm still raging inside her. Tor'Vek didn't need to look to know she was barely holding herself together. The craving hadn't passed—it had sunk deeper, latching itself to her breath, her posture, her silence. And beneath it, rage still simmered, waiting for a target.

He angled them low, banking southeast toward the signal bleed.

"Target coordinates in range," he said. "We will make visual contact in under six minutes."

The scanners beeped.

Anya leaned forward. "What's that?"

His HUD spiked. "Defensive grid. Surface-mounted artillery. Powered shielding. And—"

He paused.

"What?"

"There is a dome," he said slowly, voice going flat. "Thermally shielded. Underground hangar, possibly automated."

The scanner shrieked.

“Brace,” he snapped.

Then the sky lit up.

Chapter19

ANYA DIDN'T SCREAM .

She could have. The moment the ship lit up, she could have thrown herself into a panic, let the fear take over, curled in on herself like she used to when the world cracked apart back on Earth.

But she wasn't that girl anymore.

"Get the shields up!" she shouted instead, even though she had no idea how. Her voice cracked with urgency as the ship bucked beneath her, lights stuttering, the control panel spitting sparks like it might explode. Her hand hovered uselessly over the console until Tor'Vek's voice cut through the chaos, calm and sharp.

"Secondary console. Teal override display. Lock surge manually.Now."

She moved fast, fueled by adrenaline and blind trust. Not confidence—instinct. Terror. But it worked. The system flared under her touch. The shields surged, barely holding as the next blast hit.

Tor'Vek cursed in Vettian. One hand wrestled the yoke while the other adjusted their vector. "Evasive pattern.Now."

Her fingers hovered, unsure, until Tor'Vek barked, "Divert auxiliary power to shields. Bottom left panel—green interface. Route charge buffer override.Now."

She moved, hands shaking but fast, following his voice. The nav interface flared under her touch. “Likethis?”

“Yes. Stabilize. Lock in.Good.”

Another blast hit, harder this time. The whole cockpit rocked.

Anya held her ground. “Next time, give a girl a tutorial before we start dodging missiles.”

“Affirmative.”

“They knew we were coming,” she added, snapping herself back into her harness.

Tor’Vek’s eyes locked on the view ahead. “Or someone toldthem.”

“Selyr?”

“Affirmative,” he said again.

Her stomach flipped at that. Selyr’s base hadn’t just survived—it was fortified. Active. Hidden under a massive camouflage grid and defensive shielding that didn’t belong to scavengers or pirates. This was military-grade. Precision. Intelligence-backed.

She glanced at Tor’Vek, but he didn’t return it. He couldn’t afford to. Every muscle in his body was wound, focused. But the bond seethed. Beneath his rigid calm, he was seethingtoo.

The ship dove hard, avoiding another round of cannon fire by meters. Anya’s breath caught, but she stayed sharp. “We can’t land here. Not with that artillery.”

“We will not land,” he said. “We will breach.”

“Excuseme?”

He yanked the yoke hard to the right, and the ship rolled. Her harness bit into her ribs as the world spun.

“They have a hangar beneath the dome. One of those blasts clipped an exterior intake shaft. It is weakened. We exploit it.”

Her eyes widened. “You want to fly into a ventilation duct?”

“At speed.”

“That is insane.”

His mouth didn’t move, but the smallest flicker in the bond said he didn’t disagree. Then, dry and low, he muttered, “It is, in fact, highly irrational. Quite unlikely.”

Anya braced both hands against the console, trying to quiet the part of her brain screaming this was a bad idea. But they didn’t have options. Not anymore.

“Do it, anyway. But if you crash us into a wall, I swear I’m haunting your smug ass.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. Not even close. But the bond pulsed with something rougher than amusement. Like he wanted to laugh, if he hadn’t forgotten how.

The ship dove, engines shrieking as gravity slammed them forward. Anya’s harness bit into her shoulders, the pressure flattening her against the seat. Her stomach dropped like a stone. The screech of metal was deafening, and for one breathless

instant, she was certain the hull would tear apart around them.

And suddenly, the dome was right there. Closer than it should have been, rising out of the soil like a black tooth. The intake shaft was a jagged line halfway up the structure—barely wide enough for their vessel.

“Now!” she shouted.

Tor’Vek didn’t respond. He just angled the nose and slammed the thrusters. Anya felt her spine crush into the seat as they shot forward, every surface of the ship groaning.

She couldn’t see. Could barely breathe. The shaft swallowed them like the constricting throat of a snake—dark, narrow, and ready to eat them alive.

And then they were in.

Smoke. Fire. The high whine of metal screaming.

Systems blinked offline one by one. Gravity faltered, tilting her weight sideways as the inertial dampeners failed. A sharp scent of ozone flooded the cabin, metallic and burnt, filling her lungs with each ragged breath.

And just before the blackout hit, Tor’Vek muttered, almost inaudible:

“Impact in three. Two—”

Then darkness.

SHE WOKE to silence. Not dead. Not unconscious. Just—dazed. Like her body had been unplugged and rebooted, but her mind was still buffering. Her mouth tasted like copper and smoke. Her ears rang. The silence wasn’t peace—it was aftermath, sharp

and hollow, and the faint crackle of something broken somewhere nearby. She blinked against the dark, her pulse hammering in the hollow of her throat, and tried to remember how to move.

Her harness held. The dash was black and silent. Her bracelet thrummed. She glanced down instinctively, expecting chaos—expecting the countdown to have accelerated. But to her shock, it hadn't. It was still ticking downward, slow and steady. Unchanged.

Not paused. Not reset.

Just waiting.

Like it knew the end was coming. Like it was sure of it.

Tor'Vek .

She twisted in her seat, heart pounding as she fought to see through the haze. Tor'Vek was slumped in his harness, head bowed, one arm limp at his side. He was breathing—shallow, uneven—but alive. A dark gash split the skin above his brow, blood running down the side of his face in a sluggish trail. For a second, she couldn't move. The sight of him like that—brilliant, infallible, terrifying Tor'Vek—so still, so broken—struck something deep and primal. She reached for him before she could stop herself.

“Tor'Vek,” she rasped. Nothing. “Tor'Vek!”

He stirred. Groaned. Then his eyes snapped open—wild, violet, and glowing with too much light.

And everything changed.

The bond didn't just spike—it detonated. Like a thunderclap inside her chest, a gravitational collapse that bent everything inward. His gaze locked onto hers, sharp as a blade, but it wasn't Tor'Vek's logic she saw in that moment—it was the beast beneath. The hunger. The need.

Desperate.

“Get out,” he said, voice low, hoarse, and dangerous. “Now.”

“You're hurt—”

“I said get out.”

It wasn't rejection. It was warning. A flare of desperate logic breaking through the chaos. He wanted her gone because he could feel himself slipping, feel the bond cracking open something volatile inside him. He was trying to save her—from whatever came next.

She scrambled for the manual release. He was already unraveling. His breath hitched in uneven bursts, muscles locking and twitching under his skin like he was fighting something invisible and losing. The bond pulsed erratically, wild and unstable. This wasn't pain alone. It was something deeper—raw, feral, chemical. As if the crash had cracked open whatever control he had left and let the monster underneath start to rise. The bracelet glowed, not red—but silver. Shifting. Changing.

“Anya. Move.”

He was losing control.

And something inside her snapped.

The fear, the logic, the chaos—it all fractured under the weight of something deeper. She couldn't abandon him. Couldn't run from this. From him. Every breath he took sounded like a war he was losing.

She unhooked herself, ignoring the tremor in her fingers, reached across the console—and touched his hand.

Heat.

Instant.

It surged through him—through them—like a violent chain reaction. Not gentle warmth. Not a flicker. It was a detonation. Every synapse fired at once, flooding his system with need and fury and the overwhelming force of the bond. His breath vanished. Thought dissolved. She had touched his hand—but it was everything. It was her presence, her defiance, her choice. The connection roared to life with savage precision, demanding surrender.

And for a second, he almost did.

His chest seized. Eyes flared violet. Her body answered like it had been waiting for that moment all along.

Craving. Rage. Hunger. The bond didn't recognize injury or logic—it only knew pressure. It thrust against them, relentless and blinding, like a tide of heat and instinct crashing through every boundary. It wanted release. It wanted surrender. It did not care what it cost.

And she held his hand tighter.

Not just to calm him. Not even just to calm herself. But because in that moment,

everything inside her screamed that this was the only thing that mattered. That if she let go now—she might lose him. Might lose herself. Her skin burned where they touched, but she didn't flinch. She felt the bond flare, push, recoil, and settle again. He was chaos and logic and violence barely contained—but under it all, he washers.

And she wasn't lettinggo.

“I'm not leavingyou.”

The words came before she even realized she was speaking them—raw, instinctive, rooted in something so deep it bypassed logic. She didn't care if he was seconds from fracturing. Didn't care if the base exploded around them. The only truth she could feel, above the bond and the fear and the madness, was this: she belonged here. With him. Even if it killedher.

His body convulsed once. Then stilled. Then— a breath.

The bond settled, not into peace, but into pressure wound tight, like a storm held behind glass. Not quiet. But contained. Fornow.

“You are stabilizing me,” he said, disbelief coloring the words. “Evennow.”

She nodded once, chest heaving. “Lookslike.”

They didn't havelong.

She knew it. Felt it like a clock ticking in her chest. Every second stretched tight around them, thick with the weight of what came next. Her gaze flicked to the fractured dash, then back to him. He was steady now, but only because she was still touching him. If she let go, if they moved wrong—everything could fracture again.

Her hand didn't tremble. But her thoughts did.

"You good enough to walk?" she asked, voice low, not breaking contact.

They had no time. But she needed to hear him say it. She needed to believe they weren't walking into this already broken.

Whatever waited in that hangar—Selyr's forces, his monsters, his mind games—they'd be ready for her and Tor'Vek.

But she and her mate would also be ready.

She didn't even flinch at the word. Mate. It echoed in her mind, not foreign or forced, but true—undeniably, irrevocably true.

She remembered the first time she saw him, how calm his voice had been in the middle of a nightmare, how even then her world had tilted toward him. Like gravity had decided for her.

That was the moment, she realized now. That was when the bond began. Not with touch. Not with time. But with recognition. It came without hesitation, like her mind had already accepted what her heart had known for days. Maybe even longer.

She didn't need a ceremony or a vow or permission from the stars. The bond had chosen. He had chosen. And so had she. Whatever this place was—whatever they were about to face—they'd face it as one. As bonded. As the only true joining in a world that had tried again and again to tear them apart—and failed.

They slipped from the ruined ship into chaos. Alarms wailed from every direction, high-pitched and dissonant. Fire flickered from ruptured panels, casting red light across the wreckage-strewn floor. The air was thick with smoke and something

metallic—blood or coolant, she couldn't tell. Sirens clashed with the distant screech of grinding machinery and the low thump of boots. Somewhere deeper in the compound, a klaxon beat a steady pulse like a countdown.

Something moved in the shadows overhead—mechanical, fast, tracking. The hangar lights sputtered and flared, cutting in and out like a dying heartbeat.

It was hell. And they were already too deep to turn back.

The moment Anya's boots hit the scorched floor, she looked back at the wreckage—and her heart sank as the truth hit hard.

The ship was wrecked. Not damaged. Not salvageable. Wrecked.

One engine pod was gone entirely, sheared clean off. The aft wing had collapsed, sparking against the blackened hangar deck. The stabilizer they'd fought so hard to install was half-melted. Even if they killed Selyr, even if they survived—this ship would never fly again.

She turned toward Tor'Vek, dread knotting in her throat. "We're not flying out of here."

"No," he said flatly. "We are not."

Their eyes locked. No illusions. No backup plan. Only forward.

The bond flared—sharp, bright, hungry. It twisted through her chest, not as comfort, but as ignition. As warning.

"Then we kill him," she said.

He nodded once. “We kill him.”

Blaster fire cracked in the distance—short bursts, sharp and erratic, not part of any controlled defense line. It suggested chaos, confusion. Maybe a mutiny, or an experiment gone wrong. Whatever it was, it wasn’t clean. It wasn’t organized. Something in Selyr’s fortress was unraveling—and fast.

Anya kept close to Tor’Vek as he led them down a narrow corridor, his body angled protectively in front of hers. The bond pulsed like a war drum, steady only because she never let go of him.

They moved fast, ducking through corridors littered with debris and dead ends. The walls were too clean, the layout too deliberate. This wasn’t a pirate lair. It was a lab. A trap. And Selyr had designed every inch.

Movement. Ahead.

Tor’Vek pushed her back into a recessed alcove just as two of Selyr’s augmented guards rounded the corner. They didn’t speak—just raised their weapons.

Anya dropped low. Tor’Vek surged forward.

Tor’Vek moved like a storm—precise and merciless, drawing the guards’ focus with a fury that tore through the first one instantly. As he struck, Anya circled wide, flanking the second. One blow caved in the first guard’s helmet, the crunch of bone unmistakable. The second soldier lunged for a blade, but never made it. Anya was faster, instincts razor-sharp. She snatched the first guard’s discarded blaster from the floor and drove its stock upward into the soft joint beneath the second guard’s helmet. The impact cracked like a snapped branch. He dropped without a sound.

The silence after was worse.

Not peace. Not relief. Just the echo of brutality.

The guards lay sprawled where they'd fallen, their gear still clattering faintly as it settled. The air was thick with the scent of singed circuitry and scorched metal. Overhead, the corridor's lights flickered and buzzed, casting fractured shadows across the walls. Anya's pulse hammered in her ears, louder than the silence, louder than the bond itself. They had survived the ambush—but barely. And what waited beyond would be worse.

Their breathing turned ragged. The bond pulsed hard—untempered, primal. Every time she got close enough to see the tightness in Tor'Vek's jaw, the set of his shoulders, her body responded without permission. Heat coiled low, tangled up in adrenaline and craving.

He felt it too. She knew he did.

But neither of them gave in.

"Efficient," he said, voice low, unreadable.

"Necessary," she muttered, adjusting her grip on the blaster. "I'll take the next two."

"You will take what I allow," he said.

She gave him a look. "Then allow me to save your ass again."

His mouth twitched—close to a snarl or a smile. Maybe both.

Another hallway. Another door. Each step closer. Each breath heavier.

Then came the flood.

Anya's breath caught. For a second, she froze—struck by the sheer number of soldiers pouring toward them. It was too many. Too fast. Her fingers clenched tighter around the blaster as the first shout echoed down the corridor.

Guards poured in—more augmented soldiers, all armored and fast, their movements sharp and synchronized. They surged from side corridors and hidden doors, cut off the retreat, turned every meter forward into a battleground.

Tor'Vek went lethal. Blades sliced, fists crushed, every movement precise and brutal. Anya stayed at his back, covering him with the stolen blaster until the charge flickered red. Then she switched to hand-to-hand, yanking a shock baton from one attacker and driving it into another's spine.

Blood sprayed. Sparks flew. The air filled with the raw, electric stench of burning flesh and scorched tech. She didn't have time to think. Only to move—to duck, strike, grab a dropped weapon, fire, twist. The bond between them surged with adrenaline and fury, keeping them linked, balanced, alive.

She lost count of how many they killed. They just kept coming.

A burst of fire singed her shoulder. Tor'Vek ripped the shooter in half. Another guard almost got close enough to grab her—until she drove her knee into his throat and finished him with his own blade.

They backed into an archway, breath ragged, backs pressed together. For one terrible second, it felt like the tide might finally overwhelm them.

Then the last soldier fell.

Silence returned—shaky, stained, brutal.

Anya staggered back against the archway, panting, and yanked up her arm. The bracelet glowed faintly, its surface still crawling with slow-moving runes.

“It’s barely moved,” she gasped. “After all of that?”

Tor’Vek glanced at his own, fury flashing in his eyes. “It should have accelerated.”

“It should have burned itself out,” she muttered, almost in disbelief.

The implication hit both of them at once.

The bracelets weren’t measuring violence.

Anya let out a shaken breath. “Then what the hell are they measuring?” They weren’t responding to survival. They were tracking something else entirely—something neither of them fully understood yet. And whatever it was, they had barely begun to give it what it craved.

The path ended at a sealed archway. Unlike the others, this one glowed faintly with embedded circuitry—older tech. Vettian.

Tor’Vek raised a hand, examining the surface. Recognition flickered in his expression, equal parts horror and rage.

“This is his heart,” he said. “Everything he built—everything he twisted—it originates here.”

Anya’s stomach turned. Her finger tightened on the trigger.

From behind the door, a sound echoed.

Not footsteps.

Laughter.

Then a voice, cold and threaded with delight:

“You came all this way just to try to destroy what you never truly understood. Predictable.”

Tor’Vek’s face went still. Like a blade before it strikes.

He looked at Anya.

She nodded once.

Then he slammed his palm into the access panel.

The door exploded open.

Chapter20

SELYR STOOD in the center of his lab. Waiting. Smiling.

“Welcome,” he said, his tone light, almost amused. And yet, underneath Tor’Vek caught a hint of panic. “If survival is still a priority, I suggest you leave now before my reinforcements arrive. Take my ship—consider it a parting gift.”

Tor’Vek took a step forward, eyes locked on Selyr. “You are mistaken if you believe we came here to survive.”

Selyr ignored him entirely, speaking over the warning with clinical detachment. His voice was cool, almost bored, as he gestured toward a darkened corridor behind him. “Once you are aboard, I will stop the countdown on the bracelets. After all, I have extracted everything I need from you.”

His attention pivoted—settling on Anya with unsettling precision. Curious. Fascinated. Vaguely condescending. Like she was a flawed data set he still intended to study. His grin widened, eyes gleaming. “Stay—and I promise you, the data I collect next will be... far more invasive.”

Anya lifted her blaster, leveled it at his chest. “We didn’t come for mercy or data collection. We came for you.”

Selyr’s smile faltered.

Tor’Vek’s voice dropped, deadly and calm. “You are not the scientist anymore, Selyr.

You are the subject.”

Anya stepped forward, her voice steady but tight. “Do you have her?”

Selyr blinked, feigning confusion. “Have who?”

“My sister,” she said, louder now. “Maya.”

He tilted his head, too casual. “Ah. Yes. Of course. She is... secure. Untouched. For now.”

But he shifted his stance slightly. Not back. Not defensive. Angled. Like someone preparing to lie.

Anya’s gaze narrowed. “Where is she?”

Selyr’s mouth thinned. “Somewhere safe.”

“Why did you take her?” she persisted. “What’s different about her?”

He paused a beat. Then, “She is—a redundant variable. Genetically similar, so the outcome will also be similar. Perhaps slightly less compliant, but—”

“That’s not why she’s special,” Anya snapped. “Nor does it prove you have her. Try again because if you had her, you’d know why she’s special.”

His eyes widened in alarm. “She... will be useful. In theory,” he said, floundering. “Your comparable genetics could offer parallel baselines for diagnostic trials—hypothetically.”

“You don’t know,” Anya breathed. “You don’t have her.”

“I do,” he said quickly, but his eyes darted, just once, toward the edge of the room.

Too quickly.

Her blaster didn’t waver. “Then tell me what makes her different.”

Selyr paused.

Nothing.

Anya fired.

The shot struck center mass. His body snapped backward, slammed into the wall with a hiss of ruptured metal and scorched cloth. He slid to the floor and did not move again. No final words. No twitch. No breath. Selyr was dead—completely, absolutely, finally dead.

She didn’t look away. “He doesn’t know that Maya is my twin or it would have been the first thing he said.” She flung herself into Tor’Vek’s arms, trembling. “He doesn’t have her. I can die knowing she’s safe.”

Tor’Vek caught her, his arms iron around her frame. For a breath, he did not let go.

Anya buried her face against his chest, shaking. The bond surged between them—warm, urgent, real. Not pain. Not rage. Something deeper. Her fingers clutched the front of his suit.

“I love you,” she whispered, voice cracking.

His voice was low, hoarse. “And I love you. I would rather die beside you than live without you.”

She looked up. Their faces were too close. Her lips parted.

Need flickered through the bond, fierce and undeniable. Not the craving from before—something quieter, steadier. Still dangerous. Still potent enough to undo her completely if she let it. And she wanted to let it.

His hand slid up her spine. Her body melted into him.

Behind them, the wall trembled—an automated warning system buzzing faintly beneath the roar of distant destruction.

“We need to move,” he said, but it came out rough. Reluctant.

For just one more heartbeat, she stayed in his arms. Then she nodded, breath catching as she stepped back. The moment between them still shimmered through the bond, warm and anchoring, even as she tightened her grip on the blaster. Then she turned, resolute.

Tor’Vek crouched beside Selyr’s body and stripped an identification disc from his uniform, slipping it into a compartment on his belt. He said nothing, but Anya saw the tension in his jaw. They ran—together, fast, hearts pounding as one.

The path to Selyr’s ship was short and unguarded, a cruel final trap that never had the chance to spring. Now, at the threshold, he retrieved Selyr’s ID disc and held it to the panel beside the hangar doors.

A hiss. A flash of green.

The doors slid open without resistance. Anya couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened to them without that ID disc. Would they have been instantly disintegrated? Had that been Selyr’s ultimate plan?

Inside, the ship's core systems were dim, running on standby. Tor'Vek pulled his rij from his wrist and pressed it against the control panel.

Lights flared. Sirens chirped, then died. Panels blinked on and off in a pulse. The ship shuddered, as if waking under protest.

The synthetic voice of his AI buzzed from the overhead speaker. "Foreign AI interface detected. Initiating override."

Tor'Vek's voice was low, certain. "Override authorized."

The ship jolted to life.

Behind them, explosions rolled through the base like thunder.

They strapped in quickly, the cushions pristine and contoured, lined with dark leather and embedded tech, the air sharp with the clean scent of sterile polish and high-grade alloys. Anya's fingers trembled against the harness. Tor'Vek's hands were steady on the controls.

The rij glowed where it interfaced with the ship. Tor'Vek scanned the display, parsing the systems. Weapons. Navigation. Engines. Life support. The layout was foreign, but the logic behind it was familiar enough.

He tapped through the interface with brutal efficiency, confirming reactor stability and defensive shielding. The engines flared to readiness.

He stabbed the launch sequence button.

The ship tore from the hangar in a burst of acceleration. Below them, Selyr's compound collapsed inward—swallowed by fire, shrapnel, and the fury of its own

unraveling systems.

Tor'Vek spun the ship and set his jaw, activating the weapons array. "No remnants."

He did not speak. Not yet. This was the final step, the only one that mattered. No more data. No more echoes of Selyr's madness hiding in the walls. Just silence—and fire.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Anya staring out the viewport, unmoving. Her expression reflected what he felt deep in his core: not triumph. Just finality.

Missiles fired from the underbelly of the ship, their trajectories clean and cold. The shockwave rocked them backward. The compound vanished in a blossom of flame.

Only then did he allow the silence to settle as he gained altitude and put them in orbit around the planet.

Still without a word, he unsnapped her harness and pulled her into his arms.

She came willingly. No words passed between them. None were needed.

The ship's lights dimmed around them as Tor'Vek carried her to the rear compartment—richly appointed guest suite. Clearly not Selyr's, thank the gods. The door sealed behind them with a quiet hiss.

The bond throbbed—hot and urgent. But the bracelets still glowed, and the timers had not stopped. They pulsed, slightly out of synch: his, then hers, hers, then his.

He glanced at his wrist. One point two solar units left.

He studied the glowing countdown, then looked at her—not with dread, but wonder.

“If this is all the time we have,” he said softly, “I want to spend it with you. Not running. Not fighting. Just this. Just us. Do you agree?”

Anya followed his gaze to her own wrist and her eyes shimmered. Her answer was immediate. “Yes. There’s no better way to spend my final breath than with the only person I’ve ever truly loved.”

A beat passed.

“Then I will make every moment count.”

He set her down beside the bed, but didn’t let go. For a moment, they stood there in silence, breath mingling, foreheads touching. The moment felt suspended, as if time itself bowed in deference. Her fingers traced his jaw—slow, reverent—and his hands mapped her body, memorizing her heat, her softness, her steady presence against his burning need.

When he kissed her, it was not hurried. It was worship. Each movement unfastened something old and buried, stripped away more than just clothing. They undressed one another with devotion and aching slowness, letting their hands linger on every newly exposed line and curve. Not from hesitation. From wonder. From the kind of restraint that had become its own kind of ache. Every breath they shared whispered promises neither dared believe in until this moment.

By the time the last layers fell, the restraint had transformed—no longer the barrier between them, but the sacred prelude to surrender. Their bodies trembled with the weight of everything unspoken, everything promised. Hunger surged, yes—but it was braided with something richer, something vast and unrelenting.

It was love, but threaded through with veneration—that they had found each other in the ruin of stars, that they still had breath, and each other, and this. Even if it was only

for a final moment.

Tor'Vek reached for her, and Anya met him halfway, their mouths finding each other not in desperation, but in aching surrender and need. Every inch of skin bared was an invitation. Every touch, a declaration. They had burned through resistance. What remained now was truth—naked, raw, and utterly consuming.

His palms swept up her sides, fingers dragging slowly over the curve of her waist to the swell of her breasts, tracing every rise and dip with molten focus, savoring every inch. Anya's head fell back as he dipped to kiss the hollow beneath her collarbone, his mouth trailing down to the soft swell of her breasts. She sighed his name like a prayer, her fingers knotting in his hair.

But when his fingers reached for what should have already been gone, his breath caught. She was still wearing one last scrap of lace—forgotten in their merging, or perhaps left on purpose, as one final choice. Her breath hitched as he grazed the elastic band at her hip.

He paused, giving her the moment.

That last threshold was not about modesty. It was about surrender.

“Anya.” His voice was rough silk. “Do you want this?”

She reached up, took his face between her hands, and kissed him like it was the only thing that could save her. “Yes.”

He swept away her underpants.

Her body was lush and golden in the soft glow of the chamber. The hunger that rose in him was primal—but she was not prey. She was his. The one thing he had never

meant to choose and could never survive without.

She stepped back, drawing him with her to the bed. The sheets were smooth, the room warm, the air thick with everything unspoken. Tor’Vek settled her down and followed, bracing above her, one hand sliding from her throat to her hip. Her legs opened for him without a word.

He kissed her slowly. Thoroughly. His mouth found her breasts, his tongue circling each peak until she trembled beneath him. Her thighs squeezed around his hips as she arched, breath catching on every pass of his fingers down her ribs, over her stomach, lower.

He found her center slick and ready, and when he touched her—really touched her—she moaned into his mouth and whispered his name.

“Tor’Vek.”

Her voice wrecked him.

He dipped his head, kissed her navel, then lower, until she gasped and twisted her hands into the sheets. He learned her with lips and tongue and worship, and when her thighs shook around his head, he didn’t stop—he slowed. Let her fall in pieces. Then soothed her through the shuddering aftermath.

When he moved up her body, her arms locked around him. “Now,” she breathed.

He slid inside her in one long, deep thrust.

They both broke.

The bond lit up in his mind, wrapping around every nerve, every instinct. Her body

gripped his, her breath caught against his throat. Their rhythm was unsteady at first, frantic. But it deepened. Stabilized. Matched. He buried his face in her neck as her hands clutched his back, her nails dragging lines into his skin.

“I love you,” she whispered.

He froze, then lifted his head. Looked down at her.

“I love you,” she said again.

He kissed her lips. Her cheek. Her temple. “And I love you. I have loved you from the moment I chose you.”

The tension snapped, but not like a break—more like a release, an exhale through every muscle, every nerve. Tor’Vek’s hips surged forward, sinking into her again with a groan pulled straight from his core. Their bodies collided with a force that had nothing to do with aggression and everything to do with need—hot, full-bodied, soul-deep need.

Anya met him with equal fervor, her legs locking around his waist, her fingers sinking into his shoulders. There was no space left between them. Only heat. Motion. Sound.

He moved within her slowly at first, savoring the drag, the friction of his mounds against her inner core, the way her breath caught each time he bottomed out and his knot teased at her opening. She arched and rolled her hips in response, and that was all the invitation he needed to lose the last of his restraint.

They moved in a rhythm older than logic, older than war. Skin against skin. Mouths parting only to gasp for breath. Her voice—his name—rose again and again, breaking over the sound of his body driving into hers, deep and relentless.

And still it was not enough.

He wanted to feel her fall apart. Wanted to memorize every twitch of her thighs, every ripple of pleasure through her abdomen, every desperate cry as she shattered beneath him.

And she did. Again. And again.

When her third climax hit, she clung to him like she could fuse their bodies together. And he let go, hips driving deep, burying himself one last time as his own climax surged, crashing through him in waves.

They collapsed into each other, limbs tangled, hearts pounding in tandem.

The bond pulsed like a second heartbeat.

Not breaking.

Becoming.

Identical.

The bracelets pulsed, marching in synch.

One point zero. Then point eight. Then point five.

He wrapped her in his arms as though he could protect her from the inevitability of it all.

Their bond shattered.

Or maybe it unlocked.

Their bracelets flared. A high-pitched tone rang through the chamber. Then—a click.

The metal fell.

He caught both before they hit the sheets. Point two.

“Stay,” he told her. His voice was raw. “Stay here.”

He raced across the room naked, fierce and determined, and shoved the bracelets into the ship’s ejection chute.

Launch.

The chamber sealed. The bracelets ejected and almost immediately exploded in space.

The ship rocked, shields flaring—but holding.

He turned back.

Anya lay there—spent, radiant, alive .

She blinked up at him, wide-eyed, disbelieving. Her chest rose with uneven breaths, and tears spilled sideways into her hair. “We lived,” she choked out, voice breaking. “We were supposed to die. Tor’Vek, we chose it. We said goodbye.”

Her hands reached for him like she needed proof he was still real. He grabbed them, kissed them, pressed them to his chest.

“I know,” he said roughly. “I felt it. Every second. And then the bracelets fell off—like shackles breaking, like time itself surrendering to hope.”

Anya let out a sob that turned into a laugh, wild and broken and giddy. “I don’t understand. I don’t care. I just—how is this real?”

He leaned in, his forehead resting against hers. “I do not know. But we are alive and I suspect it is because we fully joined, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Our souls aligned and that alignment meant we no longer needed the bracelets.” He gazed at her with glowing amethyst eyes. “I swear this to you... I will spend every breath proving it to you.”

She pulled him down into the bed with trembling hands. “Then start now because I thought it was over,” she whispered. “I thought that was how we would die—together, but still dying.”

He swept her into his arms, sweeping her hair from her cheek. “So did I. Right until our last few heartbeats.”

She gave a shaky laugh, one hand rising to touch his face. “I do not understand how we’re still here. I should feel terrified. Or disoriented. But I don’t. I just feel... like everything we endured finally brought us to this moment.”

“Then let us make it ours,” he murmured, voice low. “Not a miracle. A beginning.”

For the first time since the bond began, there was no timer. No pulse of pain. No threat of madness.

Just her.

And peace.

Andlove.

THEY CURLED together in the captain's chair, bare skin wrapped in one of the ship's soft black blankets. The stars stretched endlessly beyond the viewport, silent witnesses to what they'd survived. Her head rested on his chest, the steady beat of his heart still supporting her more than gravity ever could.

Anya let herself breathe.

Every inhale was a miracle. Every exhale was gratitude.

Her fingers curled loosely over his ribs, rising and falling with each breath they shared. Not synced by a bracelet, but by choice. By love. By something infinite.

Tor'Vek's hand threaded through her hair, slowly, gently. He didn't speak for a longtime.

When he finally did, his voice was a quiet rumble against her ear. "Where shall we go?"

Anya smiled, lips brushing his skin. Her chest swelled with so much emotion it hurt—joy, disbelief, alone so big it barely fit inside her body.

"Earth," she whispered. "I want to find my sister. Even if it's just to say goodbye." She shifted, lifting her head enough to meet his eyes. "And we need apples. Seeds. Insurance, in case your Final Flight ever tries to come back."

His lips twitched—almost a smile. He traced a thumb down her cheek, reverent. "Then we go to Earth."

Anya settled against him again, holding him tightly as the stars blurred around them.

They were alive.

They were free.

And for the first time in what felt like forever—she had everything she needed.

Love. Hope.

Him .

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The Intergalactic Warriors: Book4

By

USA TODAY Bestselling Author writingas

Dare O'Dell

Chapter1

THE NIGHT concealed him, just as it always had.

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

Target: acquired.

She moved quickly, unaware—blonde hair spilling down her back, catching the faint amber glow of a flickering walkway light. Her steps echoed softly against the pavement, one hand gripping the strap of her backpack. Wide blue eyes flicked left, then right, scanning, but not seeing. Petite. Fragile-looking. Predictable.

But a flicker of something broke the pattern.

She hesitated—barely—glancing behind her with a crease between her brows. Not suspicion. Not certainty. Just a whisper of unease she couldn't place. A tension she

didn't understand. Her fingers tightened on the strap.

The odds of a clean extraction: 94.2 percent.

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

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

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

He inhaled slowly.

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

Two.

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

One.

Just one step until she never made it home again.

He moved.

Silent. Precise. Inevitable.

He was Alpha Unit, assassin-class—engineered for precision, bred for elimination,

trained to leave no witnesses. Which meant the girl would not see him coming. If he had been ordered to kill her, she would not survive the moment he struck.

But he had not been sent to kill.

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

She sensed him a split-second too late.

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

He struck.

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

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

The sound sliced through the air, sharp and bright—a ragged, panicked cry that shattered the stillness like glass dropped on stone. It pierced straight through the darkness, lancing down his spine and igniting a primal urgency in his chest. Not a warning. Not a call for help. A flare—raw, unfiltered, and impossible to ignore.

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

Fuck .

Every projection shifted.

He'd miscalculated—let familiarity dull his edge. He'd grown complacent because she was human. He'd expected soft and compliant. Predictable. Defenseless. But she wasn't any of those things. That single scream had shattered the illusion, cracked the quiet veneer of the night wide open.

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

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

Because of her scream, the hunt would begin.

He had to move— now .

She fought with the ferocity of desperation, slamming her heel into his shin, trying to bite down through his glove. Every part of her flared with violent resistance. He adjusted his grip, a subtle shift of force and leverage—containing her, minimizing damage. She was compact, but explosive. Her heart thundered against his chest, her breath frantic and fast.

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

No time.

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

She collapsed.

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

Alive. Fornow.

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

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

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

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

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

Up the ship's hidden ramp—silent, sealed, unseen.

Extraction: complete.

But not clean.

She had screamed.

And someone would come looking.

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

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

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

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

And if the order came to eliminate her?

He would obey. He always obeyed.

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

THE SHIP'S containment chamber lights pulsed in low intervals, calibrating to the new arrival. Cold and sterile, the chamber adjusted to accommodate her biology—air composition, temperature, even ambient noise recalibrated in precise increments. The walls themselves shimmered faintly with containment fields, and above, hidden sensors came alive with whispered hums, feeding data into the ship's core.

She lay unconscious, but the ship had already begun analyzing her—biometrics, neural activity, trace atmospheric residue. She was triggering dormant protocols. Disrupting subsystems calibrated never to falter. Riv'En watched it all unfold with a flicker of unease.

He secured her to the diagnostic table—restraints minimal, just enough to prevent injury during transport—and initiated the ship's isolation protocols. Magnetic clamps hissed into place beneath the table as the chamber's internal shielding sealed shut with a hum. Atmospheric systems locked down, and the lights dimmed slightly, signaling full quarantine mode.

He double-checked the restraint calibration, not out of necessity, but to buy himself a second more to process the impossible—the heat in his chest, the flicker of dissonance in his mind. She was secure. She posed no immediate threat.

And yet, he did not move away.

His hands hovered longer than they should have, fingertips brushing the edge of the restraint as if the contact might bind him to logic. But logic was slipping—dislodged by her scent, her pulse, the memory of her scream. Something primal stirred beneath the surface of his control. Not longing. Not need. Not yet. But proximity to her did something to him. It bent the silence between them into tension.

He told himself it was nothing more than professional interest—recognition of strength, of anomalous defiance in a species engineered for weakness. He tried to attribute it to curiosity, to the need for understanding an unexpected threat. But the excuses rang hollow.

What unnerved him was not her resistance alone, but the flicker of something else it awakened in him. A memory not quite formed. A hesitation he could not afford. He had faced dozens like her. Ended some. Spared others. None had stirred this reaction.

And if the directive required her termination?

He would carry it out. That was what he was built for.

But something about the idea lodged hard and sharp behind his sternum—a reaction he couldn't trace, couldn't justify. It didn't belong in his programming, and yet it was there all the same. Not hesitation—he would act. Not remorse—he had none. But something else entirely. As if ending her would cost him more than a mission. As if it would sever something he had not realized was already forming.

He observed her carefully, his eyes scanning every twitch, every involuntary shift of

her unconscious body. Her breaths were shallow, uneven, and though she remained sedated, her body language hinted at unrest—subtle signs of resistance already surfacing beneath suppression. She wasn't aware of the isolation yet, but when she woke, it would hit her all at once. And when it did, he needed to be ready.

He remembered the resistance in her — not just physical, but mental. Even in those first few moments, when he had locked his arms around her and pulled her from her world, she had fought with a wildness he had not expected.

Her will to defy ignited instantly, primal and unrelenting. It was not just fear that had powered her movements — it was also fury, raw and instinctive. And something else. Something he had not yet classified. A spark that lingered even after she collapsed, one that made her an anomaly before she ever opened her eyes.

He had taken dozens. Subdued them all. But none had looked at him like she had — just before she screamed.

Riv'En turned toward the monitor behind the diagnostic table and studied the readout. Vital signs: strong. Neural activity: elevated but within parameters—likely a byproduct of her earlier resistance and the sudden trauma of abduction. Respiratory rate: stabilizing. Muscle tension: high. No visible contamination or tracking devices. Internal scans showed no active implants, no foreign markers.

Still, something in the data felt off. Not incorrect—just incomplete. As if the diagnostics were measuring a system that hadn't fully activated yet. She read as human. She read as stable.

But nothing about her presence felt that way.

Still—uncertainty remained. Riv'En couldn't fully calculate what she might be. The message from Third had identified her as a potential contaminant—anomalous physiology, possibly compromised by Selyr's experimentation. That alone warranted

containment.

But this human—this one —registered differently. His mind, sharp and programmed to assess threats with cold logic, couldn't seem to find a clear answer. She wasn't like the others. Beneath her panic, beneath her resistance, something else churned—something that gnawed at him in a way he hadn't anticipated. Unfamiliar. Disruptive. It stirred his instincts and clouded the sharp lines of protocol he relied on. That uncertainty—it weakened the precision of his control. It was a flaw. A weakness in his calculations.

This was no standard human.

The genetic scan returned incomplete. Her sequencing fell within known human ranges, but scattered inconsistencies—slight signal drop-offs, weak hybrid markers—were enough to trigger a review flag. It wasn't dangerous. Likely a systems anomaly. But the scanner couldn't rule out prior environmental exposure or latent tampering. Riv'En had seen corrupted baselines before. He knew better than to dismiss the possibility. Lockdown remained the only acceptable response.

Still, the question lingered.

Whyher?

Possible variables: contamination, genetic manipulation, Selyr's experiments, latent carrier factors. It was probably nothing. But if it was something—he would be the one to find it.

Risk assessment: Unacceptable.

Containment: Mandatory.

She stirred, a soft sound escaping her lips, her breath ragged as her eyes flickered

open. Her pupils dilated rapidly, instinctively adjusting to the harsh light overhead. He noted the spike in her heart rate, the erratic rhythm of her pulse. It was raw fear—understandable, given her situation. But it wasn't panic. Not yet.

She was still processing, still fighting to make sense of the reality she had been thrust into. Her body tensed as she tried to move, but her limbs were sluggish, uncooperative, restrained. The fear was there, but so was something else. A spark. Resistance. It would make this process far more complicated than expected.

He prepared the communication implant—precise placement required. No margin for error.

As her eyes regarded him, wide and panicked, Riv'En moved.

No words.

His hands found the correct angle, the precise nerve cluster. A swift, sterile insertion behind the ear. She screamed—the sound raw, human.

Necessary.

While the device calibrated, Riv'En stepped back, his expression unreadable, eyes tracking every shift in her vital signs. His gaze lingered for a moment longer than necessary on her flushed face, the rapid rise and fall of her chest. It was a brief moment of hesitation — one that he quickly suppressed, as he had been trained to do. She was still disoriented, still human. Her resistance had only just begun.

For a moment, Riv'En hesitated.

His fingers curled tighter around the edge of the table, tension bleeding into stillness. The space between them pulsed—inexplicably charged—and he couldn't pull his eyes away. He needed to reset. Refocus. But instead, he stood there, caught in the

gravity of her presence, lungs tight, control fraying at the edges. The tension in the air thickened, pulling him in as if something invisible had wrapped itself around his chest.

He couldn't explain the way his gaze followed the curve of her lips as she panted, her pulse still erratic beneath her pale skin. His eyes traced the delicate line of her jaw, the flush of color in her cheeks, and despite the cold, clinical part of his mind urging him to focus, he couldn't help but notice how her body responded to the proximity between them.

The air felt warmer, charged. Her scent, fresh and faintly floral, swirled around him, heightening the mystifying sensation that she was pulling at something deep within him. His grip on control tightened, but it was becoming more difficult to ignore the pulse of awareness between them, the magnetic, unwelcome attraction that simmered beneath the surface of his detachment.

She was a prisoner, an anomaly to be contained, and yet, the way she fought him, the way her body writhed under his control, sent a ripple of heat through him that he was not prepared to confront. The tension was undeniable, and it unsettled him in ways he couldn't afford to acknowledge.

She struggled against the restraints, breathing hard, eyes wild. She shouted something at him—demanding, furious—but he heard only noise until the translator activated.

“Who the hell are you?” she snapped.

He said nothing.

She launched herself at him—predictable—managing to tear through the minimal restraints. He caught her with clinical precision, trapping her arms without violence. Holding her firmly without injury.

She writhed, kicked, fought.

He absorbed every motion, every blow, like stone against storm winds.

Finally, he spoke.

“Riv’En. My name is Riv’En.”

The sound of his name fractured the silence between them.

She froze, only for a heartbeat, then twisted it into something easier on her tongue.

“Riven,” she muttered.

He did not correct her.

Let her humanize the syllables. It meant nothing to him. Should have meant nothing. Just another sound in a long list of species trying to make sense of him.

Or—

Something tightened in his chest, a sensation unfamiliar, unwanted, and yet undeniably present. The space between them seemed to shrink, pulling him closer despite every logical directive demanding he remain detached.

Her scent, her fight, it triggered something deep within him, something buried under the layers of discipline and control. He was not supposed to feel this, not toward her, not toward any human. Yet, every time she moved, every time her pulse quickened under his touch, he felt the tension crack inside him. A low, burning awareness he couldn’t ignore, even as he fought to maintain his distance.

He ignored it. Or tried to.

She glared at him, chest heaving with rapid breaths, muscles trembling with the violent mix of exhaustion, adrenaline, and the undeniable pulse of fear she couldn't suppress. Her gaze, still fierce, locked with his, defiant, despite the overwhelming power of his control over her. He felt the shudder ripple through her, small, involuntary, but unmistakable.

Her body had to ache, every fiber straining against him, but there was something else in her eyes now. Something that gave Riv'En pause, just for the briefest moment. She wasn't just resisting him. She was fighting him. And it triggered a flicker of heat in his chest, unwelcome and unexplainable. A response he had no protocol for. One he could not afford to feel.

Containment was complete.

Observation: ongoing.

And yet... Despite every logical directive programmed into him, Riv'En knew with crystalline clarity—this was only the beginning.