

A. G. WILDE



V'ALEN

THE RESTITUTION

— 2 —

V'ALEN

A SCI-FI ALIEN REBEL ROMANCE

THE RESTITUTION

BOOK 2

A. G. WILDE

 Petronie
Publishin
g

Copyright © 2023 by A.G. Wilde

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, businesses, or locales is coincidental and is not intended by the author.

This story is intended for adult readers and it may contain elements not suitable for readers under the age of 18. All sexually active characters portrayed in this book are eighteen years of age or older.

Cover design: Vanesa Garkova

CONTENTS

V'Alen

Before you read!

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Also By](#)

[About the Author](#)

V'ALEN

One who can feel and one who cannot...

Kidnapped and thrown into an alien war where danger is a constant threat, fear would consume most. But Alaina Webster is not most people.

Ripped from Earth by the High Tasqals and labeled a slave, Alaina seizes this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. All because she has a secret she is determined to keep hidden.

And she would have succeeded, if *he* didn't come along. V'Alen. The cyborg who can see right through her.

As they embark on a mission that challenges the boundaries of humanity and technology, they form a passionate connection that is as intense as it is unexpected.

Caught in a series of events that bring them closer together, Alaina and V'Alen must confront the consequences of a love that defies all odds.

A love that transcends life itself.

BEFORE YOU READ!

Goodness me, it's been a while.

If you're picking up this book right after reading *Ajos*, you can skip this part.

If not, I recommend going back to *Ajos* first. As the plot is an overarching one, some things will be easier to understand if you read that book first.

For those who don't want to go back, or are new to this series or my work, here's a brief rundown of what's happened before.

In books 1-5 of *Captured by Aliens*, we met five couples. Five human females and five alien rebel heroes who rescue them from the High Tasqals—a race of overgrown toad-like beings who are dying from some incurable disease that makes it impossible for them to reproduce on their own.

And who best to fill that gap than lovely humans. (Gosh, we're too awesome for our own good.)

At the end of that series, we find out there are more humans trapped in a stasis hold somewhere and our rebels make an oath to rescue them.

Then comes the book, *Ajos*.

A rebel fighter who helps open the stasis hold, he falls for Kerena, a female who was trapped inside it.

Ajos takes Kerena with him on what should have been a safe-enough mission, but nothing goes to plan. Kerena is kidnapped

by a plant. Yes, you read that right.

While imprisoned by this flora, she discovers the plant reacts to human blood.

It turns out, this plant is key to healing the very beings that took her from Earth. (Boo!)

But what's even more important, is a device she and Ajos discovered while on their mission. A glowing orb. One they have no clue the power of, and one the High Tasqals seem determined to retrieve.

This book picks up on the storyline of that orb, with V'Alen and Alaina.

If you understood any of that, keep on reading!

I hope you enjoy!

Below is a TW/SPOILER

.
. .
. .
. .
. .

MASSIVE SPOILER INCOMING

.
. .
. .
. .
. .

TW INCOMING N NEXT PAGE

.
. .
. .
. .

SPOILER/TW BELOW:

This book contains themes surrounding health and death/mortality. The heroine in this book is terminally ill. Whatever your experience with a terminal illness may be, whether you or a loved one suffer/have suffered from such a malady, I understand this theme may be a sore point. It is completely fine if you want to skip this book..

I have many other books you can enjoy :)

□ AG

“JEKINNNN.”

Alaina’s brow furrowed slightly, her nose twitching as she slowly roused from sleep.

That voice... It sounded so real. So *close*.

Lids still heavy with sleep, her eyes slowly opened to lock with yellow slitted pupils, luminous in the dark, right before her and so close, they were all she could see.

Her breath rose in her chest, stopping in her nose as she startled awake.

She knew those eyes. Saw them in her dreams that turned into nightmares.

They were the eyes of a Hedgerud. A gator-guard, as she and the other humans called them. Evil beings with those same cold yellow eyes set over long snouts that hid sharp, jagged teeth.

Henchman of the High Tasqals, the very fiends that ripped her from Earth, his presence spelled death and danger.

But he couldn’t be here. She *had* to be dreaming, for she was on the Restitution’s base. A place where rebels fought to keep her and other unfortunate souls safe from the same species she was staring at right now.

It was the safest place for her to be in the whole universe. A place where she was protected from the High Tasqals and their minions. Not even Earth was safer than here.

So how...

How was she staring into the eyes of the very thing she feared?

Her heart slammed into her chest as a scream tore from her lips—or rather, she *tried* to scream, but the sound was stifled by something forcing her mouth closed.

Something rigid. Something unmoving.

Alaina grabbed at it, her fingers grasping thick skin that felt like leather, and her entire body shuddered as she tried to scramble backward.

A claw. One big enough to grasp her whole jaw while constricting her neck.

But even as she scrambled backward and tried to pull the claw from her face, her movements were futile.

Her head met the wall. There wasn't anywhere to go.

She'd been asleep on her sleeping slab. She was *still* on her sleeping slab. And she was trapped.

The pressure on her jaw increased as the gator-guard pushed her head back into the bedding, almost as if he was trying to ram her jawbone up into her skull.

Her whimper was silenced as she stared into those slitted eyes, terror filling her and running over as the gator-guard drew closer.

The alien lowered his head, his snout coming so near to her face that she could smell his rancid breath. Sharp teeth bared over her face, so close that the tips brushed against her nose.

This had to be a dream. Another side effect of her illness.

She already knew about the headaches. The nausea. The reduced strength and coordination...

She knew all about the diagnosis she'd received just a week before she'd been taken from Earth, but the doctor hadn't mentioned hallucinations.

And this pain developing in her throat, the terror replacing the blood in her veins, it all felt too real...

But it *couldn't* be real.

The only way a gator-guard could have passed the base's defenses was if...

Oh, God no.

The base had been breached.

They were under attack.

"Jekinnnnn," the gator-guard hissed again. "Rise and keep your maw shut, or I will crush it and silence you myself."

A whimper left her throat as he pulled her forward by the face, the automatic lights finally clicking on to reveal the horror before her.

She'd only seen the Hedgeruds and their masters, the High Tasqals, on holo-images. Never in real life. And those images did no justice to the utter horror that they actually were.

Coarse dark-green skin covered every inch of the gator-guard's body right down to his jagged tail. And those cold, wicked eyes. So unfeeling, she could look right into them and see that he wished for her doom.

Grabbing the claw that was latched on to her face, she pushed at it, trying to free herself.

Panic shot through her like a bullet. She had to get free. She couldn't let him take her.

The Tasqals only wanted humans for one thing, and even though she had two, maybe three weeks left to live, she didn't want to die writhing in pain while an alien spawn ripped itself from her belly.

As a scream cut through the other side of the room, Alaina's heart did one heavy thump.

Constance. Her roommate, Constance. With the sudden terror she'd woken up to, she'd forgotten about her roommate, but Constance must have woken up to see the evil in their midst. And that meant it was now two against one.

There was hope.

Panic melded with the only other thing flooding through her veins. Adrenaline.

Pulling her legs toward her chest, she released them in a kick that struck the gator-guard in the belly. Startled, his grip on her loosened enough that she freed herself. Spinning, she only managed to land on her belly, her fingers digging into the bedding for purchase as she tried to scramble forward and away from the monster now behind her.

A growl sounded in the room. One that chilled the air itself as a claw closed around the back of her skull, slamming her face down in the bedding so hard she couldn't breathe.

A scream ripped from her throat and disappeared into the soft feathers of her quilt.

Growling, the gator-guard pulled her by the hair, yanking her back so hard she felt a tendon spasm in her neck.

His claw closed around her throat in the next second and suddenly she was spun to face him as he lifted her toward the roof with one hand.

"Pitiful," he murmured.

Her own weight was pulling her down against the vice around her neck, cutting off the air she so badly needed to remain conscious and survive.

It was a strange feeling, being choked.

Her body fought for air, her head feeling like it was swelling and about to combust...and yet, behind it all, behind the panic of losing her breath...there was calm. A beckoning that it could all end now and she wouldn't have to fight anymore.

But she *had* to fight.

Strangled words rose from her throat. "SoMeonE pleaSe hElp..."

Movement behind the gator-guard sent another chill down her spine as she spotted his counterpart moving behind him,

focused on none other than Constance.

“ConsTaNce!” *Run!* She tried to scream, to shout, to tell the other woman to run, but the claw around her throat only tightened.

Pain spread around her neck as if the guard’s rough skin was tearing hers apart.

Tears sprung into her eyes and the pain only caused her to flail more. Gripping the gator-guard’s arm with both hands, she pulled against his claw with all her strength.

“Unbelievably pitiful.” There was a hiss followed shortly by a cackle as the gator-guard laughed. “It is no wonder our masters chose your species to rebuild theirs. You cannot escape them...even if you wish to. Resistance is futile.”

Pain spread through her throat and she was sure the blood vessels in her head were about to burst.

“FuCk. TheM.” Teeth grit, she glared at the fiend before her.

It shouldn’t be possible, but those cold eyes grew colder as his slitted pupils narrowed on her.

Behind him, Constance screamed. “Let me go, you piece of shit!” She dug her heels into the floor, but it was like there was no resistance. The other gator-guard pulled her along behind him anyway.

“Make haste,” the Hedgerud said. “There are many more of these jekins to find. The masters await our return.”

No.

Alaina began struggling again.

This couldn’t be happening.

Surely, this wasn’t how it ended.

Not like this!

She tried kicking at the guard again as he headed toward the door, but possibly, the action hurt her more than it hurt him.

She was barefoot and his skin was like hitting jagged rock.

No. She had more time left. More life left to *live*. And it would not be taken from her prematurely. She refused!

The universe frickin' owed it to her.

As the gator-guard turned with her in his grasp, her eyes landed on a small tool she'd been using to cut plant samples around the base. A blade that was tucked inward like a ratchet knife.

For weeks, she'd worked tirelessly beside Kerena, another human refugee on this strange world, cutting plants with that blade, trying to find a compound they could use against the High Tasqals. After Kerena had accidentally found a plant that caused Tasqal cells to react, they'd been experimenting since, trying to replicate the results and maybe reverse it.

To find the weakness of the scourge that descended upon Earth, ripped them away from their lives, and was still chasing them through the cosmos.

It would be ironic if that same blade would liberate her now.

She just needed to get close enough. If she could just grab it, she could use it against the fucker holding her in his vice-like grip.

As she hung on to the gator-guard's arm, fighting the burn in her throat and the one in her lungs, she eyed the blade. It was high on a shelf, high enough that she could grab it if—

Her body swung in the guard's grasp, and Alaina pushed her weight into the sway. Her fingers closed around the blade at the same moment that the gator-guard turned his head in her direction.

Like the world slowed down, the blade flicked open, the sharp metal glinting in the light. She only saw the slight widening of the gator-guard's eyes as she swung her fist, burying the blade into his arm.

Her heart thumped, just one massive beat as the blade sunk into his skin, dark-green blood springing up along its edge.

But despite that it sunk through the hard barrier his skin created, it didn't go nearly as deeply as she'd have liked. Eyes wide as she stared at it, time stopped as the gator-guard roared.

He was going to kill her now. He was going to crush her throat between his fingers.

But as her wide eyes rose to his, he reached for her hand still grasping the blade. Time started moving once more as his fingers tightened, sinking the blade deeper into his flesh as he squeezed her wrist.

She felt her bones crack, felt the muscle in her hand spasm as he tilted her wrist backward in one sharp movement. Her back arched with the pain, her eyes watering, her sharp sob disappearing under the sound of the growl he released from his chest.

"*Pest,*" he growled, snapping her wrist.

The agony made the breath stop in her nose, her lungs caving in as pain shot through her arm. Through her blurred vision, she could barely make out her limp wrist, the bone sticking up underneath her dark skin as the gator-guard pulled the blade from his arm and flicked it somewhere in the room.

Her mind swam, indescribable pain making her consciousness wane as the gator-guard's hold on her tightened as he stepped from the room.

The sounds that hit her as soon as they left the sound barrier surrounding the sleeping quarters were the only thing that dampened her anguish.

Screams. Wailing. Big booming sounds that echoed through the night air like massive guns being fired. Smoke and burning buildings. Residents screaming and running for their lives. People being murdered right before her as dark outlines of gator-guards cut them down.

Her heart ceased.

It was...horror.

Up above, something much darker than the night itself was hovering in the air.

Like a symbol of terror, the Hedgerud's mothership hovered in the air, *waiting* for them.

Even without the Hedgeruds saying it, she knew...if she got on that ship, she was never coming back.

"Comrade, on your right!"

The gator-guard holding her jerked, taking her with him, and Alaina choked out a cry because of the pain. From their right, one of the rebels, an alien with four sets of eyes and as many arms, was charging toward them, his blade pointed at the gator-guard.

But he didn't stand a chance.

There was nothing she could do as the gator-guard brandished a sword and buried it into the rebel's chest.

Carried forward by his momentum, the sword went full hilt into the rebel's body, piercing him through and through.

As his body slumped, his gaze locked with hers and she saw the moment the light left his eyes.

"No!" she choked out, at the same time that Constance screamed the same.

The gator-guard withdrew his weapon and kicked the rebel's body out of the way as if he'd meant nothing.

The utter disrespect was harrowing.

She was shuddering now, her body shaking uncontrollably. Not out of fear, but maybe the shock to her system was just too much.

How...

How did this happen?

How did the base fall so quickly?

"Keep walking!" The guard in front pulled Constance and the woman winced, a whimper leaving her lips as she stumbled over the body of a fallen resident.

So much death.

It was everywhere.

She could smell it in the air. Like a thick, heavy concoction of dread that would seep into her bones if she stayed in its presence for too long.

For a moment, despair almost overtook her, but that's when something caught her eye.

Glistening metal. Black and gold.

Far off through the smoke and destruction, that armor only meant one person. Since she'd woken from stasis, he'd been the one alien that caught her eye, and maybe it was the engineer within her, but he was a beauty to behold. She'd never interacted with him apart from that first day when he'd installed a translator chip behind her ear. But she knew his name.

"V'Alen," she whispered.

IT WAS A WHISPER, BUT HE HEARD IT ANYWAY.

That moment when the human called his name.

Despite the surrounding chaos, V'Alen turned and locked onto her immediately.

Dropping the piece of building he'd been lifting so a trapped resident could flee, he sent a probe in the human's direction.

[Scan]

[System:

.
.

Two Hedgeruds.

Two human females: Injured.]

And it seemed the human hadn't been the only one that had spotted him.

The moment the Hedgeruds caught sight of him was clear, too.

They suddenly stopped walking, tension radiating off them as they glanced toward their mothership, then back in his direction.

Even from the distance, he could sense when their pulse quickened, and he knew their next move even before they did.

They were going to change direction.

If they went toward their mothership, he would intercept them too quickly.

“It’s the Kyron!” one of them hissed.

Their words carried over the distance, his enhanced hearing picking up their speech as if he was standing right in front of them, and he tilted his head slightly as he watched their eyes dart around.

“Hide!” the other hissed.

Just as he’d expected, they diverted to a nearby building.

Jumping from the roof of the building on which he stood, V’Alen headed in their direction.

[Scan]

[Activating infrared]

He could see them clearly. Each standing on either side of the door, weapons drawn, the humans still in their grasp.

“PLeAse V’AlEN.” It was the human whispering, the same one that uttered his name. Only now, her voice was filled with hope.

I saw you, human.

Glancing at his fingertips, he knew he could use a high-powered beam to take out the Hedgeruds from this distance. But there was a problem.

He couldn’t harm the Hedgeruds.

He was forbidden...and the Hedgeruds would know that too.

Launching himself into the air, V’Alen jumped, engaging the thrusters built into his armor so he could move over the chaos below and land just in front of the building he’d seen them take the humans into.

Two steps and he was in front of the door they hid behind.

[Scan]

[... Probing vicinity for allied species

.

.]

[Ally found]

Akur, rebel fighter and twin brother of his commander, Ajos, was nearby.

Calculating the chance of success in a millisecond, V'Alen tilted his head in the rebel's direction. He spotted him immediately, dual blades swinging as he cut through two Hedgeruds at once.

Akur wasn't restricted like he was. He would do.

The male looked his way then, the blood of his enemies splashed over his face like a painting, and V'Alen gave him a signal.

Backup necessary.

Akur nodded and began heading his way, but his path wasn't clear.

Even though he was cutting them down, Hedgeruds were still charging at him like a flood.

At his current pace, Akur would arrive in roughly one minute and thirty seconds.

V'Alen turned his attention back to the two Hedgeruds he faced.

They were still hiding and fear wafted from them in waves.

"And if the Kyron spotted us?" one of the Hedgeruds asked, his voice so low, his words sounded like growling.

"Unclear. But this is cowardice. We are hiding like weaklings. The Kyron cannot attack us. That is their law."

"Cowardice? We do not know if he observes the treaty. I have seen what a rogue Kyron can do, and I do not wish to be killed by one."

That was all he needed to hear.

They weren't sure if he was abiding by the Law of Voltaris, so he would use their fear against them.

Charging his fist, V'Alen calculated the exact trajectory of each particle as he struck forward, sending the door flying inward.

“Qrak!” One of the Hedgeruds exclaimed. There was a scream from one of the females and scampering as the Hedgeruds scrambled further into the darkness. “Take cover!”

V'Alen stood in the center of the room, his gaze flicking in the direction of the closest fiend. “You cannot hide. I will always see you.”

[Scan]

[System: Female. Alaina. Neck wound. Broken bones in the wrist. Critical damage to the brain. Chance of survival: 3%]

[System: Female. Unnamed. Wound to the arm. Wound to the jaw. Chance of survival: 99%]

V'Alen's system charged, his armor lighting up like a wave. He hadn't expected one of the female's life state to be so critical and, as the dust cleared, his gaze locked on her.

“I am sorry I am late...Alaina.”

Apart from the hope in her eyes, surprise shone through.

He'd used her name.

He must have saved her designation without realizing, for he only knew one other human's name and that was the name of Kerena, his commander, Ajos', mate.

This little female must have impressed on his subconscious programming. That part of him that ran in the background and he had no access to.

When had she done this? He was not sure. He'd had little contact with the humans they'd rescued.

His gaze moved from her to the Hedgerud who had her in his grasp, and the brute pulled a blade from his waist.

V'Alen's gaze flicked to the weapon, and the Hedgerud seemed to wither a little.

Everyone knew you did not point a weapon at a Kyron, even one that had not gone rogue.

But the Hedgerud was smarter than he looked. Because, though he'd drawn the weapon, he held it loosely in his claw at his side as if waiting.

"Hm." The Hedgerud spoke, his voice much steadier than the tension his body indicated. "The famed Kyron stationed at the Restitution." He gripped the female, Alaina, tighter and she winced. "The High Tasqals have heard rumors of your presence here."

[Scan]

[System: Forty-five seconds before Akur's arrival]

"Three words, Hedgerud," V'Alen said. "Release the humans."

The Hedgerud glanced at his comrade and at that moment, the air around them changed.

Possibly, the fact they weren't yet writhing in agony gave them confidence.

A hiss-cackle developed in one's throat and his comrade joined in with his own hesitant laughter.

"The Kyron dares to give us orders. Maybe he's forgotten the law of his people."

The Law of Voltaris.

The one that locked his combat abilities. Restricted them. And the only thing that gave other species enough piece of mind to trust his own.

The Hedgerud tugged the female in his grasp, and her body jerked against his. "What are you going to do if we don't let them go, Kyron?" He glanced at his comrade. "You can't attack us, can you?"

Yes. Yes, he could.

He only needed certain conditions to be met. And there were ways to do that.

V'Alen took a step forward.

“One more step and I kill the human.” The gator-guard lifted his blade and pressed the tip against Alaina’s belly, but the female didn’t wince or pull away.

Her gaze was locked on him as if she was waiting, waiting for him to make his move.

[System: Thirty seconds before Akur’s arrival]

“Don’t worry about me,” she whispered. “Focus on Constance.”

Her words made him tilt his head slightly. It was not what he’d expected her to say. It was almost as if she was aware of her chance of survival and wanted him to save the other female who had much better odds than she did.

Three percent.

It was curiously low, even with his presence and with Akur on the way, the odds did not improve.

“Quiet!” The Hedgerud shouted, slamming a fist into the female’s belly.

Everything within V'Alen stilled.

These beings.

These beings were filled with malevolence.

It wasn’t his place to decide good or evil. That was the reason for the Law of Voltaris. But even though he was mostly artificial, with even his brain altered by code, that part of him that was still flesh reacted.

He’d spent many revolutions with the Restitution, and he’d seen and archived much. The rebels and the beings they protected, they fought an evil much greater than themselves.

An evil these Hedgeruds before him *worshiped*. An evil that preyed on the weak...those too small to fight back. Like the female before him now.

The Hedgerud's masters were a scourge on this side of the cosmos.

As Alaina doubled over, her gaze still locked on his... something snapped within him.

Whatever it was, made his vision turn red.

One of the Hedgeruds shifted even farther back. "What does red mean?"

"You can't attack, Kyron!" the other exclaimed. "You are forbidden."

So he was.

He shouldn't be able to defy his system like this, but watching the small female choke on air was a scene that seemed to make his system react without his input. No doubt as he moved, a signal was being sent back to Voltaris, warning the Kyron of his possible disobedience—but he couldn't stop.

This human...the look in her eyes...

He cut through the air, erasing the distance between him and the Hedgerud as his hand closed around the fiend's throat.

Fear shone in the Hedgerud's yellow irises as he suddenly released the female to grip the arm now at his throat.

"You cannot kill me, Kyron," the Hedgerud grunted. But his words no longer bore confidence.

V'Alen's gaze flicked from red to white and back, his system trying to correct the glitch in his code, but he fought back as he raised his arm higher, lifting the Hedgerud off his feet.

A sense of power went through him. One that set off internal alarms.

This feeling...

This feeling is what led his ancestors astray.

[Scan]

[System: Three seconds until Akur's arrival]

“You cannot kill me.” It was more of a plea than a statement now as the Hedgerud flailed in his grasp and V’Alen was aware of Alaina trying to crawl away to safety. The other Hedgerud was scrambling back as well, his eyes wide and his maw open.

“Affirmative. I cannot kill you,” V’Alen said. “But *he* can.”

AS ALAINA TRIED TO CRAWL AWAY, SHE FOUND SHE COULD hardly move.

Everything hurt.

Above her, V'Alen had the Hedgerud in his grasp and, at that moment, she yearned to hear the bones in the asshole's neck crack and break.

She wanted to hear him scream in pain.

Damn them.

Damn them all to hell.

“You cannot kill me!” the Hedgerud exclaimed.

“Affirmative,” V'Alen answered. “I cannot kill you...But he can.”

He who?

It was but a blur and the glisten of a blade as someone else darted into the room, but she was too startled, feeling too much pain to even move or react. It was as if her mind lagged as it fought to keep up with what she was seeing.

One second, the gator-guard in V'Alen's grasp was resisting, and the next, his body went limp.

He fell to the floor with a thud, his huge tail missing her by mere inches as his body collapsed.

Her head pulsed, dizziness interfering with her vision as she looked at the fallen Hedgerud. But even with her blinking

hard to dispel the blurriness that had crept over her sight, she knew something was wrong.

The gator-guard's body didn't look right and in the second that passed, her mind refused to allow her to understand what she was seeing.

But it soon became clear.

The horror of the sight made a scream leave her lips.

It wasn't the gator-guard's body that had fallen to the floor.

At least, not *all* of it.

Her terrified gaze moved upward as rain suddenly began falling, splashing against her legs.

Rain?

Inside?

The confusion and the pounding in her head made her mind swim.

Nothing made sense.

But then her gaze focused, and it clicked.

Not rain.

Blood.

For the gator-guard's body had been sliced completely in half.

The lower half had fallen and the other half was still being held up by V'Alen's arm.

In one movement, he threw the upper half of the gator-guard to the side as Alaina scrambled backward, her body moving out of pure instinct.

Black and gold metal blocked her view as cold arms surrounded her, pulling her against a hard body.

Her body shook as cool blue eyes met hers.

"Threat exterminated," V'Alen said. "He will no longer harm you."

She was barely aware that she gripped on to him, eyes wide as she tried to calm her breathing.

They were saved?

There was another shout in the room and Alaina's gaze focused over V'Alen's shoulder just as the moving blur materialized into something her mind could understand.

Another of the Restitution's rebels.

Akur. Over seven feet tall of pure pissed-off rebel fighter, somehow he'd killed the two gator-guards before anyone in the room could even react.

The tall alien braced a boot against the other Hedgerud's chest and slid his blade from the now lifeless body. His teal skin splattered with blood, he looked like he'd just made a sacrifice.

"Get off my blade," he hissed, as he kicked the body off and flashed the blood from his weapon as if it was an inconvenience.

Satisfied, he turned to glance at V'Alen. "Nice teamwork. Thanks for the signal, brother."

Alaina's heart was beating so hard, she couldn't think clearly.

Was it over? It had all happened so quickly.

She'd known she was living in a camp full of rebel fighters, but she'd never seen them in action before now.

And these must be the elite ones because most of the other rebels on the outside weren't faring so well.

"You are safe now," V'Alen's voice cut through her consciousness and she realized he'd been focused on her the entire time.

His eyes were no longer that luminous red and he was so calm, you wouldn't know that right behind him was chaos and death.

"You are safe, but injured." He raised a hand and it hovered over her wounded wrist as if he wasn't quite sure

what to do about it.

She winced when his fingers brushed over the wound and he pulled them back, his gaze flicking to her face.

Curious.

For a robot man, he wasn't as unaffected as she'd expected him to be.

"I—I'm fine." Alaina blinked through the swirl of shock and pain. "How did you find us?"

He looked at her, his head tilting slightly. "You called me."

The way he was looking at her, like an all-knowing, super-intelligent, man-alien-AI-person made any response die on her lips.

She remembered whispering his name. No way he'd heard that from the distance he'd been. But they were frickin' lucky he'd come.

"Constance," she whispered as she tried to stand, and V'Alen helped her up.

"Constance..." Alaina gulped when her eyes landed on the woman. There was a line of blood going down Constance's cheek and her lip was swollen and bleeding where she'd been punched.

"Don't worry about me, Alaina. I'm fine." Constance forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Alaina nodded. "I'm alright."

"You lie."

V'Alen's words made Alaina snap her head back to him so quickly, pain shot right into her skull with the sudden movement.

How did he even know that?

"I..."

What was he?

His gaze didn't budge and staring into his eyes, the intelligence there was almost overwhelming.

It felt as if, should she try to deny it, he would provide a factual rebuttal that she was indeed lying.

He was right, though.

She wasn't fine.

Her neck was burning like there was a ring of fire around it, her head was pounding, her limbs felt weak, and her wrist felt like even the blood vessels had been crushed.

Not to mention, that punch the gator-guard had given her felt like it had broken a rib or two.

“We should get them to the bunkers,” Akur said. He glanced toward the space where the door was as he spoke. “Better not go that way. That ship is too close. Our fighter jets couldn't intercept it before it entered the base, and I saw a unit of Hedgeruds heading in this direction. We have to find another way—”

Alaina glanced toward the door, and, as if summoned, there was a loud snarl as a gator-guard charged into the room.

He had a pointed weapon aimed, one that was tipped with shining black metal on the sharp end.

She opened her mouth to warn the others, but there was no use to warn anyone. It seemed V'Alen was leagues ahead of them in that regard.

Either he'd seen the guard coming or he'd heard the intruder before they did, for he grabbed her and turned just in time to block the guard's attack.

Judging from the trajectory, the gator-guard's weapon would have pierced *her*.

Instead, it plunged into V'Alen's back.

“V'Alen!” Alaina's eyes widened as she jerked, her body weightless as V'Alen let her go.

She was falling as V'Alen crouched and spun, turning to wrap his other arm around her once more just before she hit the floor.

That calm face of his turned to her, his gaze locked with hers as his free arm shot out behind him.

His palm connected with the threat, and there was a hum throughout his entire being. It vibrated against her, sending tingles all across her skin as, once again, time stood still.

In the next instant, there was a loud explosion.

The building shook and a high-pitched sound threatened to melt her eardrums. Her senses protested, her ears ringing as the room filled with dust once more.

Alaina coughed, covering her nose as she squinted to see what had just happened.

But the only thing she could make out were the lights in V'Alen's suit.

He was still holding her, still in a crouch, and as the dust cleared, it became evident just exactly *what* had happened.

There was a hole in the wall that hadn't been there before...a man-sized hole. Or rather, a gator-guard sized hole.

She could see outside of the building, into the chaos still unfolding out there, and on the ground outside was the unmoving body of the gator-guard that had attacked, his spear lying a few feet away from him.

A chuckle filled the room as Akur laughed. "Qef. When I said we couldn't use the door, I didn't expect you to make a new one."

Alaina's wide eyes met V'Alen's as he rose and supported her so she could stand on her feet once more.

What the hell...

She glanced from the hole in the wall and then back at him.

He just did that...

"I—I thought they said you couldn't attack them," she whispered.

There were rings around V'Alen's pupils that spun as he studied her.

“Conditions were met.”

THE HUMAN WOBBLLED ON HER FEET, AND V'ALEN WONDERED whether it had been wise to release her.

As he steadied her with a hand on her elbow, she smiled up at him, causing him to pause.

That wasn't the reaction he'd expected.

But it wasn't the first time she'd smiled at him.

That first day when he'd installed the translator chips behind all the humans' ears, she'd smiled at him too. He remembered, because most of the humans had eyed him with wariness even *he* could read. And though he wished to know more about their kind, he'd kept his distance. Not all biological beings adjusted well to one as artificial as he was.

It was something he'd learned while traveling the cosmos, and it was no different here.

But this one...this female...

She wasn't afraid of him.

[[Deep System Root: Automatic Record Creation]]

[[Record Name: Alaina...]]

[[Record saved.]]

She steadied herself, glancing up at him once more.

"I'm ok. I can walk."

She was right.

She *could* walk. But that didn't mean she *should*.

His earlier scan told him that much.

She was injured. Much more than her wounds revealed.

[Scan]

[System: Estimated chance of survival: 3%]

Her life state still registered as critical.

[Major wounds to the neck and the wrist]

[Critical damage to the brain]

Zooming in, V'Alen's head tilted as he gathered the information. Alaina's semioval center was compromised. He could see the mass that was compressing it. A biological mass. One her own body created.

"Akur, we must make haste. This female is critically ill."

He saw her stiffen, her muscles tightening as her eyes darted to the other human. "I'm fine. Really. It's just a flesh wound. I just...need a cast for my wrist."

She wouldn't meet his gaze. Instead, she looked toward the hole he'd made in the wall. "We should go."

She was lying again.

When she tried to take a step forward and realized he was still holding on to her arm, she finally glanced up at him.

"Truly, I'm *fine*."

She stressed the word as if it would make it true...or at least cause him to believe it was true. But regardless of her efforts, he could see every detail she wished to hide.

Was this another human trait he had yet to learn? This lying?

He could tell her head was aching. The vessels there were throbbing. Strained. The mass in her brain was causing her body to fail.

She was weaker than she looked.

What's more, he saw that she tried to hide the pain, closing her eyes for a moment before opening them a little too widely and with too much force.

“Do humans lie when in pain?”

His question made her eyes grow larger and, once more, her gaze darted to the other female.

He watched as she huffed a laugh through her nose, her gaze darting away from him. “Of-of course, not.” Clearing her throat, she pointed her gaze at Akur instead.

“Which way?” she asked. “We can run if you tell us where to go.”

“Negative.”

Alaina's gaze snapped back to his, her throat moving.

She opened her mouth to argue but he was already crouching to lift her into his arms.

She gasped but did not fight. Stunned maybe.

“What are you doing?”

“Lifting you.” Now in his grasp, he could hardly feel her weight.

“Put me down.”

“I refuse.”

She squeezed her eyes shut again, her brows knitting a little.

She ought to get better at lying. He could see right through her.

She was in agony.

With that in mind, he lifted her arm to rest her broken wrist on her stomach so he didn't accidentally crush it.

“Aren't you like a robot?” she groaned. “Shouldn't you listen to me?”

A robot?

He had heard that term before. Whispers the other humans made, unaware he could hear them. And he'd searched for the definition in the Archive.

A robot was a machine.

"I am much more than that."

"Okay, but you don't have to carry me. I can walk. You should use your strength for someone else who might need your help."

He paused, and she stiffened as his gaze flicked down to hers. "*You* need my help."

She swallowed, her throat moving as she looked up at him.

Still gazing into those wide brown eyes, he spoke to Akur. "Brother, let us go."

Akur grunted in agreement.

"We will head through the Lihzahr's district. Take path sixteen." Akur said, crouching to lift the other human, his hands grasping her buttocks a little too firmly.

The human screeched.

"—the fuck are you doing?!"

A resounding slap echoed in the room as the female's hand connected with Akur's jaw.

She'd slapped him so hard that Akur's head turned a fraction to the side and V'Alen saw the disbelief shine in the male's golden eyes.

For a moment, Akur didn't move and V'Alen could even feel Alaina stiffen.

"Constance? You okay?" she asked. Despite the pain she must be enduring, she was looking at Akur with some wariness in her eyes.

[System: Data retrieval]

[Humans. A herd species.

Strength in numbers.

A threat to one is a threat to all.]

“Thanks, Alaina. I’m okay,” the human named Constance said, her brows diving as she looked at Akur. “Keep your hands to yourself, big guy.”

Akur crouched and grabbed her, throwing her over his shoulders anyway.

She yelped and kicked at him.

“You’re in no position to fight me. You are weak. You’re injured. Just relax and let me take care of you, *female*,” Akur said. There was a strange look in his eyes and a slight smile on his lips. He was baiting the human. “And thanks for the compliment.”

The human groaned. “I didn’t *compliment* you—”

“You called me big.”

“—And you have no right to carry me like this. I am not your mate!”

Akur grunted. “But you *can* be. Are you offering?”

“Hell no!” Constance wriggled to free herself, and Akur chuckled.

V’Alen paused once more, watching their interaction. Both had slightly elevated heart rates. And the human lied. Akur’s careless words excited her enough that her breathing rate slightly increased, too.

[System: Data input]

[Humans regularly lie]

[Reason: unknown]

“Let us go, brother.”

As V’Alen stepped through the hole in the wall, Akur followed behind.

The night was thick with smoke, but he knew the way without using his lenses, and it didn’t take long before they were sprinting across the base as they rushed toward the bunkers.

Akur was fast for a biological being, keeping pace as they hopped over obstacles—fallen carts, fallen buildings...fallen bodies—and it was clear carrying the humans had been best.

They could move much faster that way.

As they turned a corner, heading through an intersection of three streets, his proximity sensors picked up movement that was just too fast for it to be a living thing.

“Incoming on your left!” he shouted at Akur.

Akur changed direction just in time for a part of a building to smash into the ground.

The male paled a little, just as the human he was carrying squealed.

Akur’s gaze darted to Constance. “See why I have to carry you?”

“Oh, shut up.” A reddish hue colored Constance’s cheeks, and V’Alen looked down at the human *he* was carrying.

Her skin was darker than Constance’s. Brown. And he wondered what that hue would look like brushed over *her* skin.

She was also smaller than many other humans they’d rescued. Frailer looking, possibly because of the mass in her brain.

Nestled against him, her hair a cloud of short curls that brushed against his armor, she was silent and her eyes were closed.

Unconscious. But her heart rate was steady.

He needed to get her medical attention quickly and trust the other rebels were doing their part. If each rebel protected at least one human, they could minimize casualties.

Protect the humans.

This was the Restitution’s prime directive.

Ahead, burning buildings blazed, lighting up the darkness. Shops. Lodging. Bathing rooms. All places that were built by

rebels and refugees alike.

All destroyed.

And all because of the humans.

A dying race that has been searching for a suitable species that can foster their young, he wondered if the High Tasqals may have found just that when they discovered the little planet called Earth. Why else would they have come after the humans, destroying so much to gain only a few females.

Glancing down at the human in his arms, he knew...if the Tasqals wanted the humans so badly, the rebels could not let them succeed.

If it had been up to him, his people, the Tasqals would have been erased from existence long ago...

And that was the exact reason why it was not his place to interfere.

“V’Alen, which bunker?” Akur’s voice cut through his stream of consciousness.

Lifting his gaze from the human’s face, V’Alen focused ahead as he scanned several meters in front of them.

“This way,” he said, diverting down a side street. “The Hedgeruds haven’t reached sector fourteen yet. We should go to the entrance to the bunkers there.”

As they hurried through the chaos, dodging fleeing residents as they too ran to safety, V’Alen’s gaze fell once more to the female in his arms.

He needed to be careful.

Earlier, when she’d been in the Hedgerud’s grasp, he’d fought against his code. If it happened again, the council would believe he’d gone rogue.

And a rogue Kyron was *always* captured.

He’d be hunted and reset.

That was a risk he would not want to take...not even for this strange being in his arms. One who was so different from

the others.

One who knew she was dying, but was fighting to live.

...One who had caused him to fight against the very code that built him—something that has never happened before.

He had learned too much, had too much data stored, too many experiences he did not want to lose. His time with the Restitution had evolved into much more than a mission to gather information for the Archive.

It was a life. His life.

Even as these thoughts flicked through his system, he knew it was...abnormal. Almost as if he was...*feeling*.

But he was Kyron, and Kyron did not have emotions. Perhaps he should head back to Voltaris voluntarily...have his code updated in case something was amiss in his deep system...

As he boosted himself into the air, jumping over an abandoned hover vehicle, Alaina groaned in his arms and winced as her consciousness returned.

“Where...” she whispered.

“Not long...Alaina,” he said.

They were almost at the bunkers’ entrance.

“W-what about the others?” Her voice was so low, it was almost inaudible. “There were a lot of us in the temporary accommodation. We were all sleeping.”

“Most will be safe.”

Around them, the air grew thicker with smoke that billowed up into the dark sky. Cries, wailing, and forlorn sounds filled the air.

All these beings, their small, finite lives...they were mourning what they lost.

It was a dark day for the Restitution. The darkest he’d seen since he’d been sent as an emissary to the rebels.

Alaina coughed.

“Most? Some have been taken to the Tasqals, haven’t they.”

Not a question. Her voice didn’t lilt at the end, and he wondered if she wished for an answer.

A glance her way and deep brown eyes that held too much sorrow looked back at him.

“Affirmative.”

Alaina swallowed hard, and even though her eyes were closed to keep away the dust and mounting smoke, he could see the distress etched into her features.

But she was here. She was alive. And he had her. She was one of the lucky ones.

“Bunker approaching.” He projected his voice in Akur’s direction. “Ten clicks.”

The bunker was just ahead, the door that led to the underground tunnel just barely visible in the darkness.

“Hurry!” Akur shouted, at the same time that V’Alen’s defense systems activated, the threat behind them identified in a split second.

It was too quick, not enough time for him to turn and warn Akur of what was about to happen.

The explosion sent them flying.

V’Alen spun and they hit the ground hard, his armor absorbing the impact of the fall. Rolling over, he ensured the human was tucked underneath him as he braced above her, a shield in case shrapnel followed.

But it wasn’t shrapnel that came.

[Scan]

As the world around them lit up with a bright light, he shouted in Akur’s direction, “Hold on!”

“Qef!” Akur shouted somewhere behind him.

V’Alen charged his systems just in time before gravity shifted and there was a pull against his armor.

Qef indeed.

He knew what this was, but he hadn't expected the Hedgeruds to use it.

THERE WAS A POUNDING IN HER HEAD THAT HAD NOTHING TO do with the recent turn of events.

This wasn't the time for her illness to raise its ugly head.

It was difficult, fighting against her own mind, but through the brain fog, the surrounding chaos was slowly breaking through.

He was braced over her, V'Alen, for somehow, after the loud boom, she'd ended up without injuries but with the ground at her back.

His armor felt cold against her skin as he caged her in, his hands planted into the earth beneath them.

There was a bright light, much brighter than the sun, and it didn't take long to understand where it was coming from.

Above them, that huge dark ship was hovering, and the light was coming directly from it.

It lit them up, and she realized belatedly that her body was hovering off the ground, barred only by V'Alen caging her in.

She was...*floating*. Something was wrong with gravity.

“What's happening?!”

He focused on her, those strange blue eyes seeming to go right through her, and with the chaos around them, she wasn't sure she could ever get used to the calmness in his eyes.

If he had any emotions, he didn't display them.

“Your kind call it a tractor beam,” V’Alen said.

“A what?” She’d heard him but, *shit*. Those things were real?

“Light, manipulated so it gains forward momentum...” he explained.

Of course. She understood all about the science behind it.

Not.

“We’re going to get pulled up into that thing?!” Eyes wide, she squinted as she looked up, the large black mass that was the ship like a shadow behind the too-bright light.

“Negative.” His single utterance was sure, and Alaina swallowed hard. “There is a ninety-eight percent chance I will remain grounded.”

“But it’s affecting *me*.” She couldn’t help the tremor that came into her voice. She hated the enemy, but she was also frickin’ terrified of them—the High Tasqals and the Hedgeruds alike.

“Calm, Alaina. I am here.”

She choked on panic and adrenaline as she nodded. Staring into those strange eyes, she tried to do what he said. To remain calm.

Taking in a deep breath, she fought to regain control of her body. But it was rising on its own accord, pressing into V’Alen, and even when she tried to ground herself, nothing happened.

It was like gravity was inverted.

But V’Alen wasn’t rising. Despite the pull, he remained steady. Unaffected. Not even his face revealed any strain.

His head tilted slightly as he watched her, and she was beginning to realize that was the only tell that actual thoughts were flying around in his mind.

As the pull became even stronger, it plastered her body against his.

Her hips against his belly, her breasts squashed into his armor, and their faces...

They were so close now, their lips touched.

Cool. Supple. The feel of his startled her.

They were flesh. At least, they *felt* like flesh.

As her lips pressed against his, V'Alen didn't flinch, and in the terror of it all, neither did she. Those strange eyes of his bored into her and his gaze was the only thing dampening the effect of her terror.

For if she focused on the fact that they were being pulled upward into a ship that even itself looked evil, she would focus on the fact that it would all be over.

And this was not how she wanted to die. Not screaming for her life while those wretched Tasqals had their way with her.

V'Alen shifted and she swore he floated for a moment, which sent her heart into overdrive.

Dipping closer to her, he was so near that all she could stare into were his eyes. "Do not be afraid."

Shit. She was well past that.

Fear and uncertainty were already swimming in her blood and her heart was a colosseum for their babies.

"Okay," she whispered.

V'Alen's eyes suddenly flashed white and stayed white as dust picked up around them.

She had to squint from the brightness.

Vaguely, she realized that dust was rising around them, floating upward like little particles suspended in the light, and she was forced to grip on to the alien above her and press her face against his cheek to protect her airway.

That's when they suddenly jerked and descended a few inches, V'Alen taking them both lower into the earth beneath them.

Alaina shuddered, finally comprehending what he was doing.

He was keeping himself still, fighting the power of the beam by anchoring himself into the ground itself—and, in effect, he was anchoring *her*.

But anything else underneath the beam wasn't so lucky. When a scream cut through the noise of the hovering ship, Alaina popped one eye open to squint in the direction of the sound.

“Constance?” she choked. “Constance and Akur!”

Her chest heaved with the rapid beating of her heart and she trembled against V'Alen.

“You have to help them. Leave me.” She swallowed hard, the decision coming without a second thought. “They have more to give than I do.”

Glowing white eyes met hers. “Negative.”

“What?”

The dust cleared somewhat and her eyes widened as she saw Constance rising into the air even as Akur gripped her hand, his other hand gripping the broken edge of a building through sheer will and strength alone.

She could see him straining, the tendons in his arms and neck pulled taut, his teeth grit, but it was clear he couldn't keep them grounded for much longer.

It looked like he would dislocate his shoulders if he didn't let go.

Even under V'Alen, she could still feel the pull. It was like she was a piece of paper being sucked up by a huge vacuum, only halted because of the man made of metal above her.

But Akur didn't possess the power V'Alen had and the moment his muscles lost the fight was evident. His hand slipped from the earth as he lifted off the ground to float upward behind Constance.

It was as if they suddenly couldn't move then, frozen within the beam as the light took them higher and higher.

“Constance!” Alaina screamed as panic ripped through her.

She clutched on to V'Alen as his arms sunk a few more inches into the ground.

Constance.

V'Alen was so close to her now that she could hardly breathe, for his weight was now pressing into her. Sandwiched between him and the ground, she could hardly move.

Fear overtook her. But not for herself. For *Constance*...

“V'Alen,” her voice trembled, “is there any way to stop this beam?”

He didn't need to answer, because just then, the tractor beam shut off and the strain on her muscles ended.

V'Alen's eyes stopped shining white, and he turned to look up at the ship.

It was still hovering, but Constance and Akur were nowhere to be seen.

They'd been taken inside the beast itself.

If she had a rocket launcher or something...

The thought made her gaze fall to V'Alen's right arm.

He'd blasted that gator-guard through the wall as if it had been nothing.

What other weapons did he possess?

“Can you attack them?”

For a moment, she thought he didn't hear her, but then he lifted his arm, his palm directed at the ship.

“Conditions have been met,” he said, his arm lighting up as white light raced through his suit and into his palm. But he paused. “Scans have located several humans on board. Complete annihilation impossible.”

Fuck.

But in the next second, his eyes glowed white, and a beam left his palm.

It was so bright that she had to shield her eyes. Squinting, her vision held black spots that took too long to disappear, but when her gaze darted in the direction the beam had gone, she could see the smoking end of the ship.

Alaina used her one good arm to scramble backward and from underneath V'Alen, her eyes wide as she stared up at the ship.

Everything felt tender. Her head. Her wrist. Her neck. Her...fuck, just *everything*. But nothing could stop the terror she felt looking up at that ship.

Now, without that bright beam shining down from it, it was a sight to behold.

A floating mass of dark metal with jagged edges, it looked like an extraterrestrial sea urchin mated with the *Millennium Falcon*.

V'Alen shot at it again and it shuddered once more before a hatch opened and something fell from within.

She recognized just what they'd thrown out a moment before it hit the ground.

Akur.

His body landed in a heap of dust, and something clenched within her.

No way he survived that fall.

But then...he groaned.

There was a loud hum as the ship above them rose higher, jerking and shuddering.

If they let Constance out the same way they'd thrown out Akur...

But even as she thought it, she knew it was wishful thinking.

They weren't going to let Constance go.

The ship shuddered again before it picked up speed and shot higher into the sky.

One moment it was there, the next, it disappeared.

Alaina's heart slammed against her chest.

V'Alen's attack hadn't been enough.

They'd taken Constance.

THIS WAS A WAR.

And she was in the middle of it.

As she rose to her feet, all around her the world burned. The destruction...the death. The terror.

Her body trembled as she turned and looked at the destruction all around her.

She couldn't deny it anymore. This wasn't some horrible nightmare she could hope to wake from. It wasn't a figment of her imagination.

It was reality. Her reality. Happening right before her like a tragic movie.

She was barely aware of V'Alen moving toward Akur, grasping the male, and throwing him over his shoulder. Barely aware of the cold breeze that whipped across her, fluttering the tunic she'd worn to bed.

All she could hear were the cries of torment echoing in the distance. Other refugees like her, *dying*.

When strong metal arms lifted her, she barely reacted. V'Alen placed her over his shoulder, and even as he did, another explosion erupted close by them, making the ground shake underneath his feet.

"Everything's destroyed," she whispered.

She couldn't see V'Alen's face, but she felt him pause. Felt when his head turned to the side as he looked out into the

distance.

“Not everything,” he said. “Sector three is intact.”

She swallowed down a sob that had risen in her throat as she lifted her head, her vision blurred by unfallen tears as she stared into the dark night.

Lit embers floated like wisps in the air, lighting the night sky like fireflies of despair. But sector three. Sector three was where she'd been working in the lab with Kerena. It's where their research on those plants was. The only thing that had been giving them hope to beat the scourge that had now descended on the base.

What they had was a compound that could heal the race that was enslaving theirs. What they wanted was a weapon that could beat the High Tasqals, ripping them apart from the inside out.

“The orb,” V'Alen suddenly said. “That is what they are after. It is why they have returned.”

Alaina gulped down the pain that was rising in her chest, and the desolation that followed it. Orb?

But before she could say another word, Akur coughed. Flipped over V'Alen's shoulder like she was, she could see how bruised and beaten he was, but he opened a golden eye, anyway.

“You can't let them get it,” he croaked.

When V'Alen still didn't move, Akur spoke once more, meeting her gaze as if he was speaking to her as well.

“V'Alen...you can't let them get their claws on that orb.”

V'Alen spun slowly, turning in the opposite direction to the bunker's entrance. Through the smog and smoke, she could almost make out the metal doors ahead.

“Contradictory course of action,” V'Alen finally replied. “Your injuries are severe. I must take you and the human to safety.”

“Forget about me,” Akur growled. “Set me down in the lift. I will regenerate enough to crawl to the medic. But you... you need to get to the orb. It’s in sector three. Underground.”

V’Alen’s head turned once more, almost as if he was thinking, and she could almost see that ring around his pupil spin.

“Acknowledged,” he said, turning once more toward the bunker.

With wide eyes, she watched Akur’s eyes roll over before coming into focus once more. He was badly injured and he looked darker than before, almost as if his blood was rising to the surface of his skin.

When metal doors creaked and V’Alen bent, shifting so that Akur slid off his shoulder, she knew they’d reached the lift.

Safety.

So why wasn’t she ecstatic?

Why wasn’t relief thumping through her veins now that she could run and hide, extending her life by a few more days?

As V’Alen grasped her by the waist, his metal hands gentler than she expected them to be, he lifted her from his shoulder and set her down on her feet.

She was on some sort of lift in a narrow shaft.

“Once it descends, you will find help. Other humans,” V’Alen said, his head tilting slightly. “Safety.”

A lump in her throat made it hard to reply.

Yes. Safety.

V’Alen turned to leave and her heart skipped a beat, a rush of panic shooting through her so suddenly that she felt her whole being startle.

“V’Alen!”

Hand outstretched, she stared with wide eyes as the metal man turned, luminous blue eyes meeting hers.

“Take me with you. Let me help.”

For a moment he said nothing and when Akur groaned on the floor beside her, she wondered if she was making a mistake.

But even as her heart thundered in her chest, the panic wasn't rising within her at the thought of heading back into the war. It rose within her at the thought of heading down into this bunker and burying her head in the sand, hoping that others will fight a war that involved her as much as it did them.

“You are wounded,” V'Alen finally answered.

She wasn't sure if that was his way of telling her to buzz off. That she'd be a hindrance more than a help. But he hadn't denied her outright and something within her forced her to press on.

“I know.”

“You will be safer below.”

“I know.”

His head tilted slightly, that ring around his pupils spinning.

“I have more than some of the other humans in this shit have gotten,” she continued. “You saved my life.”

It was the first time she'd said the words out loud to anyone but herself and something deep within her ached.

“I want to use the time you've given me. I want to use it to *do* something.” Pain swelled inside, coming from a place that wasn't physical. Someplace where she'd buried it deep. “In those final moments, I want to know I used the time I had to do something.”

Akur groaned again, and V'Alen's gaze slid to him.

It was a critical moment. He was going to deny her request.

“Take me with you,” she pressed, shifting her injured arm behind her back and standing a little straighter.

The silence between them was almost deafening as V'Alen's gaze slipped away from Akur and he turned, his back now toward her. Another lump formed in her throat as she expected him to walk away.

Instead, he said two words. "Follow me."



THE AIR WAS like a cold shaft against her face as she clung on to V'Alen with one arm, the other cradled to her chest, the pain within it forgotten as they sailed through the wind.

He carried her piggyback and all she could do was hold on as the world flashed by, almost like a blur.

He moved fast. Much faster than he'd done when running alongside Akur, and the air pressed against her so hard, she almost couldn't breathe.

He seemed intent on his destination, following a path she couldn't see as he moved through the base, dodging obstacles, enemies, and allies alike, much faster than she'd expected even a machine to be capable of.

The orb. He was heading to whatever "the orb" was.

"This orb is important?" she asked, but her words flew away in the wind. Pretty sure he didn't hear her, she opened her mouth to ask again.

"That is unclear," he replied, his voice coming much crisper and steadier than she expected, given the speed at which he moved. "Commander Ajos found the orb on his last mission with your humankind, Kerena."

Alaina's brows furrowed. "I thought it was a plant they found. The one I've been working in the lab with her on? The one that's poisonous to us humans but reacts to Tasqal tissue, healing it."

When he suddenly gripped her, his arm reaching behind to push her buttocks firmly against him, Alaina's eyes widened. But in the next second, he launched himself into the air,

practically flying from ground level to land on top of a roof before he continued on, jumping from roof to roof as they avoided the ground below.

She tried not to let fear take hold. Instead, she focused on the back of his head, the smooth metal that encased the rear of his skull, and how the starlight made it glisten in the night. For even though the world was rushing by around them, he was constant. He was steady.

“They also discovered the orb,” he said, mid-leap. “Old technology. Forbidden. One the Tasqals shouldn’t have.”

That made her gulp. His words held no specific intonation, yet a sense of dread hung over his utterance.

With one final leap, he landed on his feet on the ground and stood still. Guess they reached where they were going.

Releasing her arm from around V’Alen’s neck, she slid from his back, swaying a little as she found her footing.

It took her a few moments to recognize just where they were.

In the days leading up to this destruction, people had filled these streets. Beings she never knew existed. Beings with six arms. Some with four. Beings with multiple eyes. Some with none. Species from different worlds. All brought together because they had one thing in common.

An enemy that was ripping their worlds and their lives apart.

“This is the lab,” she whispered, her eyes locking on the building she’d spent so many late nights in, helping Kerena with samples as they tested compounds on the plant Kerena had discovered.

“Follow me,” V’Alen said.

Alaina nodded, ignoring the pain in her being as she hobbled behind him and toward the building.

The streets here were quiet. Almost ominously so, and, as if reading her mind, V’Alen’s eyes found hers.

“Evacuated,” he said.

She nodded and released a steady breath. At least not everyone was killed when those fiends landed.

Disengaging the locking mechanism, V’Alen opened the doors to the lab and stepped inside.

The automatic lights didn’t flick on, not even when she pressed her hand against the controls, and as the door closed behind them, not even starlight permeated the darkness that enveloped them.

“This way,” V’Alen said, a dim light growing in his suit that was like a beacon she followed. But as they passed a small cryo storage unit on the floor, Alaina paused.

Bending, she opened the little freezer, and it released a soft hiss. There, right before her, were concoctions of the serum that was created in this very lab. The same serum they’d accidentally created with that plant. The serum that healed Tasqal tissue instead of destroying it.

She should leave them here. This part of the base was safe...but something inside her refused to let her close the freezer. Reaching forward, she took hold of one of the vials, just as she felt V’Alen’s presence at her back.

When she looked up, those luminous eyes were on her.

There was an almost-silent whirr and it was only because his suit was lit that she saw the small compartment open in his suit arm.

Just big enough to hold the vial, she understood what he wanted her to do.

“It will be safe with me.” As usual, his words were sure, and she nodded. Rising, she put the vial in the little compartment and watched as his suit closed over it once more.

Gulping, she shut the small freezer and released a breath that made her shoulders shudder.

“Elevated pulse,” V’Alen said. “You feel fear.”

Alaina huffed a laugh through her nose. “Yes. But we have to keep going. We have to get that orb.”

“Affirmative.”

The conversation was dismissed as he turned and headed to the back of the lab, and Alaina kept her eyes glued on his back as she followed him.

He was so different than any other being she had ever met or imagined.

As they entered the lab’s storage, he walked without fear. And she imagined he didn’t feel fear.

What it must be like to be rid of all human emotion. Would it be liberating? Or would it be like having a hollow soul?

When he stopped suddenly before her, she halted at his back.

Nursing her injured wrist, she tried to push away the pain that was threatening to consume her thoughts and instead focus on her current position.

The place was still dark, but she didn’t see an orb.

That’s when there was another sound and the ground at their feet trembled. Still dark, she only barely saw the floor opening before him, a row of stairs that were previously hidden being revealed.

HE EXPECTED THE FEMALE AT HIS BACK TO HESITATE. TO whimper like many flesh beings did, their mortality flashing before their eyes when encountered with unexpected circumstances.

But not this one.

She didn't pause. She didn't hesitate.

The human named Alaina stepped behind him, following him into the tunnel that was dug under the lab, her small footsteps sounding like a soft pitter-patter behind him.

“You need to be healed.”

It confused him, the fact she was not complaining about her injuries. On his other missions with biological beings, their injuries were always noted. Always dealt with immediately. And hers were severe.

“I'll get my wrist splinted after we get this orb.”

The strength in her voice was telling. Her heart rate remained steady. Her voice held no tremor.

Turning his head slightly, he glanced her way and those wide brown eyes of hers met his. Only then did her heart rate stutter.

“Do you know where you're going?” she whispered. “This tunnel is kinda longer than I expected.”

“There are only three entrances to these tunnels. They lead to the same location at the center of the base.”

“And that’s where the orb is.”

“Affirmative.”

“And this orb is ancient technology the Tasqals somehow got their hands on.”

“Affirmative.”

For a moment, she was silent, and he glanced her way once more.

She was small, this female. Her bones. Her body. Her voice.

They found many other humans in the stasis hold alongside her. Bigger humans. Stronger ones.

Yet, it was this small one that didn’t seem to fear him.

Why?

“Well, when we get the orb, can’t we use it against them? If it’s a weapon, we can just turn the odds in our favor, right?”

“Negative.”

“Fuck,” she whispered. “Why can’t anything be simple.”

Not a question, even though it was constructed like one. Her voice didn’t lilt at the end.

His lens zoomed in on her face. At the furrow of her brow. How her lips tightened as she gripped her wounded arm and held it against her chest.

“The orb is pure Vikteki tech. It is beyond even my understanding.”

Her forehead furrowed some more and, staring at her, V’Alen mimicked the action. It was a strange thing to do with his brow. Alien. Unnatural.

It made the fibers underneath the artificial skin on his forehead bend and twist in ways they’d never done before. Yet, he found himself performing the action several more times.

[System record: Alaina.]

[Furrowed brows. Disbelief. Also a sign of discomfort.]

“But you’re like...the highest form of AI.”

“Ay Ai?”

“Artificial intelligence.”

So her world had beings like him? He wanted to ask her more, but they were almost at their destination.

“I am more than Ay Ai.”

She blew air between her lips, causing them to vibrate. He would not try that action. At least, not now. She would become aware he was observing her, wary, and he did not want his observation to end.

“We are doomed if not even you can figure it out.”

“I will,” he answered as the tunnel curved. “While you and Kerena worked with the serum in the lab...I was below, interfacing with the orb.”

Her eyebrows moved upward then, her eyes widening slightly.

[Upward brows. Also disbelief.]

“And?”

“I need more time.”

She nodded then, releasing a breath as they came upon a door. He wasn’t sure she could see in the dark, but he could, and only when he interacted with the locking mechanism, bypassing the code, did the door open before them. As if drawn forward, she stepped past him.



THE ROOM WAS bare except there was a huge glass barrier with something hovering in the air behind it.

As she walked into the room and the door closed behind her, Alaina’s eyes widened.

When they'd said "orb" she hadn't imagined a miniature glowing sun.

Standing transfixed, she stared at the object.

It was like looking at a small white dwarf, about the size of an ostrich's egg. If it was a weapon, the only thing she could think of it being was some type of bomb. What else could it be?

It glowed like it held indescribable energy, and for a moment, she wondered if the barrier was enough to contain it.

Movement to her side made her glance his way and she watched as V'Alen stepped behind the glass barrier and walked up to the orb.

For a moment, he turned and looked her way.

Brighter than the light in his suit, the orb lit up the room. She couldn't pull her eyes away from it.

"Are you going to move it?"

V'Alen shook his head. "I must contain it somehow. It transmits a signal that interferes with all objects within its radius of effect. I must find a way to hide that signal...and then hide the orb itself."

As he spoke, she drew closer to the glass barrier, unable to take her eyes away from the object. It was mesmerizing.

There was energy coming from it. Even she could feel it. It tickled her skin and did something else it shouldn't do. It calmed her.

Shaking her head, Alaina frowned slightly. What was this sensation?

The orb before her was so...*strange*, yet soothing. The longer she stared at it, the calmer she became. Almost as if it was calling to her. Captivating her with each second that passed.

And that energy. That charge that was making the hairs along her arms stand on end...

She was about to ask V'Alen if he was sensing anything unusual when she saw movement in her peripheral vision. Glancing to her right, it was her own arm, rising, stretching toward the orb. Reaching for it.

Frowning, she shook her head and planted her arm back at her side.

Still, she couldn't pull her gaze away.

There was something strange about the orb.

Something powerful.

Something she should fear.

And it had nothing to do with the fact that it was alien...or maybe that had *everything* to do with it.

“What if you can't figure out what it does?”

But her question wasn't answered because the moment V'Alen touched the orb, his eyes lit up.

She'd seen his eyes light up before. Why did this time feel different? Why was a strange feeling developing in the pit of her stomach?

Unnerving.

Unsettled.

Worry making the muscles tense in her abdomen.

He stood there like that for what felt like minutes, not moving, his eyes shining with the same ethereal light coming from the orb itself. And that feeling in the pit of her stomach only grew.

“V'Alen?”

Something was wrong.

HER HEAD POUNDED AS SHE STARED AT THE METAL MAN behind the glass. V'Alen still wasn't moving. The headache was back and it was threatening to make her fall to the ground and curl into a fetal position. But she forced herself to remain standing.

"V'Alen?" she called his name again, only to get the same response. Nothing.

His eyes remained lit, his hand on the orb as he stared at nothing.

Her gaze remained fastened on him before she glanced back at the door.

Something didn't feel right.

Only, she didn't know what it was. All she had to go on was that strange calmness of that orb...and the fact that whatever was happening to V'Alen rang alarm bells in her head. She needed to go get help.

When she looked his way once more, Alaina froze.

V'Alen was...glowing.

Not only his eyes, but his entire body was lit up now.

The sight was so alarming that her headache was forgotten as she moved closer to the glass barrier.

He was shining as brightly as the orb itself, the room now fully lit with the increase in light.

“V’Alen!”

Whatever was happening, he couldn’t hear her. Or maybe he couldn’t respond.

As her heart thumped hard in her chest, she was vaguely aware of the door to the room opening.

“Ohmigod, Alaina, you’re safe,” someone said. She recognized the voice even before she glanced over her shoulder to see the one other human she’d gotten close to, bar Constance, rushing to her side. The same female she’d been working so hard with in that lab before the base was destroyed. The only other friend she had in this mess.

Kerena’s eyes were wide as she stared at the spectacle behind the glass barrier. “What the fuck? What are you doing down here? And what’s happening to V’Alen?”

It was a question she wished she could answer. “This isn’t normal, is it...”

She knew it wasn’t. Everything within her told her it wasn’t.

“He’s interfaced with the orb before,” Kerena said, “but I’ve never seen him glow like this.”

Behind Kerena, her mate Ajos stood. The spitting image of his brother, Akur, she almost mistook him for his twin.

“Should we stop him?” Kerena asked, looking back at her mate.

Ajos shook his head, but it was so slight, she almost missed it.

Closing her eyes, Alaina pressed her head against the glass as her headache suddenly pulsed and intensified. But trying to manage the pain with will alone only seemed to make it worse.

Not now.

Of all the times that she could be weak and defenseless, it couldn’t be now. She needed to focus. She needed to push past the pain.

Her nose scrunched, her brows furrowing as she fought the pain. And that's when she heard it.

A whisper.

Not words. Nothing she could identify as speech. And yet, she heard it.

Squeezing her eyes tighter, she fought against the pain, and for a moment, she wondered if it was Kerena and Ajos that she heard. But that couldn't be the case. For as she pressed her forehead against the glass, she could hear it even louder.

Eyes popping open, she could see the orb right before her on the other side of the barrier. And as she stared into its strange light, it became clear.

The sound she was hearing.

It wasn't coming from Kerena or Ajos.

It was coming from the orb itself.

“Can you hear that?”

The more she focused on the orb, the louder the whisper became.

“Hear what?” Kerena asked from somewhere beside her. For the life of her, she couldn't even pull her gaze away from the orb to look at her friend.

“That!”

The whisper was so loud now, she couldn't imagine the other woman couldn't hear it too.

It was *calling* her. Beckoning her closer, and as crazy as it sounded, her legs moved.

Kerena's shout sounded far away as Alaina's legs took her toward V'Alen.

He was floating just about two inches off the ground and both of his hands were on the orb.

“Alaina! It's dangerous! What are you doing?!”

“I don't know,” she whispered.

She only knew that she *had* to. She had to touch it.

Just as her fingers reached out, drawn to that ethereal light like a magnet, her palms connected with the orb. Cool energy ran across her palm and straight up her hands.

Far away, she heard Kerena throw the glass door open and a scream as the woman was thrown backward.

For a moment, she didn't understand what had happened until she felt the pulse move through her.

An energy surge...one that occurred as soon as her hands touched the orb.

Only, she was still standing. The blast didn't affect her.

Fear surged up her spine that she had made a mistake but then...

Her world went white.

The room disappeared.

Ajos. Kerena. They were both gone.

Alaina blinked as she looked around.

She wasn't underground in that small room anymore. The orb was gone. V'Alen was gone.

The sun was shining and she was on...

Earth?

EARTH.

A place she never thought she'd see ever again.

But she had to be mistaken. This couldn't be Earth. This place...

There were mountains in the distance, far away from the grassy hill on which she stood. Down below, a river snaked through the valley, and she could hear birds chirping across the wind.

There were cottages. A small town. She could even see the pointed steeple of a church.

Her chest seemed to arrest itself as she forced herself to breathe. Even the air smelled fresh and clean.

Where was she?

It looked like Earth except, when she lifted her eyes to the sky, she could see the moon even with the brightness of the sun, and it was much larger than she remembered.

Her heart thumped so hard she could hear her pulse in her ears as she slowly spun.

She was in a field filled with dandelions, reaching toward the sky. The cool breeze that whipped across her legs fluttering their delicate petals and the hem of her...dress?

For the first time, she looked down at herself.

Her wrist was healed. The pain in her chest was gone. The pain in her neck, non-existent. And that headache. That god-awful headache...she couldn't feel a thing.

Her head felt normal. Like it had done before her symptoms started. Before she got weak and her head pounded for more hours than she could count.

She should be afraid, but instead, all she could feel was that steady beat of her heart. That steady push of blood through her veins.

That's when a voice caught her ear.

One that had her whipping around to come face-to-face with...*him*.

She didn't know how she knew it was him, but she did. For he looked nothing like he did before. The only thing that hadn't changed was his face.

"V'Alen?"

"Alaina."

Alaina staggered back, her eyes wide.

"How..."

Her wide eyes slipped down his frame. Dressed in a normal summer shirt and pants, he looked nothing like the V'Alen she had known before. His armor was missing and, instead, smooth skin covered every bit of his body that she could see.

Soft, dark strands whipped in the breeze as the wind played with his hair. Alaina took another step backward. Only his blue eyes were the same, though...more human. That soft light that usually shone behind them was gone.

"What's happening?" She glanced around. "Where are we and why do you look so...different?"

He glanced down at himself and blinked. She watched as he frowned, his brows moving toward his nose before he lifted his hand and brushed his fingers over the furrows, almost as if feeling the texture of them.

When he blew a raspberry from his lips, it was her turn to frown.

He blew a raspberry again, moving his fingers from his brow to brush over his lips. She could only stare as his eyebrows rose, a slow, lopsided grin gracing his features as his gaze found her again.

Alaina's eyes widened some more.

He was drop-dead gorgeous.

"I don't believe we are in the bunker anymore," she whispered.

Her heart thudded in her chest.

Her headache was gone and she felt stronger than she had ever felt in years.

If they weren't in the bunker, was this real?

But it couldn't be. How did they get to this place? Where were Kerena and Ajos?

"It *is* real," V'Alen replied, almost as if he had read her mind, "but it is not our reality."

"I...don't understand."

"Come," he said, reaching forward and touching her hand.

Her world went white again and this time, when her vision cleared, she was in a...house?

V'Alen was standing beside her, but this time, he was his usual enhanced, cyborg self.

Glancing down at herself, she almost had a stroke.

She was wearing a skin-tight leather suit—something she could never have imagined herself wearing before now.

"What's happening?" Her eyes widened as she tried to make sense of what was going on.

"Look," he said.

The house was strange.

It was too...different. Modern in the sense that the furnishings were all smooth with soft curves, all dipped in grayscale colors.

As her gaze moved to where V'Alen pointed, her heart thudded even harder in her chest.

There, on an image on the wall, were the two of them both. Embracing. A confident smile on her face. A twinkle in his eye.

They looked like a couple.

“I don't understand.”

V'Alen turned around, his gaze moving across the room.

“I believe this is another,” he said.

But he wasn't making any sense. “Another *what?*”

“Another string...another level.” His gaze met hers. “Another dimension.”

Alaina blinked at him.

She had no idea what he was talking about.

“I know what the orb is,” he finally said. “I know what it can do.”

There was a sound behind her and when she turned, her knees went weak. Only disbelief and adrenaline kept her upright.

Her heart slammed against her chest as her gaze met eyes she'd seen looking back at her every time she'd looked in the mirror.

She was looking at herself...only *different*.

A different hairstyle. The woman's was straight, while her curls were their natural unruly selves. And the woman that looked back at her with the same shocked expression that was on her face wasn't as thin as she'd become after she'd gotten sick.

“Who are—” the woman began in a voice that sounded just like her own.

Alaina's eyes widened at the same time that V'Alen's hand closed around hers and, once again, the world turned white.

She was ready for it this time, but when the world cleared, she didn't expect to be standing on a ledge of some building about a thousand feet from the ground.

V'Alen was beside her, but this time he was different again. His cybernetics didn't cover his entire body. One of his arms looked enhanced, but the other didn't.

"I don't understand what's happening!" The wind was cool and she pressed her back against the building behind them, not daring to look down as the wind whipped in her skirt.

"Another level," he said. "The particle. It brought us here."

"Particle?"

"The orb."

"How do we get back?!"

"I do not know."

FUCK!

The wind picked up, almost throwing her off the building, and she reached for V'Alen, grabbing his hand.

Immediately, the world went white.

"Alaina? Alaina!"

It was Kerena's voice and as her vision slowly returned, she saw the woman's face appear before her own.

"Kerena?"

"Oh, my god, Ajos! She's awake!"

"Wh-Where am I?"

"Underneath the base, in a room. Don't you remember? You touched the orb and your whole body lit up. Shit, I thought you were going to explode. Are you alright? Can you see me?"

Alaina nodded as she tried to stand.

When had she ended up on the floor?

“I had to pull you off it. It was like you were *stuck*.”

“V’Alen...” she whispered.

Her mind was swirling with all that she’d just seen and her heart was beating against her chest so hard, she couldn’t tell if she was still imagining things or not.

There was still that whispering in her ear and it was getting louder with every second that passed.

“V’Alen,” she whispered again, “you have to pull him off.”

Just then, the door flew open and the glass smashed to bits as Ajos rushed over to his mate.

“What the pherk, Kerena! You touched her and it sent another blast that I thought killed you!” He was gathering Kerena into his arms and checking her over even as he spoke.

“I’m fine, hon. I’m fine.”

“How long...” Alaina whispered. It felt like she’d traveled a million miles and back.

“It was only a few seconds,” Kerena said, as she slid from Ajos’ grasp. “Hon, help V’Alen. Pull him off like I did Alaina.”

Alaina eased up into a sitting position, the whispering in her head almost too hard to ignore. It was a force of will lifting her gaze to find V’Alen.

Still lit up, he was glowing even brighter now as Ajos tried pulling him off the orb.

It wasn’t working. In fact, energy crackled in the air, causing every hair on her scalp to rise and stand on end.

“Phek!” Ajos cursed, gritting his teeth.

Holding on to V’Alen, his whole body lit up like cracks of lightning were being embedded under his skin.

“Ajos!” Kerena screamed.

There was a roar as Ajos grit his teeth and pulled.

The moment he released V'Alen from the orb was the moment a blast of energy hit the room, shattering what remained of the glass wall and sending them all flying backward.

Pain shot through her already wounded limbs, her vision waned, and it felt like a dog whistle went off in her ears.

Groaning, Alaina squinted as she lifted her head.

It was almost too heavy for her shoulders and she fought to keep it steady.

As her vision cleared, the first thing she saw was the fact that the only thing left standing around them were the four walls that enclosed the room. Everything else...everyone else...was on the ground.

Including V'Alen.

Alarm rang through her as she realized he wasn't moving.

Beside her Kerena groaned and eased up on her arms, her eyes widening as they landed on her mate.

"Ajos!" she was scrambling over to him in an instant.

Hearing Ajos groan, knowing he was still alive, all that was filed away in the background of her consciousness, because all she could see was the fact that V'Alen was still.

He wasn't moving. And the lights in his suit...they were all gone.

She didn't know how, but her body moved on its own. Despite the pain wracking her frame, she crawled over to him, her eyes widening at every second that he didn't move, her breath stuttering in her chest.

"V'Alen?"

To his right, Ajos groaned and sat upright, pulling Kerena into his arms as he squeezed her tight.

"V'Alen!" she called his name again, and when she reached his side and saw his face, something inside her clenched with a new pain of which she couldn't determine the source. "V'Alen?"

His eyes were open, but there was no light in them. No code. No semi-transparent ring spinning around his pupil.

Just darkness.

“V’Alen!” she shouted his name again and only then did she realize Ajos was kneeling beside her too.

They stared down at the cyborg, neither seeming to know what to do.

“Is he...” She couldn’t finish. She couldn’t say the words.

“I do not believe he can perish,” Ajos said. “At least...not in the way that we can.”

Alaina gulped. “So you’ve seen him like this before...”

There was a pause and she knew what Ajos would answer even before he uttered it.

“Never.”

As Kerena helped her to her feet, she was mildly aware that the woman was leading her from the room. All she could see was V’Alen, his limp body being hoisted over Ajos’ shoulder as they hurried from the room, and that ominous orb glowing in the background.

“Alaina,” Kerena said, her breaths coming fast as they staggered out the door. “What happened when you touched that thing? I was calling your name. You weren’t responding.”

How could she describe or explain what she saw? It was almost like a dream.

This was all like a dream.

“I don’t know. I saw...” Her thoughts snagged. Her mind filling with fog.

“What did you see?”

Alaina swallowed hard, her eyes still on the cyborg as they hurried down the corridor.

“I’m not sure what I saw,” she finally answered. “But...I think he knows what that thing does. The orb. I think V’Alen figured it out.”

Kerena glanced at her mate.

But the silent anticipation she felt in the woman was soon to be dampened.

She'd only touched the orb for what was a few seconds, but it felt as if she'd seen three lifetimes.

Alaina gulped hard, a breath shuddering through her.

“There's no way we can let that thing fall back into the Tasqals' hands.”

ALAINA SAT ON THE FLOOR STARING AT NOTHING, HER KNEES pulled up to her chest. Though now in a room away from the orb, it still felt as if she was right beside it.

There was still the faint whisper of energy crawling across her skin, beckoning her to come closer, and if she wasn't so stunned, she might have risen and dragged herself back to that strange object.

As Kerena busied herself with making a splint for her wrist, both the woman and her ministrations seemed to fade into the background.

Turning her head slightly, her gaze fell on the only other person in the room who could explain what the hell had just happened.

V'Alen lay on a table that Ajos rested him on, his body still motionless. Staring at him, all she could see was a repeat of the scenes, the places she'd seen. And him.

Every moment with him.

He was there. He'd experienced it all with her.

And he was there in that strange house where she'd met that copy of herself. He was in that picture on the wall.

He was there.

And it had all felt so...*real*...

The wind, the flowers, his touch...

She had no idea what it all meant.

Slapping her palm against her forehead, Alaina stared at the floor beneath her.

Maybe none of this happened.

Swallowing hard, her gaze bored into the floor as if the answer to it all would appear there, right before her.

It could all just be the tumor.

“The council demands a meeting,” Ajos walked back into the room, his voice making her jump. She hadn’t even realized he’d left.

Just how long had she been sitting here on the floor in a daze?

“Now?” Kerena paused, her fingers grasping the end of the bandage she was wrapping.

Tucking in the end of the bandage, Kerena gave her a tight smile before rising and heading to the door. There, she paused, a dull murmur whispering through the room as she spoke with Ajos.

When they both turned to look at her, she knew it wasn’t anything good.

“What is it?” Her gaze bounced between them.

“They want to speak to you, too.”

Alaina blinked. “Me? Why?”

“They want to know what happened when you touched the orb.”

Alaina stared at them before her gaze slipped back to V’Alen.

She needed him to wake up. To make all of this make sense.

“I’ve never been in front of the council before.”

“Don’t worry,” Kerena gave her that tight smile again. The one that didn’t reach her eyes and hid all the worry she didn’t

want her to see. “It’s only two of them. They are coming here.”

As if summoned, two tall beings wearing strange long garments appeared behind Ajos. As he shifted out of the way, they walked in without hesitation, their gaze flicking to V’Alen for only a moment before their eyes landed on her.

All she could do was stare.

Tall. Skinny. They reminded her of Jack Skellington minus the pumpkin head.

“This is the human that interfaced with the object?” one asked.

“Yes, sire,” Ajos answered.

The one that asked the question approached, his eyes flicking to V’Alen once more before they focused back on her. He leaned forward as if he was too tall to peer at her while standing.

“Tell us...human...what happened when you touched the object?”

Alaina’s gaze darted to Kerena before she wet her lips and focused back on the alien before her. This was the council. She could trust them.

“I saw...V’Alen.”

Her response was not what they’d expected, judging from the way they glanced at each other. The one who had leaned forward stood tall once more, her words disturbing him enough to make him pause for a moment.

“What do you mean, human?” the other asked.

“I saw V’Alen.” Grunting and with much effort, she rose to stand on her feet and faced them at her full height rather than the crumbled being that she felt like inside. “I was with him. We were...somewhere else, not here, together.”

The councilmen glanced at each other a second time, their gazes now so unreadable, it was impossible to know what they were thinking.

“Where were you?”

Alaina shook her head. “I’m not sure. A different place? A different world? Time?”

A beat of silence filled the room. Enough for her to know that whatever she just said was of great importance.

“You traveled.”

The councilmember who spoke said it matter-of-factly. A statement, not a question. And the way he said it made a slight furrow come to her brow.

“You don’t seem surprised,” she replied, and the councilmember’s gaze sharpened on her. “You knew...that *thing* could do that?”

Turning away from her, the councilmember took a few silent steps toward where V’Alen lay. His long robes whispered over the ground as silently as he moved.

“He might have been right...the Kyron,” he said after a few moments.

“But he was still researching how to unlock it,” the other said. “How did he manage to do so now?”

In her peripheral vision, she could see that Kerena and Ajos glanced at each other.

Alaina cleared her throat. “Right about what?”

The councilmember turned his gaze on her. His eyes were strangely shiny, almost like there was a film over each iris.

“The Kyron theorized that this...*orb* was part of a bigger piece. A larger piece of technology that served a greater purpose than to power the ship we retrieved it from. He...” The councilmember paused as the other stepped to his side, whispering something she could not hear.

“I am aware this is confidential information, but I believe this human has seen too much already. It is no use hiding what we know. And...” he said. “We are out of options. Above us... our world burns.”

The other councilmember glanced at her and for a moment, she saw the wariness in his gaze. But then he backed away.

“I don’t understand what any of this means.” Maybe she was laying all her cards on the table, letting them know she was clueless and probably in over her head. But as the other councilmember had stated...above them, the world burned.

Constance was gone and so were many other humans.

In this new universe, her species was no longer at the top of the food chain. They were at a disadvantage. And they were hunted.

She was already vulnerable, and the only way to reduce that vulnerability was to open herself to more information.

The councilmember turned to face her and he seemed to smile, if she could call the slight twist of his lips an attempt at setting her at ease.

“We believe the orb is a remnant of an ancient civilization. The Vikteki.”

She waited for him to continue.

“It was a powerful civilization.” He paused. “The Vikteki were like gods.”

Her gaze darted to V’Alen and the councilmember continued. “No. Much more powerful than the Kyrion.”

Alaina’s eyes widened a little. She still didn’t know the extent of V’Alen’s power, but seeing what he could do in the little time that she’d known him...it was hard to think a species more powerful had come before his.

“What happened to them?”

“No one knows.” The councilmember took a step toward the wall, facing away from everyone. “There is evidence a great war took place. That is all we have been able to discover. A single piece of Vikteki technology gives power to those who control it. Hence, all their technology was destroyed. No single race should have control over any remnants of that civilization. Not a single piece.”

Alaina pulled her gaze away back to V'Alen.

She didn't like where this was going.

If this meant the Tasqals had some sort of ancient weapon, how much more terror would they incite? Even now, they were destroying worlds.

"The Kyron's Archive is a treasure trove of data on all civilizations that have ever existed," the councilmember continued. "His species has the most reliable records on the Vikteki...and it was believed the Vikteki had discovered a way to..." He paused. Turning to face them, his gaze landed on hers. "Travel."

"A gateway," the other councilmember piped in.

"A gateway to what..." she whispered.

Things were getting much more complicated than she could have ever imagined.

"A gateway to other worlds... Maybe a way to fold space and time."

Her heart thumped like it was full of lead.

Everything V'Alen said. Everything she'd seen when she'd touched that orb...

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" she finally asked.

She was only an engineer. Not a physicist. But even she could understand the implications of what the councilmember just said.

The councilmember didn't pause. "The Tasqals have found a way to travel without hyperspeed. And eventually, they will discover how to fold time and space in minutes. Seconds."

Alaina stared at V'Alen, thoughts swirling in her head.

That first day when she'd woken from stasis, a Tasqal ship had suddenly emerged in the sky above the Restitution, materializing past the base's defenses as if conjured out of thin air.

“That day,” she whispered.

From somewhere behind her, the councilmember made a sound in his throat.

“Yes...” he said. “That first day, when you humans arrived at the Restitution, your stasis hold was bombed when the Tasqal ships suddenly appeared in our skies, bypassing our defenses. They have been using this technology. This orb.”

“But that means they have more.” Kerena took a step forward.

“And...” Alaina swallowed, her body aching as she limped over to V’Alen, her eyes wide as she stared down at him. “...It means, if they figure this out, if they put all the pieces together, this is just the start of it all.” A lump formed in her throat as she whispered the next few words. “Earth and everyone we know and love are still at risk.”

The room fell into silence. Even her breaths came out like thin wisps, silently evaporating into the air.

Her mother. Her sister. Her coworkers. Her neighbors. Her friends.

Everyone she left on Earth was in danger of being thrown into the same nightmare that she was forced to experience.

She couldn’t...she couldn’t let the Tasqals get to them. It was partly selfish, and she knew that, but one of the reasons this whole ordeal hadn’t broken her yet was the hope that those she loved back on Earth would probably live long lives unaffected by the torment that she’d been through.

“We can’t let them win.” She spoke through gritted teeth, and it was only when a tear slid down her cheek, falling across her lips and down onto the table below, did she realize that her vision had grown blurry from the tears that had crept into her eyes.

“We can’t let them win.”

Gripping V’Alen’s hand, she squeezed.

She needed him. Needed him to wake up. Needed him to help them. He had the answer. She was sure of it.

As she gripped his fingers, she felt a twitch. She was sure of it. V'Alen stirred. But even as her heart leaped, he didn't rise.

"We must hide the orb," the councilmember said, and she wasn't sure if he was talking to her or the other three beings in the room, for her gaze was fastened on V'Alen's face.

He needed to wake up...or reboot.

"Having the orb in this bunker will only keep it safe for so long. Its energy pulse is interfering with every device on this section of the planet and the Tasqals know it is here."

"What do you suggest?" Ajos asked.

"Someone must go off-world to Okurna. Bring back a xytrex box."

Another of V'Alen's fingers moved.

"A xytrex box?" The incredulity in Ajos' voice was clear. "Those things are impossible to find. Even on Okurna, they are rare."

"It is our only hope. That metal might be the only thing that will hide the orb's signal."

"Commander," the other councilmember stepped forward. "Will you take the mission?"

Kerena's eyes widened. "He can't. It's a death sentence. We can't travel using hyperspeed with that thing. It jams the signals. He'd be flying blind with the Hedgeruds at his back and the Tasqals at our door."

The conversation soon became background noise as she stared at V'Alen. She was sure his fingers moved again.

Staring at his face, she waited with bated breath.

C'mon, V'Alen, c'mon. You can do it. Wake up.

She could only hope that what had happened in that room hadn't damaged him. That he was stronger than that.

"Wake up, V'Alen," she whispered.

The moment those blue eyes became luminous once more was the moment her heart swelled and thumped in her chest.

“I’ll do it.” The voice startled them all, and her heart thumped even harder as V’Alen focused on her.

That ring around his pupil spun as he gazed at her.

“Alaina,” he said, and she choked on what could only be a lump that had risen in her throat.

As he slowly rose into a sitting position, his body moving without him having to push himself up with his arms, he held her gaze.

“You’re back,” she whispered.

“Affirmative,” he said.

There was no emotion in his eyes. Nothing to reveal what they’d just been through, as if the experience had been solely her own.

As he turned his head away from her, something deep inside her constricted.

“I will go,” he said. “I do not have to rely on the ship’s navigational system. I have my own. I will take the orb to Okurna and retrieve a xytrex box. I will hide the device.”

Just how long had he been conscious? Had he heard everything?

The councilmembers glanced at each other. Tension radiated from their wiry forms.

“You cannot take it to your people, Kyron,” one said. “Regardless of the Law of Voltaris, such a weapon, if even a fragment, cannot be in your people’s hands as much as it cannot fall in the grasp of the High Tasqals.”

V’Alen slid off the table, his suit suddenly regaining that comforting light that shone from the narrow lines where the plates met. “I uphold the Law of Voltaris. I will not bring the orb to my people.”

The councilmember hesitated and his companion spoke up. “Kyron do not lie.”

The other one paused, then nodded. “That is correct.” He paused. “So it will be. However, V’Alen...” The councilmember stepped closer. “Once you take the orb, the Tasqals will soon realize the signal has moved. They will come after you.”

“Affirmative. I have already calculated the chances of me reaching my destination safely.”

“What are the chances?” Alaina whispered.

She didn’t know why she cared. For her, the world ended in two or three weeks. She’d be gone. Nothing that happened after that time would affect her.

She’d be at peace.

And she’d be free.

But even though she’d be gone, everyone she loved and cared for was still at risk. She couldn’t push that fact away. She couldn’t ignore it.

“Seventy-nine percent.” V’Alen tilted his head her way. “If the Tasqals come, the orb will distort my ship’s signal. The likelihood of them finding me before I arrive on Okurna is low.”

The councilmember nodded again. “Begin preparations. The base is being evacuated as we speak. Here the orb cannot remain.”

“Understood.” V’Alen was already moving toward the door and once again, something constricted in her chest.

“I’ll go with him.”

Everyone paused, even V’Alen.

“I’ll go with him,” she repeated.

“Alaina...” Kerena began.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I was an engineer back on Earth. There must be something I can help him with and... this is something...” She glanced back at V’Alen. “This is something I have to do.”

Yes, she was going to leave this place in just a few weeks. Yes, nothing mattered after that. And yes, she would be at peace. She'd be free from this pain and this strain.

But out of seven billion humans, she was one of those that ended up here on this planet. Out of so many, she was a chance to help. Whatever had brought her here to this place, this was what it wanted her to complete.

She knew that now.

And deep inside, her constitution grew a little stronger.

This was it...

Her last mission, her purpose, before she died.

IT FELT LIKE SHE WAS IN A TRANCE THE ENTIRE TIME THEY GOT ready to go into space. She moved automatically, her heart thumping like the back legs of a nervous rabbit as they prepared to leave.

Part of her was surprised the councilmembers had even agreed to let her go.

To them, she was nothing...and she guessed that was probably why they didn't object. In the grand scheme of things, they didn't care if anything happened to her.

Or maybe they just had a lot of faith in V'Alen.

She went through the movements, stuffing all the things Kerena sourced from the bunker. Meal packets. A blanket. Change of clothes. All things she'd need, and she stuffed them into a bag and stepped into the shuttle.

V'Alen was already sitting at the helm, his back to her, and as the door closed and she strapped in, all she could do was stare straight ahead at nothing, her heart still hammering in her chest like something broken.

She was about to go into the unknown.

The shuttle was in a deep column underground and as it rose to the surface, she wasn't sure what she had expected to see, but complete annihilation wasn't it.

The sun was rising, and it looked like even the walls of the fallen buildings were bathed in blood.

There was still fighting on the ground, rebels versus the Hedgeruds, and Alaina's heart thudded against her chest as the shuttle rose further into the air and the extent of the war hit her hard.

This was the end of the Restitution.

She'd gone to bed the night before, not knowing that the next day, her world would end again.

"Rising to the appropriate altitude. Please hold on to your seat," V'Alen said as the ship picked up speed.

As they rose higher, she couldn't help the sob that made her choke.

Everything was destroyed.

Everything.

When they'd raced toward the bunker to find the orb, she'd known things were bad. But seeing it all in the light...

As the ship rose and shuddered, Alaina gripped the restraints holding her down.

"Performing evasive maneuvers," V'Alen said.

Her eyes widened, her breaths coming harder. "E-evasive maneuvers? Why?"

"Several missiles are heading our way."

She swallowed her heart and now it was beating in the bottom of her belly.

"C-can you fire back?"

He glanced her way.

"Conditions have been met," he said, his gaze locking with hers as he pressed the trigger.

Two lasers shot from the front of the ship as V'Alen swerved, narrowly missing something that looked like a torpedo that headed straight toward them. Gripping the seat restraints tighter, her chest caved and expanded as V'Alen swerved the other way, sending her insides in the other direction of her body.

Two more lasers left the front of the ship as a missile whizzed past.

It was all happening so fast, she knew it was only V'Alen's quick reflexes that were keeping them in the air. As he piloted the ship, trying to get them off-world, the viewscreen before them quickly became filled with debris and smoke. All she could see was the bright light of the lasers as they shot through the clouds.

"Incoming," V'Alen's voice cut through the chaos. She hardly had time for his words to register before the ship lurched to the side and took her along with it. Despite the restraints, her body was flung into the sway as the vessel tilted sharply, the tendons in her neck spasming with the sudden strain on her body as her head connected with the panel at her side. Her fingers burned as she gripped the restraints for dear life.

Pain made her dazed, but not dazed enough as she saw the sky light up before them, blinding her with the fierce whiteness of the light as something exploded in front of the vessel.

Oh fuck.

The ship shuddered, alarms blaring and it was only V'Alen's complete calm that kept her sane. While her heart ran a marathon that rivaled the frantic pull and contraction of her lungs, V'Alen seemed unaffected.

What the hell was she doing?

This was a mistake. If she wanted to make her last days matter so badly, she should have stayed on the ground where it was safe.

But it wasn't safe on the ground anymore either. Fuck, where was safe in this cesspool created by those disgusting Tasqals?

With this orb and any others like it, nowhere was frickin' safe. And that's why she was here. That's why she was doing this now. They had to make it. They had to help the rebels somehow. V'Alen would pull them through, because if they

didn't fly off of this planet, she'd die anyway and piss herself to boot. What a way to leave this world, soaking in a puddle of her own excretions.

The ship shuddered again but then it suddenly picked up even more speed and gravity tilted as the nose of the vessel pointed straight upward.

"Deactivating the navigation system. Switching to internal navigation," V'Alen said, his voice cutting through the monologue that was beginning to take root in her mind.

"Mmhm." Alaina swallowed again as her gaze focused ahead of them.

The bright light disappeared and the ship shot upward, climbing through the atmosphere so fast, she could feel the strain of gravity pulling on the liquids in her form.

But that strain was soon forgotten as the ship suddenly evened out. Smooth, it was like the vessel was suddenly floating. And as the nose became horizontal once more and her body settled in the seat, a breath released from her nose at the sight before her.

Space was...beautiful.

Serene.

Quiet.

It was hard to imagine the carnage and chaos happening on the planet below when out here it was so...peaceful.

"Do you think they're following us?" she asked.

V'Alen was busy pressing buttons on the control panel and only when his head tilted her way did she know that he'd heard her.

"Negative. We have used a simple two-carrier ship. The Hedgeruds have presumed we do not have the treasure they are searching for."

Alaina bit her bottom lip, worrying it between her teeth.

"I hope you're right."

V'Alen turned enough that his otherworldly eyes landed on her. "For biological beings like yourself, it is easier to hide things in plain sight."

"What?"

"The Hedgeruds would not have expected us to take the orb in a two-being vessel like this."

Well...he had a point.

Her gaze dropped to the reinforced carbon box at her feet. Restrained so it couldn't move, it hadn't budged from its position on the floor. But even though it was closed, through the cracks, the swirling white light of the orb was visible.

"Are you sure you can get this to where it needs to go before they figure out we have it?"

When she looked back at him, V'Alen's gaze was still on her. "Affirmative."

Alaina nodded and pushed back the fear slowly creeping through her blood.

Maybe it was the surety in his voice. Maybe it was the fact that she trusted him more than she realized. Or maybe it was the fact that she was in this now. There was no turning back.

Because when her shoulders slumped, she welcomed the relief as the tension that had held her upright seeped from her bones.

And when her head dipped forward, she hardly noticed that her body was going slack and she was losing control. That only the restraints were holding her to the seat, keeping her from falling to the floor.

“HERE,” V’ALEN’S VOICE SOUNDED FAR AWAY.

When her eyes fluttered open, he was crouching in front of her, a soft gauze held to her nose.

When she took a breath, a strong fragrance went up through her air canal that made her eyes pop open some more.

She coughed and he took his hand away.

“What...what happened?” Alaina eased up in the seat. The restraints were loosened and V’Alen must have reclined the chair a bit.

“You are injured. More than your wrist,” he said, reaching for something on the floor that looked like a first aid kit.

“Are we safe now?”

“We are never safe.”

Of course. What other answer did she expect? Yet, her shoulders slumped somewhat.

The ship wasn’t shuddering anymore. Outside, the darkness of the void greeted her. They’d made it off the planet.

V’Alen made a sound and her gaze snapped to him, not sure what the sound meant. “Your injuries must be tended to.”

Alaina watched him with wary eyes. Yes, she was injured. Kerena had made a splint for her most critical injury—her wrist—but all the cuts and scrapes she’d gotten along the way were adding up.

As V'Alen flicked through the items in the first aid kit, her eyes moved to his fingers then over the rest of his armor.

A few weeks ago, she could have only dreamed of being in the presence of something as advanced as he was.

“Do you...do you know what you're doing?”

V'Alen paused then turned to her. “No.”

She almost laughed.

That wasn't the response she'd hoped for.

“I can learn.” He was staring at her still but he was no longer *looking* at her.

Those circles around his pupils were spinning and a set of lines passed through them.

It was the first time she caught a glimpse of his code.

“Information received,” he said, grasping something that looked like gauze and a vial with green fluid in it. Rising, he dipped the gauze in the fluid and bent toward her.

Alaina stiffened and leaned away from him. “You learned how to patch me up that quickly?”

“Affirmative.”

“Incredible.” It was but a whisper but she knew he heard. The more time she spent around him, the more amazing he became.

He was every engineer's dream.

“Where did you learn from?”

“The Archives.” He said it matter-of-factly, as if that's all the information she needed and after a few moments of staring at him, she finally relaxed against the seat.

What's the worst he could do?

Snap her neck by accident?

Yes, Alaina. Yes, he could.

She huffed out a small laugh and was surprised she could find any humor at all.

This whole experience was like a nightmare so far.

“What are these *archives*?”

“The Archives of Voltaris are my species’ treasure. We emissaries travel the universe to gather information and add it to the Archive.”

“Emissary, huh.” She studied his face. “So that is what you do? You’re an information gatherer?”

V’Alen tilted her chin back a little so he could see her neck better.

“That is the life mission of every Kyron. After the Great Mistake, it is all we do. Information is our greatest resource... and our greatest weapon.”

Alaina blinked, her brows furrowing slightly, but he didn’t continue.

She was only brought back to the fact that he was tending to her when V’Alen leaned in close.

This large cyborg. He was in her space. Far too close. And yet...she didn’t push away from him. Instead, from this proximity, she stared at his face, her eyes traveling over what looked like skin but was far too perfect to be real.

Memory of back on the surface, when her lips had been pressed against his, when she’d buried her face in his cheek, it all came back to her in an instant.

Now, outside of the situation, she felt her cheeks warm.

But V’Alen’s complete focus was on her neck. Unlike her, he was an unreadable wall of super intelligence that was unaffected by all things.

“You don’t have...” she paused. It was clear he was not simply a machine and she didn’t want to say something that might be insensitive.

“Continue,” he said, his gaze not leaving her neck as he dabbed her skin with the gauze.

“You don’t get cuts or bruises. This must be strange for you.”

He glanced at her then and this close, she could see that his pupils indeed had some sort of mechanism around them. Were his eyes even biological?

“Your body’s reliance on fluids...the way your skin breaks...it is strange, yes.” His gaze traveled over her face and she found she couldn’t look away. There was something there...something familiar about this cyborg—almost as if she’d known him for...a long time.

But that was ludicrous. Or maybe not so ridiculous.

He was in a picture on a wall in a strange house where a weird copy of her lived. She still hadn’t had the chance to ask him about that.

“Once, I was just like you,” he finally said and Alaina blinked a few times.

“You had a body? I-I mean,” she stuttered, “you have a body now, but you had like...flesh? Skin, tissue, blood?”

V’Alen tilted her head back, his touch gentler than his metal hands seemed capable of.

“Eons ago,” he answered.

Eons?

Just how old was he? Could he even die?

“Yes,” he replied, as if reading her mind. “Kyron perish.”

She didn’t know how to reply so she settled for simply looking at him as he pressed the gauze to her neck.

It stung and she hissed, pulling in air through her teeth.

V’Alen paused.

“Continue,” Alaina whispered. “I can bear it.”

With his face this close, it was also the first time she was actually *looking* at him properly, and maybe it was the position she was in but...he was absolutely beautiful.

Handsome.

His skin was the same shade as her own if a little darker. On the right side of his face, a network of pathways spread

like highways from the corner of his eye to the back of his skull.

He didn't have ears...or not what she'd describe as ears. Instead, where his ears should be, two circular protrusions presented in his armor. The armor itself encased the back of his skull and the rest of his body. A black and gold impenetrable suit.

Only his face looked like it was flesh.

His strong jaw, supple lips, straight nose...

And his skin was so smooth...not a line. No wrinkles.

"They made you...perfect..." Her hand touched his cheek and she inhaled sharply, her eyes widening when she realized what she'd done.

V'Alen stopped moving but he didn't pull away.

"I am not perfect."

Putting the inquisitive hand in her lap, Alaina chuckled, but there was no mirth in her laughter. "If you're not perfect. What would you call me? I'm hardly surviving as it is."

"You have a disadvantage. One that makes you more vulnerable than the other humans...but my imperfection does not lie within my physical form."

Alaina's eyes widened a little.

What did he mean by that?

Did he know?

Did he know about her tumor?

Clearing her throat, she thought it best to change the topic.

"We've made it off the planet...but I have no clue if we'll ever return. And all the humans I met on this journey... Kerena...Constance...You shot that ship, didn't you? The one that took Constance. Do you think they will find her again?"

"There is a sixty-five percent chance that human will survive. I damaged one of the vessel's pulse drives. They will not be able to get far."

Alaina nodded. She didn't know she'd been holding her breath, and she released it then.

If the rebels retrieved all the females that were taken, if she and V'Alen contained this orb, and if Kerena reversed the effect of that compound they were working on...maybe they could turn the tide of this war.

She might not make it back...but she could look forward to that.

As V'Alen wrapped a bandage around her neck, Alaina smiled. He paused, his gaze falling to her lips for a moment too long before he turned and reached into the first aid kit once more.

"If you rest," he said, "your energy will be restored by twenty-five percent in six Earth hours."

Alaina blinked, and as surprise to her, another smile graced her features. A genuine one. Not one forced because she was pretending to be okay, but one that came as naturally as the way she breathed.

V'Alen studied her for a moment. "You are not...afraid of me."

"Should I be?"

When he didn't answer, her smile died.

Guess the answer to that was yes.

"I think...I think I'm okay now."

"You are not."

Her brows furrowed a little. "How do you know?"

"I am monitoring your life signs. There is a...problem. But this is not news to you. You are aware. Aren't you?"

Alaina gulped and pulled her gaze away.

So he knew.

"There's not much I can do about it."

Leaning closer, he came up to her face, those eyes boring into her cranium.

“The damage is severe. But if nothing is done...you will perish. The mass is restricting your brain. It—”

“Shh!” She slapped her good hand over his mouth as her eyes widened.

V’Alen paused, his gaze falling to her hand.

She was staring at it too.

His skin was so cool underneath her palm.

Alaina gulped. “I already know.”

He didn’t reply.

“And I don’t want anyone else to. They’ll only treat me differently. Promise me that if we survive this, you won’t tell anyone.” When he didn’t react, Alaina prodded. “*Promise me.*”

His lips moved, and they tickled her palm. There was a mumble as if he was speaking, and Alaina lifted her hand from his lips.

“A promise? Definition unknown.”

Ah...okay.

“It’s...a contract you make with someone else. One that can’t be broken.”

“You wish to make a contract with me concerning your existence?”

He was speaking loud enough that she plastered her hand over his mouth again as if there were others on the ship that would hear him speak.

“Listen...I know I’m dying. I...” A lump formed in her throat and the pity she’d felt for herself when she’d first been given the news threatened to return. “...I got my diagnosis like a month before I was taken. I know nothing can be done.” She glanced behind her again. “I’ve already asked the medic at the Restitution about it. But resources were already low on the base, even before this attack happened. They couldn’t heal me and now we are in the middle of a war. You can’t let the others

know. I don't want to see the pity in their eyes. I want to enjoy these last few weeks as if I'm fine."

V'Alen was studying her and she slowly removed her hand from his mouth.

"There's no cure. It can't be fixed. The doctors...they gave me three months to live. I...I probably have like three weeks left now or something. Maybe less."

"Your chance of survival is two percent."

Fuck.

When *he* said it, it sounded final. But she'd already known her chance of surviving this was low.

"The mass cannot be removed without harming the rest of your brain. Attempting to do so using regular methods would be fatal. You—"

"V'Alen." Alaina gulped.

Damn, this dude had no filter. She guessed speaking about death so succinctly was something he could do because, even if he could die, he wouldn't experience death the way she would.

"I know. I...I understand all this." She took a deep breath. "It's not something I can escape. It's inevitable. That's why I just want to use these last moments I have doing something that matters. Understand?"

His face was so expressionless, it was hard to garner what was going through his mind.

"Negative. Comprehension not achieved."

Alaina closed her eyes for a moment before releasing a breath.

Yea, he probably didn't understand. He was a being who was upgraded with parts that didn't get cancer and die.

"There is only one reason you cannot be healed."

His words made her gaze dart to his. "What?"

"You arrived too late," he said.

“Huh?” Alaina blinked at him. For a few moments, she couldn’t say anything. “So...you’re telling me that if the Tasqals had abducted me like a year ago, there’s a chance...” She couldn’t even finish. The thought was almost crippling.

“Not a chance. It would have been a surety. However, with the Restitution’s lack of resources and the extent of the injury, the only way for you to survive now would be to...”

His eyes unfocused and she realized that was an indication that he was scanning her.

“You can see it? You can see into my brain?”

“Affirmative.”

Alaina blinked a few times, something swelling in her throat that threatened to cut off her airway.

“Your semioval center is compromised. To fix the error, that section of your brain needs replacing.”

Alaina could only blink at him. “I’m not made of parts like you are, V’Alen. I can’t just replace a part of myself like that.”

“Replacement is still possible.”

The way he said it, as if it was as easy as changing a tire, made her gulp. And despite that it was a thought she could hardly believe, hope still spiked within her.

She thought she’d accepted her fate. That she’d been okay with dying. But his utterance only revealed one thing.

Her belly twisted, hope making her heart beat like a staggering drum in her chest.

She wasn’t ready to die. She still had hope to live.

“How can I get it replaced?”

V’Alen studied her for a few more moments. “My people,” he finally said. “The Kyron have the technology to do it.”

There was something he wasn’t saying, though. Something he wasn’t telling her. She could tell from the way he didn’t continue, and that hope that was twisting her gut, making her heart beat in overtime, was slowly seeping away.

“But?”

“But you are not Kyron. The Law of Voltaris prohibits us from intervening.”

Her shoulders sank a little but she pushed the disappointment away.

A mirthless laugh huffed through her nose. “Just my luck.”

She shouldn’t have gotten excited.

Releasing a breath, her gaze fell to his chest.

This hard outer armor wasn’t just a protective covering, was it. Behind it all, he had no flesh.

“When you say ‘replace’, you mean take that part of my brain out and put like...a machine in there to make it work like normal?”

“Affirmative.”

For a few moments, she said nothing, curiosity making her mull the thought over in her head.

It was hard to believe how unlucky she was, or lucky, depending on how she looked at it.

She might not get rid of the cancer, but at least she’d taken the trip of a lifetime before she died. And she wasn’t done yet.

This life she was given. This chance to live a few more days. She would make it matter.

She had to focus on the positive.

“Why can’t you interfere? What’s the Law of Voltaris.”

V’Alen tilted his head slightly.

“I can show you...but you will not like what you see.”

Her brows furrowed only slightly. That only made her want to hear about it even more.

“Show me.”

V’Alen shifted and lifted his hand, his palm upward.

“Watch.”

Right in front of them, a light lit up from his palm and a hologram emerged.

It was of a world she'd never seen or heard of before. A large planet with purple sands and a distant sun.

There was a ship with people that looked like V'Alen. They landed on the planet and began working with the inhabitants there. At first, it looked as if they were helping, but it soon became clear that their presence was doing more harm than good.

The planet's inhabitants began to worship them and the power they had and, in turn, V'Alen's people enacted rules, edicts that governed the world.

It all seemed to be going well until V'Alen's race began to...*fix* things.

They terraformed.

They upgraded.

But in doing all this...instead of making things better, they made things worse.

The original inhabitants became nothing more than slaves.

They began resisting the technology, and the advancements. They used the Kyron's own technology against them.

She saw slavery and war. Bloodshed and chaos.

And then...

An entire planet breaking apart.

"Your people destroyed a whole world? You...blew up an entire planet..." she whispered.

For a few moments, he studied her until he slowly lowered his hand and the holo-video cut off.

"We made a mistake. We interfered with their evolution. With the natural order of things. It was a mistake we attempted to fix."

"But the...the entire planet was destroyed."

Her eyes were wide.

She never thought she'd see something like that and know that it actually happened and wasn't some movie she was watching.

The entire planet simply exploded like a clay-filled balloon. Once whole, it was now dust floating in the cosmos.

There had been innocent people on that planet.

“Our technology...my people made an error. One that was fatal.”

She suddenly felt uneasy just being beside him.

This was a being whose species eradicated a whole world...*by accident?*

What sort of power...what sort of technology did they possess to be able to destroy a whole world?

Tingles went through her, making the hairs all along her arms stand on end as her gaze slowly went to the carbon box at their feet. The orb.

It all made sense now, the councilmember's warning. The fact the Hedgeruds had practically screamed that V'Alen couldn't attack them. The way he didn't seem to be on the offense at any point.

“It is a part of our history we, Kyron, do not want to repeat.” V'Alen's gaze was moving over her face and she wondered if he could understand the utter horror she was feeling. If he could read all the thoughts going through her mind.

“And so...you don't attack unless provoked...” she whispered.

“Negative,” he said.

Alaina shook her head slowly. “I don't understand.”

“The Law of Voltaris is much more than that. We, Kyron, no longer *interfere*.”

For a few moments, she let his words settle in her mind.

The more she thought about it, the more emotions swirled in her mind, making her heart rate increase. Making her chest constrict.

The answer to all their problems...she was looking at it. Looking at *him*.

“If your technology can blow up a planet...you can eradicate the High Tasqals who are the reason for all this.” Why were tears welling in her eyes? “But you won’t *interfere?*”

He only kept on studying her so she assumed she’d gotten that correct. She couldn’t help it. There was a sour taste growing in her mouth.

“Your people can eradicate the Tasqals and you won’t.”

“If we eradicate them...another species will take their place. And if we eradicate the next, the cycle continues. We will become Gods...like before. The universe will be ruled as we Kyron see fit. Such an existence would not be best for life in the cosmos. No one species should be that powerful.”

Alaina blinked.

“But you *are* that powerful.”

It was hard to understand.

She’d always lived by the motto that if she had the power to do something for the good of others, then she would do it. It was the complete reason she was near death, but on a ship heading to only God knew where. Just so she could do *something*.

She stiffened in the seat, not in the least bit comfortable anymore.

“We have to control the power we hold,” V’Alen said, but she wasn’t sure she was listening anymore.

She couldn’t help the snort that came from her nose. “With great power comes great responsibility, huh.”

V’Alen didn’t answer and for the next few moments, they sat in silence, with her staring forward into the cosmos as his

words swam in her mind.

She thought of the humans she'd met after waking from stasis. Kerena, Constance...

She hated the feelings swimming within her, strengthened all the more by her powerlessness.

Here she was, a gnat on the windshield of the universe, and he was like one of the drivers that could operate the vessel.

"I sense that you are distressed."

Alaina's gaze shot to his and their eyes met.

It was like he could see right through her.

He probably could.

"For a robot, you're pretty in tune with emotions," she muttered.

V'Alen studied her some more but didn't reply.

"Here I am. Powerless. But to me, you are all-powerful. Can you even really die? I know you said you can perish, but somehow, now, I don't think you meant what I thought you did."

He didn't answer and it was probably better that he didn't.

"I wish I could understand. I just...can't."

V'Alen studied her for a few more moments. His complete calmness in the storm that was brewing within her was almost nerve-racking.

"What's life without mistakes...taking chances...*living*?" she whispered.

Still, he said nothing. The only thing that made her know it wasn't a statue crouched before her was the fact that the ring around his pupil spun as he watched her.

"It's all a part of it. *Everything*. The good and the bad. If you don't accept that, can you say you're even alive?" Her voice was but a whisper as she said the words, transfixed, as she stared into his eyes.

“But I guess that’s what makes me human. We make mistakes. But we learn from them and we fail a lot, but we try to do better.”

Several seconds passed and V’Alen still did not reply. Alaina pulled her gaze from him, her shoulders slumping as she sighed.

It all seemed worse now, knowing there was help out there, but that help had locked itself behind a barrier and could not be accessed.

It was like being in a fire and the fire extinguisher was stuck on the wall behind a glass case that couldn’t be broken.

“Alaina...”

“What is it?” Even to her, her voice sounded tired. Beaten.

“I want to amend the contract.”

“What contract?” she whispered.

“The promise.”

Alaina opened her mouth then slammed it shut.

She’d forgotten about the promise she’d made him swear to.

She hadn’t thought he’d take it that seriously either. She’d just wanted him to shut up and not tell anyone that she was three weeks from being best buddies with the grim reaper himself.

But now, V’Alen was talking about their promise and he was studying her with an intensity that should make her wary, especially after what he’d just told her.

Instead, she found that she couldn’t stop staring back into the eyes of this strange being, who was even stranger now that she knew more about his origin.

“What sort of amendment?”

“I will keep your secret...”

Alaina’s eyes widened a little. She was sure he’d already agreed to do that. Hadn’t he?

There must be a new condition.

“But...?” She held her breath.

“But you have to do something for me.”

“What?” she whispered. Her voice was hardly audible now. Something told her she was walking into dangerous territory.

“Teach me what it’s like to live. Teach me what it is like to be human.”

V'ALEN GLANCED BACK AT THE HUMAN WITHIN THE SHUTTLE.

She was incredibly quiet. Silent even. Only his proximity sensors told him he wasn't alone in the vessel.

He focused outside the viewscreen, the mission at hand on his mind, but it wasn't at the forefront of his consciousness.

Turning slightly, he glanced at Alaina once more.

She was leaning back in her seat, her eyes on the void beyond. She didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular.

They were going so slowly, there wasn't much to look at, anyway.

But he couldn't help but sense that she was contemplating something much larger than what her eyes were seeing.

The orb swirled in the box he strapped it in, and it caught his focus for just a moment.

He'd told her about Voltaris. About the Law. About his people. And he'd seen when her gaze shifted to the orb. Noted the sharp spike in her pulse.

She was wary of him.

But that orb...the power it held was much more than even his people wielded.

What he'd seen...the worlds he'd visited.

He wondered if she understood what it had all meant.

Even as he stared at her, the images replayed in his mind.

The Kyron, his people, knew that everything in existence all boiled down to one basic thing: energy. Every single atom in the universe...including everything that made the mass that was himself...and the human traveling with him. It was all energy.

Interacting with the orb... What it had shown him only meant it held indescribable power.

“Coming along with me was foolish,” he muttered, his gaze sliding in the female’s direction.

Her eyes flicked to his then before falling away, and he thought she would not respond.

“I know.”

An illogical answer. One he didn’t expect.

But in his time in her presence, he’d realized one thing about her. She was illogical. Every aspect of her being was illogical.

It went against everything he knew.

“But you know why I had to come. And...” Her gaze slid to the box holding the orb. “I wanted to know more about that thing.”

As he studied her, waiting for her to continue, her lids remained low, as if she was in deep thought.

“You felt it,” she finally said. “Didn’t you? I didn’t imagine it all. It’s not a side effect of my illness? I...” She paused, lifting those wide eyes to his. Far too wide for her face...and yet, eyes that suited her perfectly. “You saw what I saw...” she continued.

V’Alen studied her for a bit.

“I do not feel.”

But even as he said that, his system...glitched. He paused, a diagnostic scan immediately activating at the sudden lurch in his coding.

“So it was real...” she said. “All those worlds I saw. That person...that copy of myself...”

Alaina’s gaze slid to the box once more, and she stared at it.

“Me and you together...in those worlds...what does it mean?”

For the first time in his life, V’Alen didn’t reply simply because he had no answer to her question.

It was unreal, yet he couldn’t deny what he had seen. A glimpse into other worlds, copies of the plane on which he existed.

He’d had flesh. He’d touched her hand...and it had brought back memories long forgotten. Of him as a child before he underwent the change. Upgraded to the form he currently possessed.

Contrary to what he just told her...it wasn’t that he *couldn’t* feel. It was simply that he’d forgotten *how* to.

His code glitched again and his eyes shone red for but a moment. And if the female was looking at him, she’d have spotted the malfunction.

A fault in his code ever since he’d touched the orb. One that would make her wary of him even more than she was now.

“How comes we were together...that picture on the wall in that house. We were together in that picture. And I turned and saw myself...what does it mean?”

V’Alen stood, leaving the controls blinking behind him.

The ship would fly on its own, but this female...she needed him. He wasn’t sure how he knew that. Maybe it was the tone of her voice. The way her voice cracked like when she’d whispered his name and called him to come save her before, when that Hedgerud had her in his grasp.

[Scan]

[Alaina.

[Chance of survival. 2%]

[State: Energy level critical.]

She was exhausted. He'd forgotten beings like her needed regular sleep cycles.

"You should rest," he said.

Her brown eyes lifted to his and V'Alen found himself pausing as he reached forward to extend the resting surface from the side of the ship.

"You're not going to answer me?"

"I cannot. Not until I have processed the data."

She nodded and stood as the resting slab descended from the wall.

It was big enough to hold them both but she would be the only one using it.

"Will you rest too?" she glanced his way. But even though she asked, that tension didn't leave her shoulders. Her heart rate was still elevated.

She was indicating symptoms of fear.

"Kyron do not sleep. I recharged after Ajos pulled me from the orb."

"Ah," she mumbled, "so that's what that was. I was worried you were dead or something. But at least now I know that doesn't really happen." Releasing a heavy breath that made her shoulders slump, she glanced around.

"My blanket..."

She staggered a little as she headed for the sack she'd packed and he reached out to steady her.

Touching her skin sent an impulse through his systems that he didn't expect and he found himself drawing back suddenly.

She didn't seem to notice. Too exhausted from all that had happened.

"Where's that blanket?" she repeated, rifling through the sack. "I put it in here. I remember doing that."

A blanket? Ah. A body covering like the ones Kerena used.

Reaching into the overhead compartment, he pulled out a large cloak. It was big enough to cover her fully and should keep her warm.

“This should do.”

Nodding, she took the cloak into her arms before climbing onto the sleeping surface. There she turned and looked at him with eyes that seemed unfocused. Dazed.

Vulnerable.

Alone.

Immediately, his system glitched again.

[Automatic system scan]

[Scanning for errors]

.
. .
.

[System 100% operational]

[Zero errors detected]

That didn't seem right. He would run the scan again later.

Something was wrong, for as he stared at the small beaten-up human before him, he couldn't pull his gaze away.

For the first time in his life...he was looking at something...beautiful.

Tired. Broken down. But beautiful.

For the first time in his existence...he felt an urge to... *comfort* something.

Turning away from her, V'Alen started that second diagnostic scan as he headed back to the controls.

What was happening to him was impossible...but so was the existence of the tech they had in their possession.

Again, the scan he'd performed came back with no errors. All systems were fully operational.

So why did he *feel* the need to...provide warmth, *comfort*, to the little human in his presence?

[[Deep system control: Sub-subconscious system process started]]

[[Accessing system root]]

[[Bypassing controls]]

[[System documentation begun into document record]]

[[Record name: Alaina]]

ALAINA TRIED TO REST.

She tried to put the events of the day behind her and focus on what was ahead, but doing so was hard.

If she was going to help V'Alen, she needed to put her emotions aside and behave like he did—completely focused.

Completely rational.

Completely unfeeling.

Yet, each time exhaustion won and her eyelids grew heavy, all that came behind her eyes were the injured and the dead.

All she could hear were the screams.

The sounds of the bombs.

The terror.

Had it all really happened?

She was tossing underneath the large cloak when she felt a hand at her back.

V'Alen.

Her eyes fluttered open and, as her vision cleared, she looked over her shoulder at him.

“Alaina,” he said. His voice was so smooth, it was like her name on his tongue was a caress. “Do you...wish for comfort?”

Alaina could only look back at him.

She could neither smile nor cry.

Comfort? She needed much more than that.

Back on Earth, after she'd gotten her diagnosis, the first thing she'd done was walk from that doctor's office in a daze. She'd somehow made it to the bus station. She'd gotten on the bus. She'd taken it home. And when she got home, she'd gone inside her apartment, shut the door, and slunk against it, sliding to the floor in the darkness of her small place.

Only then had she let any emotion free.

Only then, in the darkness and alone, did she allow herself to release all the shock and the pain.

The next day, she'd woken up and stared at herself in the mirror.

She couldn't recognize the face that she saw staring back at her.

Almost three decades she'd lived...and she couldn't remember any of it. All fleeting moments. All things that didn't matter.

What had she done with all her time?

She'd stared into that mirror and made one decision. To make the rest of the time she had count for something.

But now...right at this moment...

She was weak.

Maybe it was the fact that she was on a mission with a being that was the complete opposite of her. One that held all the power in the world while she dwelled on the opposite side of the spectrum.

Did her input even matter?

"Comfort?" she whispered.

V'Alen didn't respond.

While she'd been trying to sleep, she'd caught him looking her way more than once.

He'd said he wanted to learn what it was like to be human. Well, this was one of those times when she felt wholly human.

Alaina's gaze fell from his at the same time that a tear threatened to escape.

"Comfort..." She sniffled. "What I want is strength. Because right now...I am weak."

"Affirmative."

Alaina's brows dived to her nose at the same time that a laugh mingled with the sob in her throat, causing her to choke on air. The despair that had been creeping up on her seeped away in an instant as her mouth fell open and she stared at him.

"Lesson number one, you don't tell humans how weak they are. They will take offense."

"You are weak," he repeated, and Alaina opened her mouth to deny it when he continued. "Your body is weak." He lifted her uninjured hand, turning it over so his gaze could run over her palm. "But your mind is strong." With those words, he leaned in, his fingers cupping her chin so gently, she could only stare at him.

Pulling her hand toward him, he pressed her palm against his chest, and she could feel the cool metal of his suit underneath her fingertips.

Alaina blinked at him.

He was close.

Almost as close as that time she was underneath him while the tractor beam tried to swallow them both.

"V'Alen?" she whispered.

"You need to feel," he said.

Swallowing whatever words were about to bubble from her lips, her brows furrowed slightly as her gaze fell to where he pressed her hand against his chest.

"I feel you," she whispered.

“Negative,” he said. “Feel...”

Eyes flying to his, her brow furrowed some more in confusion.

“Here,” he said, tilting his forehead to hers.

A breath stopped in her nose, her heart giving a hard thump as she looked into his eyes.

Staring at him like this, her hand pressed against his chest, his gentle fingers tilting her chin back...it all felt...intimate.

“Feel?” she whispered.

“I have seen the humans. Seen what they do when they feel weak.”

Alaina blinked at him.

“They release. They feel.”

And just like that...those feelings of despair returned. Only, they were now accompanied by something else.

Something she couldn't quite determine.

“You're saying you want me to...cry?”

Even saying the word, tears welled in her eyes.

“Affirmative.”

Alaina stared at him, too many feelings coming to the fore all at once.

She'd only cried that one time. In her apartment all alone in the dark with no one there to comfort her.

“You don't have to...” she whispered.

“But I am here.”

A single tear escaped.

Gulping hard, she pulled her bottom lip into her mouth.

Why...why him? Of all the people she could have cried to, why him? And why now?

“This isn't a part of your code, is it?” She took a shuddering breath in and forced the tears away. “Providing

comfort. You'd be interfering with me if you did."

He stared at her for a while and she saw the moment his eyes changed.

His pupils glowed a little and then he was climbing onto the sleeping slab.

"What are you..." But she knew what he was doing. For some reason, her heart lurched as she shifted in time for him to settle beside her.

"Shouldn't you be manning the ship?"

"It will travel in a straight line for the next rotation. I have already mapped the way ahead. There are no obstacles in our path." He said this as he settled beside her, one arm reaching to pull her onto his chest.

As she settled against him and his arms closed around her, Alaina swallowed hard.

She wouldn't cry. Crying was stupid and it wouldn't change anything.

"I am here, Alaina."

That did it.

The first sob came with a lurch of her chest, and she grabbed on to him.

She'd faced this darkness all alone. She kept her secret even from her closest loved ones. Her last days with them had been happy ones. Happy memories before she'd been ripped from Earth and even then, she'd still kept the secret to herself.

But this darkness. It was a cold place. A lonely place. One that tugged at her soul and threatened to break her in two.

And this being. He already knew her secret. He knew the darkness she faced.

There was no use hiding it from him.

With him, an alien from another world far from her own, she could be open. She could be bare.

She could be *human*.

So, for only the second time since getting her diagnosis, she allowed the tears to fall. She allowed them to come.

“V’Alen...” she sniffled. “I lied.”

She knew his chin tilted so he could look at her when she felt the slight press against her crown.

“I have already concluded that humans lie,” he said.

A small laugh huffed through her nose as she wiped her tears away.

“Yea...we do...sometimes.”

“You lied about your injuries to the other. The one named Constance.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“You lied to Kerena.”

“Yes.” She nodded again. “And I lied about something else.”

V’Alen remained silent, but her utterance made her pause. Made her hesitate enough to question herself. Question whether she was really ready to admit this.

That this was all an act of bravery. That really and truly...

“I don’t wanna die. I...” Alaina took a deep breath. “I’m not ready.”

Saying the words was one thing, hearing them was another.

“That is logical.”

“Hm.”

He was right of course. And maybe she’d put on a brave face because what else was there to do when faced with the inevitable?

What else was there to do when your future was already written for you?

“Thank you, V’Alen,” she whispered.

She should release him now. She’d had her little cry. And she felt better for it. But...

“Where did you learn to do this? Comfort someone?”

There were a few moments where he didn't reply and Alaina wondered if he was thinking.

“I have observed the humans since they were rescued from the stasis hold. I have seen the eye waters when in distress. Seen how they hold each other and how it seems to—”

“Heal the wounds,” she whispered.

“Affirmative.”

Alaina nodded, a heavy breath rising and falling through her chest.

“It is so quiet out here,” she whispered. “Just me and you...I could go on like this forever.”

V'Alen tilted his head again. “Forever is a long time, Alaina. But...”

“But what?” she whispered.

“If I had to spend forever with any human...I would choose to spend forever here with you.”

THERE WAS SOMETHING DIFFERENT ABOUT V'ALEN.

She couldn't put her finger on just what that was...or maybe she was just getting used to having him around. After all, they were stuck on this ship for God knew how long.

As he sat at the command panel of the small shuttle, Alaina sat up on the sleeping slab, her gaze sliding to him.

Turned away from her, his focus on the viewscreen, she wondered what he saw out there.

To her, all she could see was the dark void of space. There was nothing very interesting beyond that screen. At least—not right now. Wherever they were was a quiet, dead part of space.

The ship moved through the expanse almost silently. Only the soft hum of the engine and the occasional beep from the controls cut through the stillness.

Bringing the cloak up around her shoulders, a soft smile graced her lips. He'd held her for longer than he'd needed to, and even though that had been over a day or two ago, she could still feel the comfort that precious moment had provided.

She'd needed to cry.

She'd needed to let the tears out. The weight of it all had been bogging her down more than she'd realized.

Yawning, she slid off the sleeping slab, her feet touching the ground as she moved toward the bag she'd packed.

One glance in V'Alen's direction and she could see he didn't even twitch, even though she knew he must be listening to her every movement.

If she whispered his name, would he turn around?

"V'Alen?"

It was hardly a whisper. No way he heard that, but as the cyborg suddenly looked over his shoulder, those strange eyes meeting hers immediately, her heart thudded so hard in her chest that it sent a jolt of *something* straight through her.

So he'd heard her?

Her cheeks warmed as she stuttered to find something to say. "Oh, uh, just wondering how long before we get to Okurna?"

V'Alen's gaze bored into hers, and again, her heart thumped in her chest as if it was no longer at home and needed somewhere to go.

There was an intensity to his gaze that made her throat dry.

All this because he'd held her while she cried? No. It couldn't be just that. Right?

But as she looked at him, she couldn't deny that, yes, there was something different about V'Alen. Or maybe...she was seeing him differently.

The thought hit her like a brick and made her freeze.

"Four Earth days," he said, his gaze flicking to the bag hung on one of the ship's panels. "Do you need sustenance?"

"Oh, uh, yea..." God, her cheeks were blazing like a desert sun. What had gotten into her?

Reaching for the bag, she stuck her arm in and felt around for one of the meal bars, completely intent on keeping her gaze averted from the cyborg in her midst.

"Got one!" she grinned, whipping the packet out. About the size of a slice of bread, these specific meal bars were small but they packed a punch. Something about expanding once

they reacted with the enzymes in the stomach, just one bar could last her a full day.

When she turned, her grin froze on her lips.

V'Alen was still watching her.

What should she say?

She couldn't offer him any. He didn't eat.

Another blush climbed across her cheeks.

"I'd offer you some...but you don't eat...do you?"

Shifting, the chair on which he sat spun as V'Alen rose. With three long strides, he was before her and she couldn't breathe.

His gaze flicked to the meal bar.

"I do not consume in the way that you do..."

"But you consume?"

"Energy."

Duh. Of course, Alaina. He probably had some kind of battery or something to sustain him.

"You gain sustenance from consuming...but also pleasure?"

Alaina blinked at him, his words surprising her and causing that heat to rise in her cheeks even more. "Pleasure?"

"You display signs of happiness."

Ah...

Her blush only heightened.

What the heck was wrong with her? He wasn't even saying anything remotely sensual.

"Yea, well, I was happy to get it from the bag I guess. I enjoy food."

That ring around his pupil spun.

"Do all humans enjoy consumption?"

Alaina shrugged, taking the moment to clear her throat and move toward the only other seat apart from the pilot's chair.

Taking her time to sit slowly so she didn't upset any of her wounds, she finally looked back at him.

"Some do. For some, it is an inconvenience having to eat all the time. But me...I've always enjoyed eating. My mother used to cook the best stews..."

A sad smile graced her lips. That was a memory that came out of nowhere.

"That is something I cannot enjoy." V'Alen turned to face her, his gaze flicking to her lips as she opened the packet and took her first bite of the meal bar.

Her head tilted back as she closed her eyes. "Most of the humans don't like these bars, but, mm, they're actually pretty good. It's a unique flavor every time. This one tastes like strawberries and chocolate."

"And you enjoy that." His voice was so close that her eyes popped open to focus right on his.

Her heart lurched as she jumped.

"V'Alen, what are you—"

"Your heart rate spiked," he said. "I scared you."

"No, well, yea you did." Even as they spoke, he didn't move. "You're so close..."

He was right before her, leaning in.

Why did he move from where he'd stood?

V'Alen's gaze flicked to her lips once more and when his fingers closed over hers, slipping the meal packet from her grasp, she let him, too transfixed with whatever was happening to even care.

When he broke a piece of the bar, his gaze rising back to hers as he lifted the small piece to her lips, her mouth opened on its own.

V'Alen's fingers were cool to the touch...and big. Only two of them could fit between her lips and he slipped them both in, depositing the piece of food on the center of her tongue.

Her heart thudded against her ribcage and she couldn't move.

"Do not be afraid," he said.

He'd said those words to her before. Only then, she'd actually had a reason to be afraid.

Now though, it wasn't fear making her heart slam against her chest like it was the thing failing and not her brain.

V'Alen's gaze slipped back to hers, and Alaina could hardly breathe. He didn't pull his fingers away. She had no choice but to close her mouth over them.

Time seemed to pause as he looked down at her.

As he slowly pulled his fingers from her mouth, she couldn't help but suck on them.

V'Alen's gaze fell back to her lips. To the slow movement of his fingers. And she swore something changed in his eyes.

At this moment, as she stared up at him, she realized something that she hadn't considered, at least not properly, until now.

V'Alen was male.

And right now...his energy, the aura she was getting from him, was all masculine.

He said he didn't consume food. That he consumed energy.

Right now, she wanted him to consume *her*.

...

Alaina's eyes widened.

What...the...fuck.

What the hell was wrong with her?

As V'Alen's fingers slipped from her lips and she thought of something quick to say, his eyes suddenly glowed red.

Alarm rang through her.

"V'Alen?"

He was gone in the next second, moving so quickly, her eyes could hardly track him before he reached the control panel.

She'd only seen his eyes glow red once before, and that's when the Hedgerud had gripped her by the neck with his claw, squeezing the air from her lungs and any hope she'd had to be saved.

So why now...

She got the answer to her question in the next second when the ship suddenly shuddered.

"Engage the restraints." V'Alen's order was abrupt and her fingers trembled as she fought to pull the restraints across her chest and engage them.

Meal forgotten, she swallowed whatever food was left in her mouth as she gripped the restraints, her heart thudding hard for a whole other reason as the ship shuddered once more and something appeared before them.

Another ship?

"W-what the hell is that?"

"Pirates."

Pi-what?

"Pirates?!" Gripping the restraints, eyes wide as the ship before them swerved out of view before appearing again, her skin grew cold. "What do they want?"

But even as she asked it, her gaze pulled away from the viewscreen to the box on the floor. Even closed, that ethereal light that glowed from the orb could be seen through the cracks.

She'd tried to ignore the orb as much as possible. Tried not to think about it too much or what it had made her see. Tried not to think about how it had whispered to her that time. She hadn't imagined any of it, but try as she wished, she couldn't ignore it now.

Pirates sought treasure, and the orb was one of the biggest treasures in the universe.

"We can't let them get it!" Wide eyes flew back to V'Alen as the ship shuddered and swerved, tilting her body and all its contents sideways.

Everything that wasn't strapped to the panels flew off the walls. Her bag and all its contents flew across the floor.

"They do not know we have the orb." V'Alen's voice managed to reach her through the beat of her pulse in her ears and as the ship righted itself, her heart thundered as she stared through the view screen once more.

There, the ship appeared, and she'd thought it was one, but there were two of them. They looked like little trapezoids with shark fins. Surely, they couldn't do much damage with those, right?

As a bright light erupted right in front of her and their shuttle shook, Alaina bit her tongue.

Two lasers just as bright as the attackers' left their shuttle as V'Alen fired back.

Alaina gripped the restraints, her heart in her throat as one of the pirates was hit. The trapezoid ship spun, bits of it breaking off and her heart soared.

"You got one!"

"Not for long."

What the hell did that mean?

But she didn't need an explanation, because as the ship that had been hit dived into the background like it was hiding behind its friend, she saw before her own eyes that the hole the laser made was closing up. It was rebuilding itself?

“They’re repairing it.” Alaina sat forward, her eyes wide. “They’re repairing it, V’Alen.”

He didn’t seem surprised. “These are the Chori. Their vessels are living beings. There is no way to escape a Chori attack by normal means.”

That lump in her throat solidified as her gaze fell back to the orb.

If that’s the case, what the hell were they to do?

When V’Alen rose, her eyes widened even more.

“Take the controls, Alaina.”

Her eyes possibly popped out of her head. “What?”

“Take the controls. There is only one way to end this.”

It was only then that she realized his eyes had gone back to their usual color because they suddenly glowed red once more, just as their shuttle shuddered.

Alarms blared, the lights cutting in and out.

“Alaina.”

Heart in her throat, her fingers trembled as she nodded. This was what she’d asked for. She was the one who’d wanted to come on this mission. She’d known it was going to be dangerous.

As she released herself from the seat, the ship shuddered again, thrusting her right into the alien before her.

V’Alen stared down at her with those red eyes, and Alaina swallowed hard.

He looked evil. Dangerous.

She should be afraid. Why wasn’t she afraid of him?

She was more terrified by the weird-ass living ships outside that were trying to kill them.

“You look like the Terminator,” she whispered.

V’Alen didn’t respond. And, granted, the joke was to calm her more than anything else because her legs were going weak

just thinking about the fact that in the next few minutes, they could be space food.

Staggering away from him, she managed to strap herself into the pilot's chair.

But she was an engineer, not an astronaut, and she had no clue how to control this thing.

“V’Alen, I—” Glancing over her shoulder, a new level of terror filled her veins.

He was gone.

She was alone.

IT WAS ONE THING TO PLAY VIDEO GAMES, TO MAKE SMALL robots that did what you wanted them to do, to even write code and see your creations come to life on screen...but this...she had no control over this.

Through the viewscreen and right before her, was the vast expanse of space. Her fingers trembled on the controls and she gripped them.

She was completely out of her element. What did V'Alen want her to do?

At least the ships that were attacking them seemed to have gone. She was just about to release a breath of relief when both ships swerved in a wide arc right in front of her.

Alaina's eyes widened as she watched the two dark trapezoids head straight for the shuttle. They weren't slowing down, and they weren't veering off course.

If they kept coming, they were going to collide head-on.

She could already see it. The ship blowing up in space, turning her into smithereens. And V'Alen...wherever he was.

At the thought of him, something thumped on the roof of their vessel.

“What the...”

Another enemy?

But she couldn't pull her gaze away from the scene in front of her. From the two death ships still heading right for them,

and when another thump sounded right above her head, the fear that was creeping up her spine turned into a cold, dark hand that took grasp of her soul.

But then something appeared in her periphery. Glancing up, Alaina's heart lurched as she was met with glowing red eyes.

“V’Alen?”

He was outside the ship. Not only that. He was on top of it. Crouching, he looked into the viewscreen and, once he saw her, he finally looked forward.

Forgetting the controls, Alaina rose from the seat, her eyes wide as she watched the cyborg grip the shuttle with one hand. With one smooth thrust, he launched himself off the ship and into the cosmos.

Time stopped as she watched him sail toward the incoming ships. His entire body lit up as the first ship collided with him.

“V’Alen!” she screamed, her palm pressed against the viewscreen as she stared at the chaos.

What the hell was he thinking? He was going to die.

But the explosion that she expected didn't come. V’Alen held on to the ship's helm, that white light in his armor contrasting with his red eyes as he stretched his palm forward and fired.

A sharp red laser cut through space and right through the center of the Chori vessel, splitting it in two.

As it fell away, it dissolved into nothing, almost as if it didn't exist in the first place.

He'd done it? He killed them?

Relief mixed with the fear swirling in her gut. So focused on what he was doing, she didn't notice the other ship had swerved to avoid contact.

As their counterpart disappeared, the other ship fired. Not a laser like before, but something else.

It sailed through the air and right into V’Alen's chest.

Alaina's heart seized.

It was a wire. Some sort of cord. Like a fishing line that wrapped around him as the ship circled and tugged.

Alaina gripped the controls, her heart thudding in her chest as she looked down at the millions of buttons before her.

She had to do something. She had to help him.

Everything was in a language she couldn't read. All except one thing.

The trigger on the side of the controls.

At least, she *thought* it was a trigger.

Only one way to find out.

Slamming her ass into the chair, Alaina took hold of the controls. One side was moveable, almost like a joystick, and she took hold of it, turning it. A little crosshair on the display below the controls moved. On that same display, she could see a moving blip.

Got it.

It had to be that little trapezoid bitch that was trapping V'Alen.

Eyes focusing on the ship as it swerved, Alaina waited until the blip neared the crosshair.

“Here goes nothing.”

As she pressed the controls, she watched as twin lasers left the shuttle. They were so fast, they cut through the void like pure fire. But the enemy ship was moving too quickly. The lasers went above it, disappearing into nothing.

She watched as V'Alen spun in a slow circle. He was still being wrapped by the line, but his eyes were on the ship as it moved around him.

She had to try again.

Once more, she waited for the little blip to near the crosshair. Her heart thumped hard in her chest as time seemed to crawl even more than usual.

“Come on...hang on, V’Alen.”

Just before the blip reached the crosshair, she depressed the controls.

The laser cut through the void again, and this time, it found its target.

The moment the enemy ship shuddered was the moment it swerved off its path.

V’Alen’s red gaze turned in her direction as he gripped the cord that was tying him, his palms glowing as he burned it to bits.

Alaina’s mouth fell open as she watched him sail after the enemy ship. The vessel was repairing itself, but not quickly enough.

As the red laser shot from V’Alen’s palm, cutting through the enemy like a sharp sword, the vessel fell away, disintegrating into nothing. As it faded before her eyes, the void of space itself seemed to grow still once more.

Rising in her seat, Alaina stared ahead, watching the cyborg as he slowly turned.

There was a flickering light in his chest that was different from usual, but apart from that, he simply floated in the void, watching her.

That’s the only time she realized they weren’t moving. He’d stopped the ship? So why had he needed her at the controls?

Heart still thudding in her chest, she watched as he slowly flew nearer.

He could fly. He shot lasers out of his palms. He appeared to be completely cybernetic. And he came from a world where there were more beings like him in the thousands, millions... billions?

As he neared, floating slowly back toward their shuttle, she imagined a being like him going to Earth. If his people went there in a shuttle, just a few of them could control the world. They would have unimaginable power and influence.

And if they were evil...

His previous words about the Law of Voltaris made more sense now. The scenes that he'd shown her in that holo video even more tragic, and she could see it all from his perspective.

When she'd fired that laser, knowing that there was a chance of killing those pirates...knowing that pressing that trigger was completely in her control...she'd grasped that power.

What must it be like for him? Living in a universe where he had so much power, he could make one wrong decision and destroy a whole world?

Clutching the neck of the tunic tight at her throat, Alaina watched as V'Alen slowly moved through the void.

There were thrusters in his feet and palms. She could see them now. See that was how he was moving so seamlessly, as if it took no effort.

Her head turned, following him as he slowly neared, moving to the side of the ship.

He stared at her, those red eyes slowly turning back to blue as he neared the view screen.

"V'Alen," she whispered as he disappeared from view.

Stumbling from in front of the chair, she hurried to the back of the ship. She could hear the distant hiss of the air compression chamber, and then a panel opened, the door sliding into the wall as V'Alen stood before her.

"V'Alen," she said again, her gaze slipping down his frame to land on the flickering light in his chest.

Alaina's eyes widened as she closed the distance between them.

"You're hurt."

Her uninjured hand stretched toward him. A metal object was embedded in his chest from where the ship had pierced him.

It was like an oval made of bones, with a pointy end that was deep in his armor. Alaina gulped as her hands hovered over it.

She needed to do something.

Hurrying away from him, she tore at the panels, opening them with frantic hastiness as she searched for something, anything she could use to help him. She found the toolbox seconds later.

Grabbing it, she turned to V'Alen, ushering him farther into the shuttle. With one hand, she pushed against his chest, forcing him to sit in her seat.

Staring at him, she had no clue how to repair him. She'd worry about that later. The first thing she needed to do was remove the foreign object.

Lifting something that looked similar to a pair of pliers, she brought it to the object and pulled.

“Talix metal,” V'Alen suddenly said.

“What?”

“This probe. It is made of talix metal.”

“Mmhm.” Focusing on her task, she set the toolbox down and kneeled before him as she made a second attempt at pulling the object out, to no avail. Working with one hand was hard. And she was weak.

That wasn't going to stop her, though.

“I traveled far to receive metal like this just to save you.”

Those words made her pause, and she finally looked up at him. His face was so calm, it was probably a good thing he didn't feel pain because this wound would have hurt like a motherfu—

“Wait, to save *me*?”

“The stasis hold you and the other humans were stuck in. We could not open it with our tools. Only metal of this kind could penetrate the container.”

“Ah.” Her gaze fell back to the strange object in his chest.

“It is rare metal. One of the strongest in the known universe. Stronger than even my armor.”

Alaina swallowed hard. “I can see that.”

One of the strongest in the universe...

She didn't want to think of “what if”. Like what if this probe had been embedded in his head instead of his chest? Would he still be here? He said he didn't die, but what if this had proved that idea false?

As V'Alen reached in front of him and gripped the probe, he pulled it from his chest with one singular movement and she was left staring at the hole in his chest.

She couldn't even call what she saw a network of wires and motors. Because in front of her was a superhuman pathway of information. Like what she imagined the internet would look like if it could have a physical state.

Blinking several times, she almost forgot what she was doing.

“Right, I—” Staring down into the toolbox, she didn't know where to begin. “I can help you, I just...I have to get my bearings here.”

“Help me?”

“Yes.” She answered without looking up as she picked up tool after tool. Nothing seemed suitable. She could at least use the pliers to bend his armor back outward and smooth it somewhat, but she needed something to create a type of bandage, maybe?

“Why?”

She didn't hear what he asked. Maybe because she was too focused on finding the right thing to help him, but when his fingers tilted her chin up to face him, she forgot everything she was thinking about.

“Why would you help me?” he repeated.

So serene his expression...and Alaina realized it was so serene, it was almost sad.

“What do you mean ‘why’? I need a reason?”

V’Alen didn’t answer. Instead, he leaned forward.

“I can see inside your brain...but I cannot see what you are thinking...”

“I can tell you. I have nothing to hide. You’re...” She paused. Should she even say it? “You know more about me than most other people do. You’re the first person...the first being I have been open with in a very long time.”

V’Alen studied her some more, that ring around his pupils spinning.

“I just destroyed two lifeforms in front of your eyes...” He didn’t continue, almost as if he was waiting for her to fill in the blanks on her own.

“And?”

V’Alen’s head tilted slightly as he watched her.

“They were dicks,” she said. “You did what you had to do.”

V’Alen’s gaze seemed to sharpen and he eased back, his fingers slipping from underneath her chin as he released her and leaned back in the seat.

As she stood and lifted the pliers, he watched as she stepped between his legs and grasped a part of the twisted metal with the tool. Grunting, she tried to bend it back into place, but even as she worked, she couldn’t stop her gaze from shifting back to his.

“I understand, V’Alen,” she whispered, breaking the silence between them. “I understand the weight you and your people bear. Treading that fine line between letting people have free will and being gods over them...it’s a huge responsibility. To be honest...if my species ever became as powerful as yours...I don’t think we’d have the strength to give up that power. To control it, as your species does.”

“You were wary of me before,” he said. “When I showed you the images of what my people have done.”

That surprised her. She’d had no clue he was that good at reading human emotions. To her, she’d kept her face straight and unemotional the whole time.

“I was just upset.”

He was silent, waiting for her to continue, so she grit her teeth, pulling on one stubborn bit of metal before she went on.

“Upset that I was so powerless, yet you had all that power and were doing nothing with it. But I get it.” She met his gaze. “I get it now.”

The flickering light in his chest made her glance back at the wound, her brows knitting as she saw the strangest thing.

“I...don’t need to be doing this, do I?” She could see the metal rebuilding right before her. As if it was alive and growing. “Are you like those pirates? Can you just rebuild like that?”

“Negative. What you see are the nanobots that service my framework.”

“Ah...” A blush crept up her cheeks as she took the pliers away. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“It has been a long time since I felt the gift of touch...I was enjoying yours.”

Her cheeks only blazed more.

“Alaina.” Something about the way he said her name forced her gaze to his.

V’Alen leaned forward, his arm reaching out to snake around her and pull her toward him.

“V’Alen?”

So close now, her breath fanned over his face with each exhale.

“Show me,” he said.

“Sh-show you what?” Why were her insides trembling like jelly?

“This.”

IF HE HAD BREATH THAT COULD STOP IN HIS LUNGS, IT WOULD do so now.

As he leaned toward the human, pressing his lips against hers, he wasn't sure what to do next.

When he'd seen Ajos and Kerena press mouths together, it had seemed to come so naturally to them.

But he was anything but natural. And this...it didn't come easy for him.

For a moment, he wasn't sure *why* he was doing it. Why, when she'd been trying to mend him, he'd let her, even though he hadn't needed her help. Or why her efforts to tend to him had made him so hypnotized.

It was illogical.

Against his programming.

Why had he pulled her soft body against his? Why was he pressing his lips against hers now?

But images of what had happened recently, of touching the orb and seeing all those worlds, those different planes in which they were together...how could he deny this female was always meant to be by his side?

She may not understand it yet. He was still processing the data himself. But if they were together on those planes...were they meant to be together here too?

Alaina stiffened as their lips met, and he paused.

She was human...and this was a thing that humans did with their mates. He knew this because he'd only ever seen Ajos and Kerena do it. None of the other humans pressed mouths with each other. And he was neither human nor mate...

Logically, she had no reason to perform this ritual with him.

Logically...she would pull away.

But as she shuddered against him, the most unexpected thing happened. Her lips moved against his. Rubbing. *Teasing*.

So soft, her lips. A stark contrast to his rigid armor.

As he pulled her a little closer to him, her eyes fluttered closed, her body melting into his.

So soft *all over*.

He could easily break her. So he settled for remaining rigid and letting her lips move against his.

When she released a soft sigh, her hand rising to cradle his jaw, it was like touching the orb all over again.

She took his bottom lip between hers and brought it into her mouth, sucking lightly on it.

V'Alen froze, his systems recording the data input at record speed. The way her heart rate increased, how her breaths became short and light, how there was slight perspiration rising along her neck, how she whimpered when her tongue flicked out to touch him...

So many inputs. So much to *consume*.

He wanted more. Of her whimpers and her quick breaths. Of how her body reacted to his slightest touch. He wanted to see her feel. To see her live.

He wanted to absorb it all.

For, across his existence, he had always been an observer. A being recording data, events, across the stars. But this event was not simply data. For he wasn't observing this...he was *experiencing* it.

Alaina was doing this with *him*. Not with some other male who had flesh and could give her natural warmth. One who could laugh and smile at her jokes. One who could feel as much as she could.

She was kissing *him*...V'Alen of Voltaris.

As her eyes slid open and her lips slipped from his, she stared at him. There was a slight tint to her cheeks. Her heartbeat was still slightly elevated. Her breaths uneven. Her temperature higher than before.

“You’re supposed to close your eyes when you kiss someone,” she whispered, that tint in her cheeks only growing darker.

He could only look back at her.

This female.

This female who was so weak compared to him.

He had all the power...yet...as he stared at her, he knew she had power as well. Power over *him*. For this contract he agreed to, the one in which he’d keep her secret while she taught him how to be human...was taking him into territory he never expected.

Kyron did not yearn.

He did not yearn.

So what was this strange...*feeling*?

For it was a feeling. A want, not a need.

And he wanted...*her*.



THE SHIP BEEPED.

It was the only thing to pull her from the trance in which she had fallen, staring into V'Alen's face...seeing him as a man and not a robotic being...and realizing she'd just kissed him.

Sure, he'd initiated it, but did he even realize what he was doing?

As the ship beeped again and she glanced toward the view screen, she saw the lights on the control panel going crazy.

"I must flush the engines," he said. "And repair the damage the Chori caused."

"Shit, of course," she said, stepping away so he could rise.

As he moved over to the control panel, she tried not to stare. Tried not to touch her fingers to her lips. Tried to focus on the fact that V'Alen most likely meant nothing by what he did.

He'd asked her to show him how to be human. They'd made a contract.

That was all it was.

Yet...

Something quivered in her belly as she forced herself to focus on the toolbox. Slamming the box shut, she brought it back to its place in storage as V'Alen continued working at the controls.

When he rose from the seat, his gaze moving to her, that same quivering in her belly increased and she fought not to pull her gaze away.

"Can I help?" Her gaze darted to where the compression chamber was. "I was an engineer back on Earth. I worked for a company that was developing robots with artificial intelligence. I'm good with my hands."

That flush in her cheeks only increased, but V'Alen wouldn't take her words out of context. He wasn't like that, was he?

When he didn't respond, she was forced to glance in his direction. That hole in his suit was now just the size of a penny, almost as if it hadn't been a gaping chasm just minutes before.

“I will not put you in danger,” he said. “You are far too important.”

She wanted to scoff but instead, a soft smile graced her lips. He’d said that to her before too. Only now, there seemed to be a different meaning to the words.

“I will be gone for nine hundred seconds.”

She blinked at him.

“Fifteen Earth minutes.”

A soft laugh huffed through her nose as she watched him leave, and only when the compression unit hissed and she knew he was no longer in the ship did she move from where she was standing frozen.

Heading over to the sleeping slab, she flopped on it, burying her face in the cloak there.

What did she just do?

She kissed him, and now he was in her head.

“Alaina.”

The voice made her jerk, her head lifting from the cloak as she looked around the small compartment. But V’Alen wasn’t inside.

“I am speaking to you through the ship’s communication system.”

“Ah.” That quiver in her belly picked up the pace as she listened to his voice, and she had to bite down hard on her lip to try to distract herself.

“I will be gone for over nine hundred Earth seconds. There is extensive damage, more than I originally assumed.”

Alaina buried her face into the cloak once more. “Okay.”

Why were her cheeks burning so much she might set the cloak alight and start a fire?

And why was her heart beating so hard?

SHE MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP, FOR WHEN HER EYES BLINKED open, her brain felt foggy. And she wasn't sure what it was, but some source outside herself had caused her to wake from her slumber.

A shiver went through her and her teeth clattered as she pulled the cloak closer.

It was freezing, and her head felt like lead.

No. She groaned. *Not now.*

Not one of those headaches that plagued her.

Things had been going so well...

In just the few moments with V'Alen, she'd felt alive again. So much so that she'd almost forgotten that life was on the brink of being no more.

Grabbing her cranium, her hand sinking through her hair to grip her skull, she whimpered into the cloak.

It hurt.

It hurt more than anything.

Hurt so much, she'd wished many times before that it would all just end. That she could just skip past the pain and torture and reach the destination.

But back then, she hadn't had a mission.

That thing she'd been searching for. That *meaning* she'd craved. That thing that would make the end of her life worth

something.

But this pain...

She almost screamed into the cloak as her brain felt like someone had a hammer against it.

When a heavy hand pressed against her shoulder, she could only whimper at the contact.

V'Alen.

She couldn't even lift her head to look at him. The air was frigid, making even her bones feel brittle. It was what woke her up, the sudden drop in temperature.

Was she imagining it? Was it all just in her head, a side effect of the headache that was bringing tears to her eyes?

When one particularly painful throb made her bury her head deeper into the cloak, she felt V'Alen's hand shift from her shoulder.

That single action shouldn't leave a cavernous place in the pit of her stomach. His desertion shouldn't make lonesomeness rise its head within her.

But...it did.

Wiping away the tears that escaped, she squeezed her eyes shut and focused on her breathing. There was no paracetamol. No painkillers. She didn't have a hot water bottle or her favorite throw to snuggle up in. All she had were the few good memories she could remember. So she clung to those. And when the sleeping slab shook, it took her a few moments to realize that strong arms were encircling her.

V'Alen crept up behind her and pulled her against his chest, the coolness of his armor spreading across her back.

He returned.

He didn't leave her to bear the pain alone?

A cyborg, a being who didn't understand her humanity, was comforting her. How pathetic had she become?

But even as he cradled her against his chest, she couldn't fight the fact that his embrace was the one thing that was helping her fight the pain.

"You are experiencing discomfort," he said, his voice lower than she had ever heard it before.

Nodding, she kept her face buried in the cloak.

"Let me aid you."

Reaching above them, he got the first aid kit from storage and rifled through it with one hand.

"This will not bring you pain."

Peeking at what he was talking about, she simply saw the glint of a needle before it was buried into her arm.

Wincing, she could only grit her teeth at the invasion.

He was right. It was painless, but the suddenness of it still made her flinch.

"What was that?"

"A pain blocker. Developed by the Hesprians," he said. "I calculated the dosage based on your species and size."

Alaina nodded. She trusted him.

"The temperature does not help. It puts strain on your being," he continued.

"Why is it so c-cold?" Even with her face buried in the cloak, she could feel the bite of the cold against the tip of her nose. Her ears were burning and her nipples were little pebbles that could fall off her chest at any moment.

"Repairs. The ship will be operational in approximately three Earth hours," he said. "After the drives have recalibrated. I had to...replace some parts."

Alaina nodded. It wasn't something that couldn't be helped. She'd just have to grin and bear it.

But even though he was holding her, the ice cold of his armor was biting at her skin, so she shifted, not wanting to

leave his embrace but not being able to stay still within it either.

“My frame...it is too hard for your soft skin?”

Alaina shook her head, wincing from the throbs of pain the movement caused. “Not t-too hard. T-too c-cold.”

V’Alen shifted a bit but she went along with him, unwilling to let go of the only lifeline she could hold on to.

“It doesn’t matter. There isn’t anything you can do about it and...I like you holding me here. Please...don’t let me go.”

V’Alen stilled. “Do you wish this?”

The way he suddenly became completely still...the way he said it...if she was in the right frame of mind, she might have thought he meant something else.

But right now, all she could focus on was the fact that he was here. That she was being held. And that his touch, though strange, was what she needed in this moment.

Alaina nodded. “Don’t let me go.”

“Confirmed.”

But then he moved. Or rather, his suit did?

The shock caused her to lift her head, squinting as she looked behind her.

Right before her eyes, V’Alen’s suit was disappearing in a rippling effect that had her eyes widening despite the hammering going on in her skull. All of his sleek metal was going away, only to be replaced by...skin.

“Y...you’re...you have skin? I didn’t know you could do that.”

“I’ve never had a reason to do it before.” He poked at his chest as if that was the truth. As if seeing his skin was a surprise to him, too.

“How?” she whispered.

A square opened in his chest and she saw his mechanical parts moving inside.

“My outer layer can be...transformed as I see fit.”

Alaina blinked, unable to stop herself from staring at the being before her.

When he looked like this, he looked more...human...and it was disturbing. It was just like the image of him that she'd seen when she'd touched the orb.

That time in the field full of dandelions.

“No nipples,” she murmured.

“Kyron have no use for them.”

Her gaze moved lower down and her eyes widened, the headache that was pounding her head taking a back burner to the adrenaline that was targeting that organ in her chest.

“V'Alen...you're nude.”

“I am.”

He said it so matter-of-factly, it only made her blush.

Of course, nudity would be a non-construct for him. His people probably didn't even use their sex organs anymore. Yet, he still had a...

“I guess it's not the fact that you're naked. It's the fact that you have a...a...you're anatomically correct. I assume your people don't have sex...so why didn't you get rid of your cock, too?”

For the first time since she met him, V'Alen chuckled.

It was an odd sound, as if he was just learning to do it, and when her gaze flew back to his, he was looking at her strangely.

“I made it for you,” he answered.

She almost choked on air. “W-what?”

“You are female. I am male. I did not want to bring you discomfort.”

“So you gave yourself a cock so I would be...comfortable cuddling with you?”

“Affirmative.”

She didn't know whether to laugh or to gawk at it.

Even in the shadows between them, his tool was a sizable thing that pressed against the curve of her ass, causing all sorts of thoughts to spring into her mind.

He was a handsome male.

Who was she kidding? He was drop-dead gorgeous.

Tall. Muscular. Strong.

But he was a being that didn't feel. All of this was experimental, and one day, he would eventually write all this down in some archive for his people to learn from.

So she shouldn't let anything he did or said affect her.

But even as she said this to herself, she knew she was already affected. His nearness comforted her. The feel of his warmth made her want to snuggle against him. They'd kissed and it had made her heart beat like when a teenager sees their first love.

She was already affected. And maybe that was okay.

She was leaving anyway. Why not dream a little?

Why not *live* for a little while?

That was the whole point of making something out of these last days.

When V'Alen lifted his finger and brought it to her cheek, tracing the line of her jaw to her ear, she watched him with bated breath.

He followed the movement of his finger, that gaze of his completely focused on what he was doing to her.

Her throat went dry. “V'Alen...are you okay? You're acting...different.”

“Affirmative. I have run a diagnostic scan. All systems are operational.”

“Right,” she whispered, but the headache was faint now, and she had more clarity.

There *was* something different about him, whether or not he realized it.

As his arms closed around her again and she had no choice but to settle back against him, she wondered just what that thing was.

“Tell me...about your people,” she said. If she didn’t think about his sizable cock that was pressing into her back, it wasn’t there.

Even lying in the shadow between them, it felt like it had a spotlight shining on it.

I made it for you.

Now which girl wouldn’t like a dick made just for her? Was it a perfect fit as well? Was it one that would make her see stars and bring her to orgasm as soon as it rubbed against her heated flesh?

Squeezing her eyes tight, she tried not to let those thoughts take root. They would only lead her further down a path she wasn’t sure she wanted to go.

She hadn’t even seen it properly. Only that it was big and not entirely humanlike.

“The Kyron developed in the third sector some millions of your Earth years ago. We evolved. Learned. Grew. Advanced, until we started experimenting on ourselves.”

“Do you have siblings? Parents? A family.”

“I have the collective.”

“The collective?”

“Us. All Kyron. We are one.”

“So what about your mother...how did you come to exist? You said you had a body once.”

“I did.” His lips brushed her ear, and she realized he’d leaned in close.

Her heart skipped a beat as he pulled her closer into his warmth.

“H-how?”

“I was an embryo once. My first few months were within the lab in an artificial sac. Then I was expelled. I stayed in my flesh until Transformation.”

“When was that? What’s the time of transformation?”

“When I perfected motor function.”

“Oh my God...when you were a child?”

“It was necessary. The body begins deteriorating from the moment of birth.”

“Deteriorating?”

“Aging.”

For a moment, silence enveloped them.

“So...your secret to such a long life is removing those parts of you that...deteriorate, as you say. All the parts of you that will eventually fail.”

“All except the brain. That is the last to be augmented.”

Her eyebrows rose. “What about yours? Do you still have your brain somewhere in there?”

Turning, she glanced over her shoulder to look at him.

“Parts,” he replied, those calm eyes moving over her face.

Her gaze fell, focusing on the plain sleeping slab beneath them, as images of the world he spoke about flew across his mind.

It was so different from hers. From Earth.

Her actual existence must be confusing for him. Her brain must be confusing. Her illness even more so.

“So...” she finally said. “You really don’t die.”

“Kyron are decommissioned.”

“Is that the same thing?”

Aliana squinted a little. The warmth at her back felt like a cocoon she wanted to turn around and snuggle into. But it was

V'Alen, and if she turned around at this moment, she was sure snuggling would be the last thing on her mind.

“What do you mean by ‘decommissioned’?”

“Deleted.”

Alaina frowned. “What causes them to delete people?”

“Rogue Kyron.”

“I’ve heard that before,” she whispered. “From the gator-guards.”

V'Alen didn't reply.

“What does it mean?” she pressed.

“When a Kyron overrides his code and no longer observes the Law of Voltaris, he is hunted. And he is deleted.”

His words left his lips like he was talking about the weather, not his potential death if he ended up in such a situation.

Such a stark contrast to her experience...

They remained in silence; him holding her and giving her the comfort she needed, and she accepting the warmth he provided.

Here, in this vessel with him, time stood still.

Everything he told her swirled in her mind as she slumped against him, her lids growing heavy as fatigue crept up on her.

No matter how she tried to remain awake, that strong arm that was pulling her down kept on pulling.

Her body was failing. She knew that. This was just another symptom she hated. Maybe the events of the last few days were finally catching up on her, and she needed the rest.

As she fell asleep, V'Alen curved around her, and all she could feel was him.

He asked her about Earth, and she tried to answer as well as her drowsy mind allowed.

She told him as much as she could about her little blue planet, about life before all this happened.

She told him about her job as an engineer, her favorite ice cream, and even mundane things like which bus she used to take to work. She told him of her favorite TV shows and about her collection of plush toys from her favorite sci-fi movie.

He seemed interested in everything. A constant presence at her back, he listened to her every word, and even though it was comforting, she knew all this wasn't real. This was because of his job and that contract they made.

He was an emissary, after all. His whole purpose was to gather information for his people's Archive.

But she didn't tell him all he wanted to hear because he needed to know.

She did it for herself.

Talking to him about nothing in particular made her feel normal again.

Before her eyes closed completely, V'Alen dipped his head to shoulder, burying his face against her neck. It felt so natural, she couldn't tell him to move even if she wanted to.

A soft smile graced her lips and she placed an arm over the one he had draped across her belly. And just as she tipped over the edge into slumber, she could have sworn she felt something jerk and throb between them, right against the curve of her ass.

Lids heavy, she opened her eyes, her heart thumping as she waited for it to happen again.

But it must have been in her head.

Even though they were cuddling like lovers, whatever she thought she felt didn't happen. It was impossible.

Because V'Alen didn't have urges like that.

WHEN SHE WOKE, SHE WAS ALONE.

Alaina squinted, her hand rising as she rubbed her forehead.

The headache was gone. That was a good sign. Whatever V'Alen injected her with had worked so well, she'd even slept.

Sitting upright, her gaze moved to the front of the ship. She could tell he was sitting at the helm, only the top of his head visible in the chair.

Should she say anything? Judging from what her previous test told her, he'd probably already heard her as soon as she woke up.

Try as she might, though, she couldn't open her mouth to greet him. After last night...

Gripping the cloak to herself, she slid as silently as she could from the sleeping slab, and padded toward the back of the shuttle.

There was a small shower unit there that detached from the wall, unfolding around a section of the ship, and she could take a strange sort of shower that included a blast of disinfectant air that dissolved all impurities.

It only lasted a few seconds, but it would make her clean.

As she reached the shower deck and set the cloak down, she glanced behind her. V'Alen was still at the controls, focused on whatever was in front of him. If he heard her, he

was giving her privacy, and she guessed she should make use of it.

Stripping naked, she stepped into the spot for the shower and activated the controls.

There was a soft whirring sound as the barrier came out and circled the area and Alaina sighed as she ran her fingers into her hair.

It was a poofy mess—something her Nigerian mother would have hated and her Caucasian dad would have shrugged about. He'd never understood her mother's obsession with getting her hair done, but it had been the one thing she'd looked forward to every Sunday.

Sitting between her mother's legs on the floor while her hair was filled with small plaits and beads.

She missed them. Her parents.

They hadn't even known about her diagnosis. She hadn't had the guts to tell them their only child was going to leave the Earth in just three short months.

How was she to have known that she'd be literally leaving the Earth even sooner than that? That she'd be lost in space, far away.

But, at least now, they wouldn't have to see her go. They wouldn't have to see the illness rip her apart and lose her at the end, too.

The headaches...the nausea...

Glancing down at herself, she knew she'd gotten thinner as well.

Sighing, she closed her eyes as the first blast of air hit her. It was warm and tickled her skin just enough for her to pull her thoughts away from the dark place they were falling into.

It was only when some presence made her senses tingle did she open her eyes and look behind her.

V'Alen.

He wasn't at his station anymore. And he'd moved so silently, she hadn't heard him approach.

Alaina's eyes widened as another blast of hot air hit her at that very moment, and she had no choice but to squeeze her eyes shut tight.

"V'Alen?" she called, as soon as the blast ended and she was able to open her eyes again.

He didn't answer...and the way he was looking at her...

Not like a machine.

No machine looked at a person like that.

His gaze moved down her nakedness, pausing at her breasts, down her stomach, to land at the V between her thighs.

"V'Alen?"

His gaze shot to hers again.

"I wasn't supposed to look. Humans hide their bareness."

Alaina cleared her throat. "You're still looking."

"I am."

She fought the urge to squirm.

He was mostly a machine, she reminded herself. He didn't have urges like that.

Like last night when she'd thought she'd felt something grow and throb between them...

These were *her* urges that were clouding her mind.

Throughout her life, she'd put work first. Too interested in physics and motors, artificial intelligence and the grand design. But even with all those obsessions, she couldn't save herself—regardless that she'd spent all her life ignoring her other needs.

Like dating. Feeling loved.

Being *touched*.

That was the reason for this. The reason last night had affected her so much. Why V'Alen's touch had made her yearn for something she couldn't have. Something she had no time left to experience, anyway.

Fuck. She really needed to get a grip.

Deciding to laugh off what he said, she forced a smile. "Like what you see?"

She asked this as she turned her back to him and retrieved her clothes. They'd been blasted too and should be clean.

"Affirmative."

His answer made her freeze.

Alaina swallowed hard, her lips becoming so immediately dry she had to run her tongue over them.

He took a step closer and she didn't know why she didn't step away.

Maybe because being cuddled up to him the night before had been the best kind of contact she'd had in a while.

And maybe because, despite the warring thoughts in her head, about who he was...*what* he was...she knew nothing would ever happen between them.

V'Alen took another step closer and she still couldn't move.

"You haven't kept your part of the contract."

"What contra—. Oh, you mean the promise."

Another step. "Affirmative."

"I—I have...Last night, I told you all about Earth. We spoke until I fell asleep."

"Yes. Information about your world. But not about humans...not about how they *feel*."

What the hell was he talking about? Describing how to feel was practically impossible. How could she tell him he's lucky for not having to bear the burden of the emotions that threatened to rip her apart? That she was only standing there

through sheer will alone? That it was partial insanity that made her come with him on this trip? Fear.

Fear of not living enough.

Fear and desolation.

‘Feeling’ was great when it was good...but when it was bad...

“Alaina...” V’Alen said, and her throat grew dry as she waited for his next few words.

“I want to feel.”

He hadn’t replaced his skin with armor.

For all she could see, behind her was a naked man telling her he wanted her to make him feel.

“Your heart rate is increasing.” He froze then and took a step back, and she realized that whatever was about to happen between them, she was in full control.

He wouldn’t continue if she didn’t want him to.

...*Did* she want him to?

Yes.

Yes, she did.

For all that was going on in her head, she wanted to forget.

He wanted to feel...and so did she.

She wanted to feel something good so she could forget. Forget the shit that surrounded her existence. Forget the pain and be happy for just a moment.

“Are you afraid, Alaina?”

Alaina shook her head. “I’m not afraid. Humans...” She took a breath, more to steady herself and where her thoughts were going than for anything else. “...Our hearts sometimes beat harder if we’re excited or anxious.”

He was still frozen and she could see that ring around his pupil spinning.

“And you are anxious, Alaina...or excited?”

Alaina swallowed hard. “What are you doing, V’Alen?”

He paused again. “For once in my existence...I do not know.”

His answer threw her and she turned to face him. “Is something wrong?”

Ever since that day in the bunker...after they touched the orb...he’s been acting differently. It wasn’t her imagination, was it?

“Negative.”

“You’ve always appeared so...robotic. This is...different,” she whispered.

“I am learning.”

The more he spoke, the more her anxiety rose.

He studied her for a bit more and she realized that they were suddenly close to each other. He’d stopped moving, but when had she walked towards him?

“All my systems are at peak performance,” he said, his gaze falling to her lips before slowly falling even lower to her breasts.

Her nipples pebbled immediately and she fought to keep her breaths steady.

V’Alen stepped closer, silence enveloping them.

It was only him and her and nothing else.

When she took a step back, he followed until her back met the wall.

Alaina swallowed hard, trying to fight the invasive feelings that were bubbling in her chest. But fighting was futile. She couldn’t win.

Not when he was so close.

Not when he put an arm above her, bracing against the wall as he looked down at her.

Her heart thudded in her chest as she gazed up at him. He could shoot lasers from his eyes. Lasers from his palms. And

yet, when she looked at him, all she saw was a man.

A man. And she was a woman.

Her heart stuttered, and when he lifted a hand, threading his fingers through her hair, she couldn't help but lean into his grasp.

"You are feeling...excitement," he said.

Alaina blinked, gazing up at him still. "Yes," she whispered.

Did he have any clue what he was doing? That he was making her feel desired? Like she was a woman again?

"Where did you learn to do this?" her whisper was so soft, if he had human ears, it would have been difficult for him to hear her.

Everything about him right now was different from before. Now it felt like he was almost...*chasing* her...and she didn't know what to think or do.

"One of the Restitution's rebels. His name is Kyro. He collected data from the Tasqal ship that visited your planet." His fingers threaded through her hair, massaging her scalp with soft strokes. "While you slept, I watched images of what human males and females do together."

His gaze fell to hers. "And...I want to do that with you. I want to see you feel."

She should stop this. She should nip it right in the bud. Tell him it wasn't appropriate. That she wouldn't be contributing to his research for his people's Archive any longer. That fucking with her heart for the purpose of research was where she drew the line.

But even though she knew she *should*, she *couldn't*.

Because the only question in her head was...why not?

Why the hell not?

Yes, he was messing with her heart, but he didn't know that. This was purely on her and her stupid ideals about what should or should not be.

And...fuck those ideals.

So she did it. She did it before her senses returned. Before she could question herself and back away.

She tipped on her toes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips against his. V'Alen stilled, his fingers pausing in her hair as her lips moved against his, and just when that niggling thought took root in her mind, that she really should stop this nonsense, he pressed his mouth against hers harder.

He was either a fast learner, or whatever videos he'd watched from Earth had been extremely detailed, for as his lips moved against hers, making shivers go down her spine, she knew she was going past the point of no return.

"V'Alen," she whispered against his lips.

"Alaina."

The way he said it, as if he wasn't just calling her name but noting it down, cementing it to memory, made her weak. And as he dipped, lifting her into his arms, all she could do was melt against him.

She wasn't sure where he was taking her. Didn't care to look.

But when he set her down on the sleeping slab, his frame blocking the overhead light as he climbed over her, it finally hit her that whatever was about to happen was going to change her life forever.

"V'Alen," she whispered, about to tell him to stop when he dipped his head once more, his lips closing over hers.

She couldn't even think, her resistance dying on her lips, as something that felt like a tongue swiped against hers.

Her eyes widened slightly before a moan came from somewhere within her.

His tongue played with hers, directing a symphony that made her tremble, and he must have thought she was cold, because his entire frame got warmer as he settled over her.

“V’Alen.” As he ripped his lips from hers, his kiss traveling down her neck, her back arched as his lips reached her collarbone.

“V’Alen,” she whimpered as his hand closed over one breast.

His skin was smooth. So smooth and warm.

Her nipples were so hard that when his fingers brushed over them, she jerked against him, pleasure shooting through her that made her belly clench.

V’Alen lifted his head, his gaze shifting to her nipple, that ring around his pupil spinning as his fingers moved over it again. When she whimpered and bit down on her bottom lip, his gaze flew to her face.

Her chest heaved with every breath as he watched her, his fingers moving in slow swipes, torturing the little bud on her chest with every flick of heat he transferred to her skin.

She knew he was only watching her because this was all data to him. But she’d never seen a man look at her the way he was looking at her now. As if she was the most interesting thing in the universe. As if he was obsessed with her and couldn’t get enough.

“If you react so well to this...I wonder what you will do when I—”

“When you what?”

Her eyes rolled back as he suddenly dipped his head, his mouth closing over the nipple he’d teased.

There was a slow pulse to his lips that tugged at her nipple, pulling it into his mouth as that tongue swiped over the sensitive bead.

Warm electricity shot through her that made her bite her lip.

He’d prepared for this. Planned it.

Why did that turn her on even more?

V'Alen teased her skin like he'd done this a thousand times and knew exactly where to touch to make electricity flow right through her. One hand held her breast as he licked and sucked at the pebbled flesh, while the other hand roamed over her nakedness as if he was mapping every dip, every curve, drawing an image of her in his mind that he wanted to hold forever.

The last of her resistance went when his fingers slipped between her legs, brushing over her most sensitive place. Her hand snapped to his, her fingers closing over his wrist at the same time that eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed opened wide.

Breaths thudded through her as she gazed at the cyborg. V'Alen paused, lifting his lips from her skin as one of his fingers slid between her folds.

Oh hell...

She could already feel how slick she'd gotten. Even if this was new territory, her body knew what it wanted.

V'Alen swiped his finger through her, a gentle caress that made her little bud grow and throb, seeking more of his caress. And when he lifted that same finger, a transparent sheen coating the digit as he brought it up to the light, she felt her cheeks grow warm as her core clenched onto nothing.

Still, she couldn't close her legs. She couldn't move as he dipped his finger to her again to repeat the action, that digit moving through her folds so slowly, she trembled.

He didn't know what he was doing. This was all just research for him and it shouldn't turn her on the way it was turning her on now. But all she wanted was for him to continue. She didn't want him to stop. Not for her. Not for himself.

She wanted him to keep touching her until she was mindless.

When he made a sound in his throat that almost sounded like a growl, Alaina's eyes widened slightly as he dipped his head once more, that mouth of his closing over her breast as he

ran that finger through her folds, circling her clit like she was holding his hand there, teaching him what to do.

“V’Alen...I can’t,” she panted.

“Can’t what, Alaina?”

“I can’t stop. If you continue, I’m going to come.”

His head snapped up at that moment, those all-seeing eyes boring into her, but his fingers didn’t pause. If anything, their assault picked up the pace and a whimper slipped past her lips.

“Yes,” he said.

“Yes? Yes what?” she panted.

“Come, Alaina.”

Fuck.

That sounded too close to “come for me” and she didn’t realize it before, but maybe she liked hearing words like that.

He was commanding her to come into her pleasure. To reach for it. To claim it. And her body responded.

Her eyes widened as his finger vibrated. A constant tone as he pressed it against her clit, swirling slowly.

Her body spasmed, unexpected pleasure crashing through her as she gripped the sleeping slab, her fingers digging into the rigid fibers beneath them as her back arched into him.

V’Alen recaptured her nipple between his lips, the heat of his mouth sending another jolt to her senses as she squirmed underneath him.

“V’Alen, I’m going to—”

“Come.” With that one word, he adjusted his fingers, slipping one thick vibrating digit inside her as the other one pressed against her clit.

All thoughts escaped her head. All she could do was feel.

As her eyes rolled over, pleasure crashing through her like a tidal wave, her body jerked in his grasp.

She clung to him, this alien being that was suddenly her lifeline, sounds that weren't even words leaving her lips. And even when the orgasm passed, those fingers still vibrated.

"V'Alen," she panted. She was spent. His fingers still felt oh so good, but she was exhausted.

She'd forgotten just how draining her orgasms made her, even before she became ill, and that one felt like it pulled the energy straight from her toes.

"Again?" he asked.

"I—" She couldn't even speak as those fingers kept up with their sweet assault.

"I am at your service, Alaina."

She shuddered at his words, pleasure mixed in with how feverish she was becoming.

She hadn't even thought about it fully, but did he even get tired? If they were to go all the way...how long would he last?

"Too much," she whispered, and his fingers finally stilled, the one inside her withdrawing slowly. As the digit left her entrance, her pussy clenched, already missing the invasion.

God. How shameless could she be?

She'd wanted it...but she hadn't expected to like it so much.

As V'Alen moved higher, bracing his arms on either side of her, she looked up at him with weary, lowered lids.

V'Alen brought his face close to hers, looking down into her eyes for a minute before he slid to the side and pulled her into his arms.

"I will keep you warm."

As Alaina settled against him, she knew he didn't need to. He didn't need to hold her. Didn't need to keep her warm because the ship's temperature control was back online.

He was holding her because he wanted to.

He'd made her come.

They'd passed a point they couldn't return from.
And...she wasn't sure where to go from here.

ALAINA'S EYES BLINKED OPEN. THE UNFOCUSED GRAY OF THE panel above her greeted her eyes.

She'd fallen asleep. Again.

And she still felt tired.

Groaning, she rose on her elbow. The thick cloak that was draped over her and V'Alen was no longer at her side.

An immediate pang went through her, right to the center of her chest. Swallowing whatever emotion was rising, she pushed the thoughts from her head.

Why would he stay by her side? There was no reason to. And what they'd shared before...that was just...

That was just a form of release for her...

And information gathering for him.

Shaking her head, she frowned at herself. If she was going to do casual sex, the least she could do was get with the program.

Plus, it wasn't even sex. They didn't go all the way. All he'd done was give her one of the best orgasms of her life, only by using his fingers and mouth.

A grimace made her shrink into herself, her gaze lifting to the front of the ship where the controls were. She could see he was sitting there and all the words suddenly disappeared from her head.

What the hell was she going to say to him?

“You are awake, Alaina.”

Alaina closed her eyes briefly as V’Alen turned, the chair spinning on its axis as he faced her.

“Hello, V’Alen.”

Why was she blushing?

Flicking her gaze away from him, she reached for her tunic, which he’d hung on the panel near the sleeping slab, and pulled it over her head.

The fabric dragged across her breasts, only reminding her of one thing.

“We are stationary over Okurna,” he continued. “I would have gone to the surface to retrieve the xytrex box, but I did not know when you would awaken.” He paused. “I did not want you to be afraid.”

Alaina paused, her fingers on the hem of the tunic as it settled at her waist. He’d been thinking about her. Her feelings.

Clearing her throat, her gaze shifted to the viewscreen. “Above Okurna? We’ve arrived?”

Wasn’t it supposed to be at least one more day’s travel before they got there?

“Affirmative. You have been at rest for...some time.”

His words hit her like a brick. Some time?

How long?

She wanted to ask. Wanted more than anything to know, but she wasn’t sure she was ready for the answer.

They were getting worse. Her symptoms.

A lump formed in her throat, her fingers trembling as she shimmied, pulling the tunic the rest of the way over her hips as she finally met his gaze.

She’d lost time. Valuable time.

“How long was I asleep for?”

“Forty-eight Earth hours,” he replied, and a shaft of cold air felt like it settled in the center of her chest.

Two days?

It didn't surprise her. Didn't shock her in the least bit. She'd expected this. So why did it make her intestines curl into a knot?

“You must require sustenance.”

Rising from where he sat, V'Alen took the first few steps toward her. That's the only reason she noticed he was wearing pure armor once more.

Another annoying pang of *something* went through her chest.

Guess he was done gathering *that* sort of research.

It shouldn't make her feel any sort of way...so why was her heart starting to hurt.

Clutching her chest, she stared down at herself, her gaze only rising when a meal bar appeared before her lips.

She reached for the food with her uninjured hand, but the meal packet was promptly pulled out of her reach.

“Wha—”

“Allow me to feed you.”

Alaina blinked up at the cyborg before her as he brought the food lower once more, prodding her bottom lip gently, prompting her to open her mouth and let him in.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she wanted to scream. So instead, she took a big bite of the meal bar and chewed like she was a train eating tracks.

With her mouth full, she couldn't say anything stupid.

Like how him feeding her was making her think about him feeding her something else. Or like how even though two days had passed since he'd made her come, she still felt the ghosts of his fingers sliding across her clit.

She couldn't tell him that now that they'd done that very intimate thing, all she was thinking about was the fact that he'd made a cock, just for her, and just how good she imagined he'd feel.

She couldn't say that she shouldn't have let him come that close, because now, she was afraid...

Alaina's eyes widened as she stared at him, the food almost falling from her open lips.

...She was afraid that she was falling for him and the last thing she needed was to fall. In. Love.

It couldn't be.

She wasn't falling for him...was she?

FUCK.

As she swallowed and V'Alen offered her another bite of the meal bar, he crouched so they were on the same level. There was no way to avoid that backlit blue gaze of his now that his face was right before hers.

Her heart skipped a beat and it was hard to face him, her eyes kept wanting to drift away as if to hide since she couldn't physically do so.

She hadn't been wrong about him acting differently. What kind of porn had he frickin' watched from Earth? Because her heart was hammering like it was trying to beat for all the life she wouldn't get to live.

That part of her she was trying to school and ignore *liked* it.

"We didn't get to finish."

A spark of electricity went through her and Alaina blinked, her gaze finally meeting his full-on. "What did you say?"

"We didn't get to finish. I want to make you come again, Alaina."

Oh. Fuck.

"...but you are weak. You will tire. Your illness..."

She lifted a hand so he wouldn't continue. "I know. I didn't expect to sleep so long either."

"It is not only sleep. Your temperature fluctuations—"

"Temperature fluctuations?"

V'Alen didn't answer her immediately. Instead, he reached for a water pouch and pressed it to her lips.

Closing her mouth around the thing, she let him push small squirts into her mouth as she waited for him to continue.

"I have been monitoring your life signs since I took you from that Hedgerud's grasp."

"And?"

"Your temperature has been fluctuating. I have been adjusting the ship's temperature control accordingly, so you do not overheat or freeze."

Alaina blinked up at him. "What?"

V'Alen didn't answer. She guessed there was no answer, and her gaze followed him as he set the water pouch down.

So this whole time...she didn't notice the temperature changes because he'd been caring for her? Tending to her?

What else had he been doing to make this easier for her? What other things had passed by without her noticing?

That lump that had formed in her throat returned.

And how?

He said he couldn't feel. Why was he...why was he doing all this for her?

To him, she was nothing. A being with a lifespan that probably rivaled a mayfly's in his eyes.

So why?

A beep sounded in the ship that pulled her from her thoughts as V'Alen turned away from her and headed back to the controls.

"We must descend soon," he said.

Alaina gulped, trying to organize her thoughts.

Why worry about such things? This was all temporary and what was important was right before her.

Her gaze slid to the box on the floor. The one that she'd purposefully ignored all this time. Still there, the orb's ethereal light shone through the cracks.

"Yes," she said. "We should do this. We should do what we came here for." And leave silly thoughts at bay.

Sliding from the sleeping slab, she stiffened her shoulders as she moved to the passenger seat and strapped herself in.

"I'm ready," she said.

Only...why did it feel like this was the most unprepared she'd ever been for anything in her entire life?

OKURNA WAS NOTHING LIKE SHE EXPECTED.

Instead of a vast shining city, booming with technology strong enough to control the orb they were trying to hide, all she could see were dark towers rising into the sky.

The place looked like a ravaged planet with nothing left to give.

It was a return to reality. To the war they were fighting. Back to the real world and out of the one she realized she'd created in the shuttle with V'Alen.

Time hadn't stopped.

The danger was still out there, and the clock was ticking.

"What happened to this place?" she whispered, eyes widening as they got closer to the surface and the sight before her only got worse. The towers were tall, dark skeletons of buildings long gone, and the ground itself looked barren and without life.

"The inhabitants of this planet all live underneath the surface," V'Alen supplied.

"Why?"

Not that it was a question worth an answer. The state of the surface told her enough. Whatever happened here happened long ago, and it seemed they never recovered.

"The surface air is toxic to many lifeforms," V'Alen continued.

“Toxic?”

“The Okurnians were producers of many goods sold across the galaxy. Their factories polluted their air. Their atmosphere did not recover, and they did not learn from their mistake until the effects were too far gone.”

Toxic? Did that mean it was toxic to her as well?

As the ship slowed down and V’Alen swerved around some buildings, he brought the vessel down on a flat spot that seemed unnatural in the surroundings.

“One of the many landing bays,” he supplied.

Alaina nodded, swallowing past the lump in her throat.

This was it. They’d arrived. They could complete what they came here for and then their mission would be over.

Clutching her hand to her chest, she rubbed the space over her ribs that seemed to ache.

Why did that make her feel sad?

As the engine’s hum slowly died, V’Alen rose from his seat and she slipped the restraints from across her body, standing as he reached her.

“What do we do? Do we carry this thing with us?” She glanced down at the orb at their feet.

“Negative. There is a fifty percent chance we will encounter difficulty.”

Her lips thinning into a line, Alaina nodded as V’Alen reached down and opened a hatch on the floor of the shuttle.

“I will hide it here.”

With that, he released the box from the restraints that kept it steady on the floor and deposited the orb into the little hole before sliding the lid shut.

Now it was out of sight. There was no delineation on the floor to reveal the hidden compartment. Only someone who knew it was there would find it.

Nodding, she didn't realize she'd been staring at the spot until something appeared in front of her face.

V'Alen had risen and retrieved something else from one of the storage panels above them. She blinked at the thing. There was only one thing it could be.

“A gas mask?”

“Affirmative.”

As he helped her to adjust the thing across her nose and mouth, she tried to keep her breaths steady.

“Maybe I should stay here...”

His words were immediate. “Negative. You are far too important.”

Her cheeks warmed. He kept saying that and she didn't know why.

“Do not fear, Alaina. I am here.”

But her hesitation wasn't because she was scared.

There was a strange feeling in her gut.

Something about this place creeped her the fuck out.

He should go alone. He obviously knew about this planet and the people that lived here and he could more than take care of himself. But even as she thought this, another thought came into the back of her mind.

While he was gone, she would have to stay on the ship and on the surface of a toxic planet.

What the fuck would she do if something happened?

She didn't know what was worse, so she gripped the cloak as he finished securing the gas mask and handed it to her.

“Follow me.”

“Yes, sir.”

V'Alen glanced at her over his shoulder, that look in his eyes where she knew he was studying her, and her cheeks only grew warmer.

Maybe finishing this mission and going back to the reality of the Restitution was best after all.

As soon as she stepped out of the ship, it was clear this was a dead, desolate place.

Not even the air moved and the sound of each inhale and exhale she delivered to the mask strapped to her face sounded loud in the stillness.

V'Alen led the way, his steps short and measured as they walked across the landing pad. When he suddenly stopped, she almost bumped into his back.

“Why are we stop—”

He crouched and she could see why. A hatch in the floor of the landing pad.

Pressing some kind of engagement device on top of the hatch made it swing open and they both stared down into the darkness.

“Okurnians do not like light.”

Great.

Couldn't say she was surprised.

They lived underground and, from the looks of it, they blocked out their own sun and made their surface unlivable.

She wasn't looking forward to meeting these Okurnians.

“Human code dictates I should let you enter first.”

Alaina glanced up at him. “I thought you only watched porn when you checked those videos from Earth.”

With the dim light behind his eyes, she could see that ring spinning as he studied her. “I consumed thousands of moving images on human procreation, and even more on human life.” He paused. “I await doing it all with you, Alaina.”

That blush that had been threatening to scorch her cheeks went full flame.

“Don't sweet talk me.”

It must have been the fact that his words were making her flustered that made her brush past him and climb down the hatch with bravery that came out of nowhere.

Only about three feet down into the thing did she realize what she was doing.

Glancing up, the little light they had vanished as V'Alen entered the shaft and slid the hatch closed.

“Shit.”

Immediately, and as if he read her mind, V'Alen's suit lit up, cutting through the darkness that surrounded her.

Giving him a thankful smile, she continued on.

“Just how far down are we headed?”

“Several lengths downward. We will reach another platform where a lift will take us to the Okurnian domain.”

Sheesh. “No way they get a lot of visitors this way.”

“Okurnians are not known for their hospitality.”

Of course not. “The more I learn about them, the more there is to like.”

If he was standing before her, she was sure his head would have tilted in that way it usually does.

“I don't mean that.”

“Affirmative. It was a lie.”

Her cheeks warmed. “No. It was sarcasm. There is a difference.” This was good. The light conversation was distracting her from the fact that it was growing colder the deeper they went. It was also distracting her from the fact that the longer she climbed down, the more tired she became. Her limbs felt weak. Her head heavy.

But she couldn't stop.

She wouldn't be a burden.

“Sarcasm?” V'Alen asked as her feet hit the platform he'd told her about

“Pfft. So much I have to teach you.”

As he descended and stood beside her, he turned, those eyes catching her in a way that made her freeze. “I anticipate learning.”

Breathe, Alaina. Stop reading into his words.

As V’Alen led the way to the lift, she kept close behind, her heart a steady pitter-patter like the sound of her footsteps against the floor. And as the lift began descending, she tried to keep those invasive thoughts at bay.

“Alaina,” V’Alen said as soon as the lift stopped, the sound of his voice sending a shiver right through her. “When you meet the Okurnians...do not fear. I am here.”

Adding to what she already knew about these beings, that didn’t give her much confidence. Her brows furrowed as the lift opened and V’Alen stepped out. Following close behind, at first, she thought the light was coming from his suit.

But no, it was coming from above.

Dim greenish lights bathed the area in a soft glow, and Alaina’s eyes widened.

She didn’t know what she’d expected, but she certainly hadn’t expected this.

She was on a street in a vast city. Above them, something that looked like a train sped by on a floating railway.

There was noise, and movement, and chatter, and...*life*. A stark contrast to the surface of the planet.

“This way,” V’Alen said. “I know where we might locate a xytrex box.”

Walking by his side, her eyes widened some more as she took the sights in. The streets were busy, but not in the sense of people hanging around. They all seemed to be heading somewhere. And they all seemed to be...lizards.

Giant lizard people, with pale skin and pale, slitted eyes, the soft glow of the lights casting shadows as they moved past

each other. So pale they were, that the green lights seemed to paint them all a tinge of green.

They took no notice of her, but even though they all held their heads straight, a shiver ran down her spine anyway.

Their heads were straight, but their eyes shifted. To V'Alen.

Skipping two steps ahead, she grabbed onto V'Alen's arm. Maybe for her own peace of mind, or maybe to calm the fact that every hair on her body, bar those on her head, were standing on end.

"We should probably make this quick," she whispered.

"Affirmative."

Turning down a side street, V'Alen led them away from the main crowd. By chance, she turned her head slightly to the side and glanced in the direction they'd come.

Blood curdled in her veins.

Every single being that had been walking on the thoroughfare had stopped. They were all looking in their direction.

Tiredness forgotten. Brain fog forgotten. Alaina gripped V'Alen's hand tighter.

"V'Alen." Her whisper was harsh and insistent.

Even on this street with fewer people, she could see their eyes shift and she could *feel* them stop as soon as they'd walked past, their eyes boring into their backs.

"V'Alen."

"Do not fear, Alaina. They can smell it. Feed on it."

Mother-*fucking*-great. She'd be dinner because she was fucking afraid.

"Staying in that ship seems like it was a great idea right about now."

"Negative. You are far too important."

Alaina bit down on her bottom lip and forced herself to continue down the street.

When he turned and went down another, her heart galloped into her throat as they met upon more crowds.

“You are not alone, Alaina. I am here.”

How did he know? Ah yes, he was still monitoring her life signs. He could probably hear her heart trying to grow legs and run away.

“Yes,” she hissed. “I know you’re here. I’m not worried about *you*. I’m worried about myself. You observe that law, but still, no one in their right mind would attack you. For me, on the other hand, it’s different. I don’t want to be lizard meat.”

V’Alen stopped walking and she almost stumbled as her feet were going too fast, trying to get her the hell out of there.

“*Why* are you stopping?” she hissed, eyes wide on him as she tried to ignore the terror all around them. Even in the corner of her eye, she could tell that these...*beings* had stopped walking and were watching them keenly. Not a sound was in the air except for the occasional train riding above them.

“You are afraid.”

Alaina darted a glance around them. The Okurnians, even those farther down the street were stopping.

They reminded her of a type of gecko her Jamaican roommate had been screaming about in college. The gecko hadn’t even been in the same room. Heck, it hadn’t been in the same country. Her roommate had been on a video call with her mother when the gecko, or “croaking lizard” as her roommate had screamed, had appeared on the wall.

All hell had broken loose on the mother’s end.

Back then, she hadn’t understood their fear. The gecko had looked harmless.

It had just stood, unmoving, watching the mother as she freaked out.

Well...she understood their fear now.

“Yes, I am very afraid.” She kept her voice so low not even she could hear her own whisper.

“I am here, Alaina. I will not let harm come to you. You are important.”

“Yea, you’ve said that. That I’m important to the Restitution. Well, V’Alen, the Restitution is in shambles. They don’t care about me as much as you think.”

That ring around his pupil spun. “Negative, Alaina. You are important.”

“V’Alen...”

“You are important *to me*.”

SHE WAS SHIVERING, AND HE WASN'T SURE SHE WAS AWARE OF it. Around them, all the Okurnians had ceased all movement, their eyes on him. And now that he had stopped walking, their eyes were on *her*.

Something glitched in his code and he could feel his automatic detection processes rushing to investigate and solve the error.

Not many Kyron visited Okurna.

They were afraid. Of him.

Alaina's soft hand squeezed his, her delicate fingers threaded between his own as she hung on to his hand. Her body was turned into his and she was so close he could measure her pulse without running any scans.

He doubted any words he said would dim her fear.

She was a pack species. Even coming with him on this mission, where she was without other humans, was incredibly brave. Her need for comfort within her pack was at the forefront and right now, she felt alone.

Vulnerable.

Like she was two days before. Only back then, she'd been underneath him, whimpers of pleasure leaving her lips. Her vulnerability had made electricity run through his circuits in a way it had never done before.

It was the closest he'd come to feeling anything in so, so long.

It was an addictive sensation. One that made him wonder why he had given it all up.

He wanted more. He wanted more of *her*, but not this. Not her fear. Her happiness. Her whimpers of pleasure. Her joy.

[Scan]

“This way, Alaina.” He kept her close as he turned down another side street.

There was only one place he might find a xytrex box, and that would be in the city's Exchange.

As they hurried through the streets, more and more Okurnians paused to stare at them as they passed.

[Target located.]

The closest entrance to the Exchange was several meters ahead.

“How much farther?” Alaina whispered.

“Not long now, Alaina.”

But just as he sent out a second scan, V'Alen paused.

Alaina gripped his hand tighter. “Why are we stopping?”

Her gaze darted to the Okurnians who were frozen in shock beside them, the only movement being those slitted eyes as they slid in his direction and stayed.

“V'Alen...” Alaina's soft fingers were insistent as she squeezed his hand.

“There is an inconvenience.”

She stiffened, her brows furrowing, and when she looked ahead, he could tell the moment she saw what he did. It seemed the lifeblood drained from her veins.

Two Hedgerud fighters stood at the entrance to the Exchange, the dim green overhead lights that dotted the city casting them in a soft glow.

Glancing down at the human beside him, he noted her whole demeanor changed.

As if she no longer saw the Okurnians she was so afraid of, she grabbed his hand even tighter and pulled him to the side.

The sea of Okurnians parted like a wave.

“You call that an inconvenience. I call that a big fucking problem. What are *they* doing here?” she hissed.

[Scan]

Her fear was gone. She almost seemed angry.

Was he the reason? Was she upset that he didn't identify the Hedgeruds' presence earlier? Eyes falling to the wounds on her neck and hand, her fury was logical.

“Those assholes make my blood boil.” She spoke through gritted teeth. “Were we followed here?”

“Negative.” If they'd been followed, he'd have known. “They are here for some other reason.”

“We can't let them see us.” Wide brown eyes darted to the unmoving crowd in which they hid and a shiver went through her shoulders, shaking the cloak draped over them. “We have to go. Is there another direction we can go in to get to the same destination?”

“This city has only one Exchange.”

“*Fuck*. And let me guess, they're exactly at the spot we need to go.”

“Affirmative.”

“*Motherfuckers*.” Her eyes darted to the Okurnians again. “But there's only two. We could take them.”

“Hedgeruds travel in teams. If two are above...more lurk within the Exchange.”

“Of course. I just knew this was going to be easy.”

His head tilted as he looked down at her. She was lying again.

“Sarcasm,” she whispered.

“Noted.”

“We have to do something. We need that box.”

“The choice may not be ours.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “What?”

“In approximately five seconds, the Hedgeruds will notice the crowd has stopped moving.”

Alaina gulped.

“In approximately seven seconds, they will identify us.”

Her eyes widened.

She didn’t seem to think. Her body began moving on its own as she spun, her grip still on him as she darted in the opposite direction.

“We have to think of something else or wait them out. If they find out we are here, worse, *why* we’re here...”

Turning down another side street, she kept moving. He could see her throat bobbing as she tried to keep her gaze averted from the Okurnians. They were almost back on the main street when a thin, pale arm shot out and closed around her arm.

He was by her side in an instant, his free hand gripping the offending arm in a vise that would break it instantly if he wanted.

Alaina’s eyes widened even further, a steady thump-thump beating in his auditory canal that could only be her pulse. Around them, the Okurnians seemed to express a collective shiver.

“Release—” he began, but when his gaze fell on the Okurnian who had dared to put hands on his human, V’Alen paused.

The male shuddered, his skin going even paler than usual. “P-please. I, Afessler Komiron, do not wish to offend you, mighty Kyron. Do not take this as an attack on your person or your...” His gaze slipped to Alaina. “...your m-mate.”

Mate.

He was not Alaina's life partner.

Could he be?

It was not logical for her to accept a being like him. But two days ago she *did* accept him, in another way.

[Calculating life bond chances]

[Subject: Kyron]

[Subject: Human]

Based on the data already gathered...

[Result: Life bond possible]

His head tilted in Alaina's direction, but her whole focus was on the Okurnian in his grasp.

"Kyron," the Okurnian continued, "there is something you must know."

Alaina glanced up at him, her body still rigid. "Let him go, V'Alen."

He tilted his head once more, scanning her.

[Heart rate elevated.]

She was afraid. Not excited.

But illogically, as he released the Okurnian's arm and the male's gaze shifted nervously around, Alaina took a deep breath and followed the male into the shop.

An illogical thing to do when she was scared.

But had this female ever been logical since she blessed him with her presence?

Negative.

Never.

Only because she entered the shop willingly did he follow behind her.

The interior was...different. Various bubbling vials sat on large tables in the center of the dim room. And seated along

those tables, Okurnians that were so still, only their life scans told him they were not stone, sat looking back at him.

Alaina glanced up at him, stepping closer to his side as soon as he entered behind her.

“W-we know why you are here,” Afessler said.

V’Alen didn’t respond, but he noted Alaina’s frown. After all, the male seemed to be directing his speech at her.

“How do you know why we’re here?” she asked, her voice not betraying the quick beat of her pulse in his ears.

“The same reason the Hedgeruds have been swarming our city.”

Her eyes widened and he couldn’t help but keep his gaze locked on her face.

So expressive.

Did she know how telling her face was? How every moment in that ship, he’d wanted to stand before her, watching her every move...*soaking* her in.

Like now, how even in the midst of danger, he couldn’t pull his focus from her.

And two days ago...

How she’d whimpered his name. How she’d become undone before him.

He’d never...*experienced* anything like that in all his existence.

It was his first time.

She was his first time.

“It cannot be coincidence that they are here when they work for the High Tasqals.” Afessler glanced at the members of his species seated before them. Not a muscle moved. “We were hoping the Kyron was here to destroy them all.”

Alaina reared back a little, her frown deepening.

“But you know of the Law of Voltaris, right? Surely you didn’t think he was here to break his people’s code?”

Afessler's shoulders slumped, the soft scales that dotted his skin shifting over his muscles.

“It was but a hope. The Hedgeruds have been terrorizing our females, even though we have given them all we have.”

Alaina blinked, her shoulders straightening. Hand still threaded through his, she squeezed his fingers while stepping even closer to his side.

[Heart rate elevated.]

She still feared the Okurnians, even though she stood before them so bravely.

“What do you mean ‘all you have’?” she asked.

Afessler shook his head. “Xytrex boxes. Ore. Supplies. Our females.”

Alaina stiffened, her gaze rising to lock with his ocular sensors.

For the first time since this conversation began, he pulled his attention away from her and squared his gaze on the Okurnian. Afessler trembled immediately. It was no wonder he had spoken to Alaina directly. The Okurnian couldn't even meet his gaze.

“The Hedgeruds have been collecting xytrex boxes?”

“Aye, sire.” One of the other Okurnians spoke. “We have no more to give, yet they demand we supply. The ore is difficult to locate and cure. We cannot meet their demands.”

“And we do not want to help the High Tasqals,” another said.

“But the Restitution is destroyed,” Afessler pointed out. “The only hope we had to live freely is gone. We have no choice but to bend to the Tasqals' demands or suffer their wrath.”

Alaina seemed to snap out of some daze. “Who told you that? That the Restitution was destroyed?”

“Word has spread,” Afessler said. “The Hedgeruds have been rejoicing. The whole city knows.”

“There is no hope,” another Okurnian said.

V’Alen tilted his head as he observed the beings before him.

He’d already calculated the odds. There was a thirty percent chance the Restitution would reorganize and continue the fight. All beings fighting for this cause had not given up.

But these beings, even though they did not join in the fight, had already lost all hope.

When his gaze slipped to the Okurnians at the table, one male trembled so much, his frothy beverage splashed over his webbed fingers.

They should leave. He and Alaina had no business here, and they were wasting valuable time. If the Hedgeruds had amassed xytrex boxes, all he needed to do was retrieve one from them. But glancing down at the female before him, he knew he’d have to go about it alone.

That was the logical choice. Taking her directly into danger created terrible odds.

He did not feel fear. So why was he hesitating?

“There *is* hope.” For the first time since encountering these Okurnians, Alaina let go of his hand and his gaze dropped to where her fingers had touched his armor, the warmth of her skin still lingering on the spot.

“What do you mean there is no hope?” So small, the top of her head only reached the Okurnian’s collarbone; yet, she glared up at him. “You’re alive. You’re healthy. You have *time*. Do something with it!”

Her teeth were grit. Her brows steep inclines against her forehead.

This was anger.

She turned on the others and they flinched. “The Restitution is *not* dead. It’s made up of rebels who could be any one of you. Beings that decided to fight. Males... *females*...we all fight.”

The Okurnians startle. “*You* are part of the Restitution?”

For the first time since she began her speech, her mouth opened and closed without words leaving her lips.

“Yes,” she finally said. “I might not be the best example of a rebel...but I’m not letting that stop me.” Releasing a breath, she suddenly looked wearier than she did before. “If there’s anything I know...it’s that there’s strength in numbers. There are a lot of you here. If only you’d realize that you’re not as weak as you think.”

Turning to face him, Alaina stretched her lips in a tight smile. “We should go, V’Alen. They said those Hedgeruds are swarming the exact place we need to go. It’s...futile.” She squared her thin shoulders. “But we will find another way.”

Negative.

At least...that is what he wanted to say. So why didn’t he say it? What was stopping his code from executing the command of speech?

For it wasn’t futile. *He* could do it. If the Hedgeruds still had their stash of xytrex boxes somewhere on the planet, he could find it. He could retrieve what they needed.

He’d only have to leave her side.

Stepping back toward him, her brown eyes turned up to him. “Let’s go. Are you ready?”

Negative. The thought was just that, a thought. A word he couldn’t say.

“Affirmative,” he said.

It was almost as if he was forcing his body to turn toward the door.

This was not like disobeying the Law of Voltaris. This was something else entirely. Something new to his experience. And a thing he had no clue how to counteract.

“Wait!” the Okurnian spoke. “Your presence here, Kyron...word has already spread of your arrival. The Hedgeruds might already know you walk these streets.” The

Okurnian paused, his slitted eyes darting to his kin. “There is a tunnel you can take. One that will take you back to the shaft that leads to your ship on the surface. You should go that way.”

Attached to his side, he could almost feel Alaina’s hesitation.

The Hedgeruds’ knowledge of him was of no consequence. They wouldn’t be foolish enough to attack him.

But Alaina...

Staring at her now...all he could see was the fact she could break.

This was the exact reason his people had changed.

Alaina had no defenses. No armor. No protective shield. Nothing to fight the dangers that were at every corner of this universe.

And she was leaving it soon.

It was decided.

For the blip of time she had left...he would be what she needed. He would be her protection.

“Show me the tunnel.”

THE TUNNEL WAS DARK, THE ONLY LIGHT BEING THAT COMING from V'Alen's suit. And she clung to him.

For some reason, she couldn't let him go.

It was almost as if she could feel her heartbeat thumping in her palm, beating against the cool metal of his hand as she clung to it, the Okurnian in front leading them through the narrow winding path.

It was a damp place. One that reminded her of those tunnels she imagined people dug when trying to escape life-threatening circumstances.

Like they were now.

It was a good thing she wasn't claustrophobic, because, added to the unsteady beat of her heart and the pressure on her lungs, she might have a breakdown.

Just have to get through the tunnel. I just have to do it. And then we get our asses off this damn planet and find an alternative.

Because there had to be another way. Right?

They were walking for much longer than she'd expected when the Okurnian suddenly stopped.

Before him was a lift, which he ushered them into before pulling the metal bars closed.

"May you reach success," he said, his eyes hardly reaching up to V'Alen's. In V'Alen style, he did not reply.

“And you, small strange female,” the Okurnian’s gaze slid to her. “You have spoken words to us that have given my people hope. We will spread the word the Restitution is still fighting.”

Alaina watched him as he remained still, those unnerving slitted eyes watching them as the lift shook and began rising.

“You’ll tell them,” she said, “but what will that do? You still won’t fight.”

She could have sworn the lizard man smiled.

“Hope is all we need,” he said.

His words echoed in her head as the lift rose and he went out of view.

Hope.

Was it all that had pushed her to continue all this time? Or was it fear?

Turning her gaze upward, she waited for the lift to stop. It was slow and creaked as it went. When it finally halted and shook in place, V’Alen pulled open the metal bars, and she followed him out into what looked to be a small, empty room with a single door. From the distant voices, she could tell there were people outside, and when V’Alen approached and opened the door, the hustle and bustle of the street was literally on the doorstep.

Stepping outside with him, she gripped his hand once more as he wove through the throng, the Okurnians once again pausing as soon as they noticed their presence.

Their stares and stillness was unsettling, but not as much as before. Not after speaking to them and realizing they were cowards.

There were so many of them, and none took up arms to fight.

As V’Alen moved, she only realized they were at the shaft that would lead them to the surface when he suddenly shifted to the left. With one gentle arm, he prevented her from falling as he guided her into the tube.

“Kyron!” The shout seemed to move through still air and find them.

Blood drained from her face.

That voice rang through even the sounds on the street, the noise of the train above.

Hedgeruds.

V’Alen’s neck turned so slowly, it was clear he’d already known the Hedgeruds were present long before she did.

“He has one of those jekins with him!”

“Approach. He cannot attack.”

Maybe it was in her head, but she swore she felt a hum go through V’Alen, one that vibrated against her palm as her hand still clung to his.

V’Alen turned fully, taking a step toward the voices.

No.

If they fought now, if they were stupid enough to attack him, even by accident, he would kill them. But more would come.

V’Alen took another step and she clung to his hand. Feeling the resistance, he glanced behind him, and Alaina gasped.

His gaze was no longer blue. It had gone white.

“V’Alen, please, not now. We need to get to the surface.”

“Affirmative.”

“Those idiots are not a threat. They won’t attack you.”

“Affirmative.”

“So come back. Let’s go.”

There was a pause as he stared at her. “I am afraid I cannot do that, Alaina.”

She shook her head. The way she saw it, the longer they took to leave, the more compromised the mission became.

“*Why?*”

“They do not threaten me...but they threaten *you*.”

Alaina blinked at him, his words not registering fully.
“V’Alen. *Please.*”

Fuck.

Was she scared?

Yes.

Was she scared for herself?

Fuck yes.

Was she scared for him?

Stupidly yes.

He was indestructible. Why was she even worried?

But she clung on to his hand anyway and time seemed to stand still as the white light slowly died in his eyes.

As he stepped back into the shaft, the mechanism engaged and they shot upward, far faster than they had descended.

She had no choice but to bend her knees at the speed of the ascent, as she held on to V’Alen even tighter.

“You listened to me,” she whispered, not quite sure if he would hear this time with the rush of speed and air.

“Affirmative. But I must warn you. That is not the last we will see of the Hedgeruds.”

Anxiety managed to find a place nestled between panic and fear on her spine.

“There are...” He paused as if calculating something.
“Four Hedgerud fighters await us above this shaft.”

Alaina paled. “What?”

Shit.

As the lift came to a halt and V’Alen stepped off, she staggered a little, the speed putting her off balance and making her dizzy.

“Before we go out there, I need something.”

Standing at the bottom of the ladder leading up to the hatch, V’Alen paused, turning to look down at her.

“What do you need?”

“A weapon of some sort.” It was fucking hard seeing anything in this darkness, even with V’Alen’s light. But even if she could, she doubted something handy like a frickin’ rocket launcher would just be lying around at the bottom of a ladder.

Shit.

Shit shit shit shit shit.

“A weapon?” V’Alen asked.

“So I can fight.”

He tilted his head slightly. “Why do you need to fight?” he asked. “When you have me?”

Alaina paused, her gaze lifting as her mouth opened and closed.

There were many reasons. Like, she didn’t know, *him being deleted if he disobeyed his planet’s **one** rule!*

But she was panicking. This was a panic attack.

Nodding, she swallowed hard as she stepped toward the ladder, only halting midway as V’Alen’s hand closed over her shoulder.

“This time,” he said. “Me first.”

Gulping, she nodded again, her gaze rising as he suddenly activated some kind of jet in his suit that allowed him to rise.

He didn’t even need to use the ladder.

Awe-filled, her eyes remained on him as she pulled the cloak closer and began to climb.

With only one usable hand, movement was slow. It had been much easier to go down, but now gravity was working against her and she didn’t want to fall. By the time she reached

even close to the hatch, V'Alen had already disappeared outside it and she could hear sounds.

Voices she wished she would never hear again, but somehow they kept returning to haunt her.

“Where is it, Kyron? We know you have it.”

“You have damaged my ship,” was all V'Alen said, and his words sent a chill through her. They did *what*? How damaged was it?

Reaching the top of the hatch, she peeked over the edge.

The darkness was doing her eyes no favors, but it wasn't hard to see the four figures facing V'Alen, their backs to the shuttle that had taken her and the cyborg to this very planet.

And the shuttle itself looked nothing like how they'd left it. Parts were clearly broken, and there was a big gash in the middle that made her heart sink.

They'd smashed it with what? Thor's hammer?

There was no way it was going to fly.

“It was his idea to break your vessel,” one of the Hedgeruds said.

“Quiet, *fool*,” another hissed, sharp teeth baring before he turned his yellow gaze on V'Alen. “Listen Kyron, we know you have the device. Our signals have been scrambled since your arrival.” He took a step forward. “Give it to us.”

V'Alen's head only tilted slightly, as if he was looking at the damaged ship behind them, and when one of the Hedgeruds shifted, his gaze landing on her, Alaina ducked her head back into the hole.

But she was sure he'd seen her.

Was she even supposed to be hiding? What was V'Alen's game plan here?

“Move,” he suddenly said, not waiting for them to obey his command before he stepped forward. Three of the Hedgeruds shifted out of his way immediately while one, obviously the leader of this pack, stood his ground. V'Alen stepped right up

to him and the fiend's gaze shifted to the hatch as those cold yellow eyes landed on her. "Seize the female."

They moved quickly, faster than they should be able to, and rough arms reached in and pulled her out of the shaft as if she weighed nothing.

Struggling in the gator-guard's grasp, this felt like *deja vu*. Anger ripped through her.

"I will not stand down, Kyron," the leader continued. "I am already aware of your species' law. There is nothing you can do to stop us. We—"

In the blink of an eye, the words stopped as V'Alen's fist closed around his throat.

"V'Alen!" she screamed.

"Release Alaina..." Two words that seemed to cut through the air like a knife.

The Hedgerud chuckled in his grasp. His gaze shifted to his comrades. "Kill. Her."

The one holding her flinched. "She is one of the masters' pets. A hooman. They will punish with wrath for killing one of their mates."

Mates? The word made bile rise into her throat.

"I'd rather die than mate with those pieces of shit! Let me go!" Flailing against the arms holding her up was useless. They were too strong.

"She must die. If the Kyron doesn't give us the device and she lives to tell the tale, we will bear their wrath anyway."

The gator-guard holding her seemed to consider this for a moment before the shink of metal cut through her senses, a sword being drawn.

No. Not again.

How many times should she face death before it finally took her?

Struggling to break free, she only managed a rip in the cloak that caused the Hedgerud's grasp on her to slip.

Falling to the ground, she scrambled to her feet as she began to run. She could almost hear the air cut above her as the sword descended.

The clang of metal against metal was almost deafening.

Heart thundering in her throat, Alaina glanced behind her, her eyes widening on the scene.

Everyone was frozen, all looking at where the sword had landed.

The sharp side of the metal glistened as it made contact with V'Alen's shoulder, and as she scrambled away on the back of her elbows, the cyborg's eyes met hers.

A tremor she couldn't remove from her voice, wide eyes still on him as his blue gaze flooded to white, her words were a whisper even as relief flooded through her. "Conditions have been met?"

This was his game plan all along.

Staring at him as time suddenly stood still, she swore she saw a smile.

"Conditions have been met," he agreed.

Four words before his eyes suddenly glowed blinding white.

The Hedgeruds had no chance.

Alaina watched wide-eyed, forgetting the fact she was on jagged earth, as V'Alen moved, faster than her eyes could keep track. Only the light in his suit told her where he was as he cut down the Hedgeruds before they could even run.

Four seconds.

That's how long it took. And when he appeared before her once more, her unsteady breaths were the only thing that told her time wasn't frozen. Behind him, the four gator-guards stood, their eyes unfocused before their bodies suddenly slumped and fell to the ground.

“V’Alen.” She gripped him even as he stretched his arms around her and lifted her from the cold earth. “You scared me.”

Holding her, he stepped over their enemies as he headed toward their shuttle.

“I will protect you,” he said. “Kyron do not lie.”

A small laugh huffed from her nose. “No. I mean, you scared me when you grabbed him. I was afraid...”

“I have not gone rogue. I would not have killed you.”

Alaina shook her head. “No. I was afraid that if you did go rogue, your people would come. They would take you away.”

He paused as he reached the entrance of their shuttle, his gaze falling to hers. “Your fear was...for me?”

She shook her head, almost not believing he could ask such a question. “Of course. You mean a lot to me.”

For a few moments, he looked down at her without saying a word.

“Your breathing apparatus is impaired. We must get you within the shuttle soon.”

Eyes widening slightly, she lifted a hand to touch the gas mask still on her face. “But the ship?”

“Can no longer travel the void safely.”

Fuck.

IT MADE HER UNEASY, BUT WHAT ELSE WERE THEY SUPPOSED to do?

As the dark vessel rose into the sky, lifting above the surface of Okurna, she spotted the shuttle they had taken to this world. It looked like a crumpled pile of metal...and this one...smooth brilliance.

The Hedgerud's vessel was nothing like the one they'd taken from the Restitution. Inside was sleek dark metal that almost looked like it too harbored evil.

Sitting beside V'Alen at the front before the viewscreen, she fiddled with the box in her lap, that ethereal light still escaping through the cracks and making the unease surrounding her increase.

“Won't they be able to track us? This is one of their ships.”

“Affirmative. However, they will encounter difficulty with the orb on board.”

That didn't calm her nerves one bit.

As the ship picked up speed, shooting toward the void, she gripped the box in her lap tighter.

“What now, though? The whole reason we came here was for a xytrex box. There's not even one on board this vessel.”

She didn't know if it was his lack of definitive facial expressions or maybe he wasn't worried at all, because when

he looked at her, that smooth calmness that was always on his face was in place.

“There may be more below.”

That made her jerk in her seat. “Then we should go down there and get it.”

“Negative. It would require that I leave you on your own.”

A part of her withered inside. This was because of her. “You can leave me. I can hide or something. This orb is what’s important here. It’s why we came on this mission in the first place.”

“Negative. I refuse. You are far too important.”

But she wasn’t important!

“V’Alen—”

“There is another place.”

“Another place?”

“Where I am positive we can locate a xytrex box.”

She blinked at him, waiting for him to continue.

“From a being insane enough to collect and hold it.”

Why didn’t that make her fears go away? Taking a deep breath, she settled her back against the seat. They could still do this. The mission wasn’t over yet.

“Where is this being?”

“On a world called Hudo III.”

“And you’re sure this person will have it?”

Her chest heaved and her vision swam a little. Why was it suddenly hard to breathe when she wasn’t wearing that gas mask anymore?

“Affirmative.”

As he gazed at her, Alaina’s shoulders slumped as she forced her lungs to work. It felt like a weight was pulling her down, exhaustion sitting on her shoulders. But she trusted him. Trusted that they would see this mission through.

So she would wait it out. Not long left. She could do it.

She would see this to the end, because V'Alen's words were true.

After all, he was the one being in the universe that did not lie.

There was no need to worry.



ALAINA'S EYES BLINKED OPEN, her gaze fuzzy as she turned her head.

Where...

Where was she?

Groaning as she tried to lift her head, the pain that rocketed through her skull almost had her screaming into what seemed to be a sleeping slab beneath her.

How did she end up...

Where was V'Alen?

A warm hand brushed across her cheek and she whimpered into it.

"V'Alen?"

"I am here, Alaina. Your body requires rest. Your energy levels..."

Are failing.

She knew.

He didn't have to say it.

As another throb went through her skull, her stomach turned, her body heaving as whatever was in her belly forced itself upward. There was only enough time to throw her upper body off the side of the sleeping slab before bile rocketed through her.

V'Alen placed some kind of receptacle in front of her right before the liquid hit the floor and she realized, belatedly, that he must have done that before to have reacted so quickly.

How long had she been sick?

“V'Alen?”

“Rest now, Alaina. I am here.”

She tried to keep her eyes open. To force her vision to focus. But all that happened was her body falling back against the sleeping slab, the light disappearing even as she fought to remain within it.

When she woke again, she was sure some time had passed. Her body felt weaker than before, and the headache wasn't a hammer against her skull anymore, but a needle drilling itself in.

“V'Alen?” she whispered, guilt flooding through her the moment she called his name.

He had no reason to come to her. She was demanding of him something that wasn't even built into his framework. And yet...she couldn't help but wish he'd return to her side.

To hold her...

To touch her...

She was in a lonely place. One that was cold and unforgiving.

She'd thought she was prepared for this but...

“Alaina...”

Something cool touched her lips and when her eyes opened to slits, she saw his blurry outline. His skin. He was no longer in his armor. Why?

“Drink,” he said, pressing the thing to her lips and the first few sips made her choke.

Her throat felt like it hadn't been used in days.

“V'Alen,” she whispered. “Your skin...”

“It is easier for you,” he replied. “When you shiver. Your body calms when I hold you close.”

Alaina blinked at him, accepting the receptacle at her lips as she took a few small sips of a liquid that tasted like lemon water.

He’d been holding her?

“The mission,” she whispered.

“We are a few Earth hours away from Hudo III.”

“The Hedgeruds?”

“We have been followed.”

That alone caused her to try and sit upright, but V’Alen’s steady hand pressed her back down.

“They know we have the orb. They will try to retrieve it.”

Gripping on to his arm, she met his gaze. “You can’t let them.” She gulped. “They can’t...”

Her energy suddenly waned, her vision spinning.

Not now.

She wasn’t done yet.

As V’Alen brushed his hand through her hair, her body slumped and Alaina released a slow breath.

She was tired. So tired.

She’d had days like this before. But this felt different. Worse.

As he continued to brush his hand through her hair, she lifted her gaze to his.

“V’Alen,” she whispered. “This feels good. You’re... comforting me.”

He didn’t reply, but his fingers seemed to stroke even more gently.

As he continued to stroke her hair, she forced down a lump in her throat as she watched him.

Was it selfish of her to want more?

Was it selfish of her to *need*?

But as he pulled his fingers away, the warmth of his skin disappearing, she reached out to him.

“Can you...” Might as well say it since she started already.
“Can you hold me for a little bit?”

He was a being that didn't have emotions. At least, not like she did. So why did she feel so close to him? Why was it that his presence, him touching her so gently, was making her want...

Making her need.

V'Alen looked at her and for a moment, she thought to retract her request.

Whatever she'd developed in her head through the course of this mission was all her imagination. She knew the truth, but possibly, leaning on what was in her head was a way for her to ignore her reality. And maybe...maybe the time was coming when she could no longer do that.

But as she thought he would turn away from her, V'Alen shifted and climbed on top of the slab, pulling her into a warm embrace.

Her face pressed into his hard chest as his body curled around hers and a breath shuddered from her body.

Relief?

Pain?

She didn't know which.

All she could feel was the warmth.

All she could focus on was him.

SHE WAS LEAVING.

His scans told him so.

[Chance of survival: 1%]

It had been a brief trip with this strange female. One he couldn't have expected in the many moons he'd traveled this universe.

When she had demanded to accompany him, the only reason he did not reject her proposal was because she was leaving soon.

Her presence would hardly influence the mission.

Or so he'd thought.

As V'Alen held the female to his chest, he stared at her, watching her slight pulse beat in her temple.

She was small. And so frail.

But she had taught him so much.

As she drifted off into rest, her body pressing into his as she made use of his warmth, he knew it was time to rise and go to the helm. They were being followed. There was danger at their back.

Yet, he couldn't move.

Whatever impulse had him frozen with this small female in his arms, was the same one that made him put himself in the line of the Hedgerud's attack.

It wasn't supposed to be possible.

Yet. It was.

What was so special about this female? Surely, he could continue his research even after she was gone. There was nothing particularly special about Alaina that should cause him to try to lengthen her life.

But even as these thoughts ran through his neurons, he knew it wasn't all true.

Kyron did not lie. But, perhaps, he had found a way to hide the truth from himself.

For it wasn't only research.

This human meant much more than that to him.

So he held her while she slept, only releasing her when his internal navigation notified him they were at the location, the coordinates, of their destination.

Slipping from within Alaina's grasp, he rose from the sleeping slab and covered her with her cloak. Turning away from her as he moved toward the helm, his armor took his skin.

He could see the planet below. Descent would be quick. The only problem was, the Hedgeruds on their tail would follow.

Activating the controls, he sat at the helm and engaged the main engine. He was going to have to take them down fast. Getting to his ally on the surface before the Hedgeruds figured out where he was heading was foremost.

As the ship darted through the upper atmosphere, it shuddered with the speed of entry. But it was not like the shuttle they'd taken from the Restitution.

This was faster. Sleeker. Stronger.

It would manage.

As it shot through the clouds, breaking into the pink sky, precautionary alarms began ringing and he heard the moment Alaina stirred.

“Do not fear, Alaina. I am here.” The urge to soothe her fear. It had only grown stronger since that first day he’d rescued her from that Hedgerud’s claw.

And now...

He heard her stagger toward him, and concern made a pulse go through his system. It pulled his attention away from the viewscreen as she held on to a panel on the ship, making her way toward him.

He’d only ever felt such pulses before when he was in immediate danger. But Alaina presented no danger. It was her that was at risk.

He was sensing danger for her? This was...new.

“Alaina.” She fell into the chair at his side, buckling the restraints as she squinted ahead. He saw the moment her vision waned. Saw her fight through the dizziness.

“We’re here,” she whispered, at the same moment that the ship evened out, sailing across the pink skies of this new world.

He watched her eyes widen, saw the awe light them up as she gazed at the yellow-orange grass below and the animals grazing there.

“This is...beautiful,” she whispered.

Beautiful?

He turned his gaze to what she saw.

Beautiful...

He had been to Hudo III many times before, and he had never really *noticed* it.

Glancing back at Alaina, she became his complete focus.

She saw the universe in a way that he couldn’t. And it made her even more special.

He had seen many beings faced with the end of their existence before. Faced with the fact that they could not continue on like he could.

Beings that had no choice but accept their fate.

And he had never encountered one that faced it so bravely.

As she eased forward toward the viewscreen, he couldn't pull his sensors away from her.

[Female: Alaina]

[Mental state: Happy]

For this? She was feeling joy, for this?

“Is that where we're heading?”

She pointed ahead and he pulled his lenses in the direction her little digit stretched toward.

“It looks like...”

“A scrapyard.”

“In the middle of a plain? There's nothing else out here.”

“That is how the being we visit prefers to live.”

Her eyes widened then, her mouth opening as she stared.

“I-is that the *being* you're referring to?”

V'Alen's gaze shifted back to the viewscreen the moment he saw his ally step from his lodging, a weapon almost the size of his entire frame mounted on his shoulders.

“Is that a frickin' rocket launcher?!” Alaina exclaimed, eyes big pools.

“Affirmative.”

“He's going to fire at us!”

“He thinks we are the enemy.”

Her eyes widened more. “We have to stop him!”

“No time.”

The moment the rocket left the launcher was the moment he grabbed her. He felt her chest expand with the heavy breath she inhaled as a scream left her lips, but he already had her and the box holding the orb in his grasp.

He saw the light coming from the tail end of the missile. Felt it approaching, his internal alarms going haywire, but he was already at the hatch.

Pulling it open, he launched himself out just as Alaina screamed again.

Her face was a mixture of fright and surprise as they didn't fall straight to the ground.

Activating his thrusters, he directed them toward the firing alien, the missile reaching its target behind them.

The explosion seemed to crack and shatter the air around them.

The ship swerved, spinning out of control as it headed into the plains. Faintly, he could hear the bleats of the grazing animals as they scampered to safety, but the only thing he could focus on was the steady thump of the female in his arms.

"V'Alen?" The Bone Crusher's voice reached his auditory canal even before he landed. "What the phok are you doing here? And in a Tasqal ship? I could have blown you apart."

"You tried," he replied.

Metal mask on his face, the Bone Crusher's green eyes were the only things that could be seen through the horizontal slit. The moment his gaze landed on Alaina was clear.

"Nee-ya!" the Bone Crusher shouted over his shoulder before he settled his gaze on V'Alen once more. "I sense this is not an amicable visit. It never is with you. What do you want?"

He was eyeing Alaina. "Is she lost? In need of lodging?"

As Alaina struggled from his grasp, V'Alen was slow to let her go, but she stood on her two feet, not showing any outward indication of the strain her body went through over the last few days.

When another female rushed out of the lodging, a small female child on her hips, he saw the moment Alaina's barriers fell.

“*He’s* the ally?” she glanced up at him and V’Alen tilted his head in confirmation. Her next whisper was harsh. “He could have killed us.”

“They call him the Bone Crusher,” V’Alen began, but the Bone Crusher made a sound in his throat.

“I am Ka’Cit,” he said instead, reaching for the female that was approaching. “Ka’Cit Urgmental. And this is Nee-ya, my mate and my little chid.”

The female smiled. “It’s nice to have you here. To see another human. There are not many of us.” Her gaze shifted to V’Alen. “And you are traveling with V’Alen?”

“Not really traveling,” Alaina released a slow breath. “We need your help.”

Ka’Cit groaned and Nee-ya elbowed him not so discreetly. His side caved as he bent away from her assault, as a sound akin to laughter leaving his lips.

“It’s not my fault. Have you forgotten the last time we helped him? V’Alen’s demands are often life-threatening.” His serious gaze turned back to V’Alen. “And I’m sure it will be this time as well.”

“A xytrex box,” V’Alen said. Wasting time was illogical. It was better to get to the point. The Bone Crusher would understand.

But the look in his ally’s eyes didn’t make it seem like he understood at all.

“Why...the phek...do you think I would have one of those? Some beings kill for those things. They are rare for a reason.”

V’Alen tilted his head. “Negative. I know for a fact you have one in your possession. Your life organ, the rate is unsteady.”

“He’d be fun to play those card games from Earth with, wouldn’t he?” Ka’Cit said to his mate. She smiled.

V’Alen tilted his head to Alaina’s ear, bending slightly so she could hear him.

“He lies. But she smiles.”

“Sarcasm,” Alaina whispered, a soft smile spreading her lips.

Sarcasm.

“Yes, I have a phekking xytrex box, but what do you need it for? I almost died twice trying to retrieve it,” Ka’Cit said.

As V’Alen explained the orb, setting the box down on the ground, he kept his gaze on Ka’Cit, but all his other senses zoned in on the human he’d taken to this place.

Alaina was speaking to Nee-ya. She was smiling. She played with the little child on Nee-ya’s hip, even as Nee-ya rubbed her belly, smiling as she revealed another young was growing inside her. Alaina’s eyes lit with a light that had long been extinguished.

This was what she looked like when alive. And even though he’d felt a pull toward her since that first time, he was only seeing a part of her, not the whole.

There was so much more he wanted to learn. So much more he wanted to see.

“They attacked the Restitution?!” Ka’Cit’s exclamation was loud enough to catch even the attention of the females. “And they’ve followed you *here*.”

The male’s eyes narrowed. “You should have led with that. I have a family now. They are more important to me than anything else.”

Nee-ya stepped forward, her teeth baring into a grin. “But it’s been a long time since we’ve had to deal with a little danger.”

“Phek. Hold on.” With one glance at the skies, Ka’Cit took off, rushing through his land toward a building at the back.

He was barely out of sight before two dark ships appeared far above.

“Oh shit,” Alaina whispered.

“Listen, darling,” Nee-ya set the child down. “Remember what we practiced all those times?”

The child nodded.

“Great! You’re such a quick learner. Now, do what we practiced and go into the safe house. Don’t come out until mommy or daddy gets you, okay?”

“Are those bad guys?” the child asked.

“Mmhm,” Nee-ya said. “And mommy is going to kick their asses.”

The child grinned before she rushed back into the lodging.

As Nee-ya reached into a pocket at her back, she retrieved a small pistol.

“Here.” She handed it to Alaina as she reached for the huge rocket launcher that was definitely bigger than her size. “V’Alen, I know you can’t fight. So don’t worry, we’ll take care of this.”

His gaze slipped to Alaina. He should protect her. He should take her somewhere—

But she was gripping the pistol in her both hands, eyes on the two approaching ships.

“Think they’ll play fair?” Nee-ya asked.

Alaina shook her head. “They never do.”

It was strange, watching them. One fighting for her family. One fighting for her people. And him...

All this time...

What was he existing for? If he had to fight? What would he fight for?

As Ka’Cit reappeared, xytrex box in hand, they switched the location of the orb, placing it in the new sealed xytrex compartment, a new clarity suddenly overcame him.

V’Alen stared at the xytrex box.

“Hide it,” he said to Ka’Cit.

The Bone Crusher jerked his chin to his chest, already moving.

The orb. It has been interfering with his systems all along. It had been subtle. Too subtle for him to realize.

But now...

Lenses focused on Alaina, he knew what was about to happen a moment before it did.

“Alaina!”

The first missile to hit the ground was aimed at Ka’Cit, but it was enough to throw the females off their feet.

“Ka’Cit!” Nee-ya screamed, as her mate was propelled into the air.

Eyes wide, Alaina’s gaze darted from them toward the incoming ships.

“V’Alen, go. You take the orb. Leave us.”

Struggling to reach the rocket launcher that Nee-ya had abandoned, Alaina gripped the thing with both hands, her chest heaving with giant huffs.

That brown gaze of hers turned toward him, and he expected to see fear. Her heart rate was far too high for her not to be afraid. But it wasn’t fear he saw in her eyes. It was something else.

“Go!” she shouted. “The orb’s all that’s important. They can’t track it now, right? Take it and leave!”

“Negative.”

Something that must be anger flared in her eyes. “God! Now’s not the time to be stubborn. Just listen to me! The orb’s important!”

But there was something else that was important too. And now that the slight interference from the orb was no longer there, he could see it clearly.

As another missile hit, directly in front of her, he saw her eyes widen the moment her body was thrown into the air.

Time stood still as he moved toward her, barely catching her as her body crumpled to the ground.

“Alaina.”

Her body went slack and a pulse went through his system.

“Alaina,” he said her name again, at the same moment that something thick and slick ran across his fingers.

V’Alen lifted his hand...everything fading into the background as he saw the thick dark fluid coating his fingers.

Lifeblood.

Staring down into her face, her eyelids were heavy as she looked at him.

“Take the orb,” she whispered. “Forget about me and take the orb. It’s too important.”

Important. Yes. *Something* was important, but he didn’t need to run a probability test to determine that they’d disagree on just what that was.

As her head tilted back and he watched her vision wane, he knew.

It was immediate.

The *feeling*.

A feeling he could clearly *identify* as a feeling. One that overcame him. One so strong that he realized just what was happening a moment too late.

His vision flashed red and he didn’t try to control it. No automatic diagnostics were run to correct the error.

As his gaze turned to the heavens above, locking on to the approaching vessels, he didn’t try to fight this feeling.

It rushed through his circuits, rewriting his very code.

Resting Alaina down as gently as he could, V’Alen turned to face the incoming ships. Off to the side, he could hear the Bone Crusher’s shout, but whatever he said didn’t register.

As his thrusters lifted him off the ground, he rose like a silent embodiment of doom. His whole armor was changing,

the white lights that usually signaled his defense systems flooding to red all across his body.

He knew the moment the Hedgeruds spotted him. Heard them in the ships. Heard them arguing with each other, half determined that he wouldn't attack, the other half controlled by fear.

Five seconds.

That's all it would take for him to annihilate them all. But for some reason, he paused. He waited for them. Waited for them to get closer.

He wanted to see them up close. Wanted to hear them scream.

They and the Tasqals took Alaina from her world. Put her in this place.

They hunted her kind. Violated them. Murdered them. Filled them with disease.

Focusing on the first ship, he released his lasers like sweet fire from his ocular discs. They met their target in a split second, cutting a sharp line down the center of the ship before him.

It split in two as it broke apart and headed for the ground.

Two sharp lasers and the engines exploded, creating a fiery mass in the air.

The other ship veered off course, the Hedgeruds inside firing two missiles his way.

V'Alen tilted his head as he watched the ship try to make an escape.

Moving forward, he caught the missiles in his hands; the metal fizzing as it burned in his grasp.

He looked at them, noted how they'd fired these things at his Alaina. The image of her lifeblood on his fingers returning to the forefront of his mind.

Deactivating the warheads, he let them fall as he rose higher into the air.

He knew they were coming. More of these fiends and he wasn't disappointed when seven more ships cut through the atmosphere.

More power flooded through him.

So this was what it felt like. This was why his ancestors had created the Law. Why they had altered their code and that of every Kyron after them.

This was the power of emotion.

He could almost laugh as the feeling, the *power*, surged through him.

It would be the last time he ever used it.

He might as well use it for good.

For the one person in the entire universe that he cared about.

Her.

His Alaina.

SOMEONE WAS SCREAMING HER NAME AS SHE WAS HOISTED over a broad shoulder.

“V-V’Alen?”

“Not V’Alen, but we need to get you to safety.” Ah. V’Alen’s ally. But where was V’Alen?

Panic surged through her, enough to make her force her eyes open past the pounding in her head.

It sounded like a war was happening around them, yet she could see no fighting. Like great explosions were going off, yet she couldn’t see the source.

“Where is V’Alen?”

The male named Ka’Cit did not set her down. He was hurrying toward his lodging and he did not answer.

“We need to get her to the safe room,” the female named Nia said.

“No,” Alaina murmured.

V’Alen. Where was V’Alen? Why weren’t they answering her?

That’s when she caught something large and dark falling through the sky, only for it to explode in a fireball of flames a moment later.

What the...

Adrenaline was the only thing making her body move as she jerked against the big blue alien holding her.

“Let me go!”

“We need to get you to—”

Somehow, she kned him in the neck. She heard him grunt, a soft curse rising from his lips.

“Let me go! Where is V’Alen?”

“Set her down, hon.” Nia’s voice seemed to be the only thing the big blue alien listened to, for he finally paused, lowering as he set her on her feet.

Panting, Alaina staggered a few steps forward, her gaze searching the skies. That’s when she spotted him.

There. High above them, V’Alen hovered in the air, his arms at his side.

He looked like he was standing still in midair and if she didn’t know him, she would think he was completely harmless.

But there was something different about him.

His entire suit, the lights she now realized had given her such calm and comfort, they were red.

“Oh no,” she whispered. “Oh, no no no no no.”

As one enemy ship shot a missile his way, V’Alen simply raised one hand and intercepted the weapon, dissolving it in thin air. But that wasn’t all. Red lasers fired from his eyes, blasting the ship until it exploded in a mass of flames.

“V’Alen,” she whispered, her heart thundering in her chest. “V’Alen!”

He couldn’t hear her, not so far away. He couldn’t hear her, and he was doing the very thing he shouldn’t.

“We have to stop him!”

“There is no way to stop him,” the blue alien was by her side. “I am not sure that is even him anymore. I have known

this Kyron for many moons. I have never seen him like that before.”

A lump formed in her throat as she stared up into the skies.

V’Alen...

He’d gone rogue.

And that meant...

Her gaze flicked around the heavens, but the only sign something was amiss was the few other ships there. They could probably stop this, couldn’t they? They could save him.

As he shot two more ships, taking them out in mere seconds, her heart felt like it was about to arrest itself.

Tired limbs carried her across the yard as she headed in V’Alen’s direction.

Have to stop him.

Can’t let him do this.

“V’Alen!” But she was still too far away.

“We can’t stop him,” the blue alien said. “I have heard of Kyron who have gone rogue. They annihilate everything. Even their own. The power rush is too much.”

“No...not V’Alen.” The words left her mouth, but she didn’t need to think on them to know they were the truth.

“We must get to the safe room. We do not know how he will respond when there is nothing left up there to destroy.”

Alaina shook her head. Not V’Alen.

She couldn’t just leave him.

“V’Alen!” She screamed his name again but there was too much distance between them. Already weak, her voice just drifted away on the wind.

She had to get his attention.

That’s when her eyes landed on the rocket launcher. Still lying where Nia had dropped it, she pulled herself toward it.

“What are you—” It was clear the blue alien gave up trying to get through to her. “What is she doing?!” He turned to his mate instead.

As she braced against the huge weapon, she staggered. It weighed probably three times her weight. No way she could lift it. So she opted to tilt it instead.

Pointing the mouth in V’Alen’s direction, her heart crashed against her chest.

This wasn’t a good idea. But she couldn’t think of anything else.

Two more ships went down, sprinkling the sky with debris.

She had to do this. Before it was too late. Before his people were notified.

She’d spent too much time with him. Felt too much while with him. She couldn’t let him...

She couldn’t.

The thought of him being erased...

Lining up the weapon with V’Alen, she took a deep breath. She didn’t intend to hit him with it, so it didn’t have to be perfect. She just needed his attention.

When most of the weapon’s weight was suddenly lifted, she glanced up to see the masked alien beside her.

“This is a bad idea,” he said.

“I know.” She gulped.

As the launcher was activated, a missile shot from its mouth sailing through the air and straight at V’Alen.

He turned as if he knew it was coming, and Alaina gasped. Red eyes shone down at them, even from the distance.

With just a slight movement to the right, he sidestepped the missile, but now that his attention was on them, the remaining ships made haste and left.

“V’Alen,” she whispered, her heart stuttering as she saw him lift his arm, his palm facing their direction.

He was going to attack and if he did, they'd all be dead.

"Phek," Ka'Cit cursed.

Her world froze over as she looked up at the cyborg she'd traveled so far with.

No.

She knew him.

He wouldn't.

As she stared up at him, aware that Ka'Cit was grabbing Nia and getting ready to dash to safety, she couldn't move.

"V'Alen..."

They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity.

"Come back to me," she whispered as she let go of the launcher and took a step toward him. "Please...come back."

He'd once told her that every Kyron had a choice of whether or not to attack. He could annihilate her right now. Cease her existence. But she hoped...she hoped that she meant more to him. She hoped she meant *something* to him.

The seconds seemed to move slowly as her head remained tilted back, her eyes on the alien hovering in the sky. It was taking all of her energy, but she couldn't back down.

If he took her out now...would it be a blessing? Would it hurt? Or would she just vanish into nothing?

And would he...would he even be sorry? Would he miss her? Would he mourn the fact that he'd killed her?

Staring up at him now, they were so far apart, and it wasn't just the distance between them. He was leagues above her in every way. What his race had perfected were the exact things her species struggled with.

She stopped walking as she looked up at him. Behind her, she could hear the pounding footsteps of the blue alien rushing to her aid.

He should go.

If V'Alen attacked, she didn't want anyone else to be hurt.

“Come, small female!” the blue alien said, gripping her arm. Somehow, she found the strength to resist.

“No.”

She saw the look in his eyes. Knew he was about to flip her over his shoulder again and carry her to safety anyway, but she couldn't leave.

She had to give V'Alen a chance.

She had to know if...

If she'd been imagining things on that ship.

“You go,” she said to the alien beside her. “Take Nia and go. I'll be fine.” She turned her gaze back to V'Alen. “I trust him.”

Even though only his eyes could be seen through his mask, he looked at her as if she was insane.

“Go!”

As she faced V'Alen once more, the world once more broke away, and it was just her and him. Only two souls facing each other in the void of nothing.

Time ticked slowly, and only when his hand slowly lowered did she breathe again.

He...didn't do it.

“V'Alen!” she uttered his name, whatever strength she'd used to come this far suddenly waning.

She saw him lower himself through the air, his lights turning back to white as he slowly approached.

Relief huffed through her, taking her remaining energy as she fell to her knees.

He didn't do it. That's all she wanted to know.

He'd overcome the urge. He'd be okay.



“SHE ISN’T RUNNING A FEVER. She just seems tired.”

“V’Alen...you are aware meat beings consume sustenance. Did you feed the female at any point?”

“I should go make her some broth. She can have it when she wakes. It will help.”

He heard their words, but it all seemed inconsequential. Background noise. Static.

They were sitting inside Ka’Cit’s lodging, Alaina resting on soft cushions on a raised seat.

“At this rate, I should call Geblit, and let him take her to the medic,” Ka’Cit said.

“Negative.” Their gazes met.

Neither asked what happened to him out there. Neither asked about the repercussions. And he was sure they were curious about it.

It was a clue he’d learned after being around so many beings similar to them.

The sideways glances. The knowing looks they shared. The hesitation.

They were not at ease.

And yet...it meant nothing to him. All he could focus on was the female before him.

“V’Alen, she is not like you. She will not heal on her own,” Ka’Cit’s mate said. Had he not noted her designation?

Strange.

Just as strange as the code now running in front of his framework. Code that had been hidden deep in his system’s root, only now accessed because he had, essentially, broken the one law that he was bound to.

[[System: System]]

[[System root]]

[[Record name: Alaina]]

[[Recording]]

Every interaction he'd had with this female had been recorded in his deep system. From the moment he'd rescued her till now.

[[System Record: Alaina]]

[[Access Restricted]]

This was...an anomaly. Why would he unknowingly create a record and restrict access to even himself?

Was it a virus?

Negative.

Impossible.

He had lived for eons and he would have not survived if he was so easily compromised by outside forces.

Then what could it be?

[[System Record: Alaina]]

[[Delete?]]

[[Command Unavailable]]

V'Alen stared at the information before his eyes, before dispelling the code so he could look at the human at the center of this anomaly.

Her.

Alaina from Earth.

A female with only a blip of life left to live, but one who had already changed his existence in ways that could not be undone.

“Are you listening?” Ka'Cit's mate peered at him. “Did you feed her at all?”

“Alaina consumed several times while on our journey. The cause of her malady is not so simple.”

The female blinked at him before glancing at her mate. “We should get that medic then.”

“Negative.”

Rising, he towered over the two beings before him, his eyes only on Alaina.

There was a bandage on her head from where she'd gotten that bruise, when her lifeblood had spilled over his fingers.

He remembered that. Recalled how it made him *feel*. Remembered how it made him...not want to lose her.

It was too soon.

He was not ready.

It was the reason he'd attacked those ships. The reason he'd tapped into code that had been overwritten and sleeping for so long.

He had gone rogue...and that only meant one thing now.

Just like the female before him, his time was about to be cut short.

As Ka'Cit's mate placed a hand over Alaina's brow, she worried her lip in her mouth.

“Maybe she has a concussion, Ka'Cit. I'm worried about her.”

“No brain injuries due to blunt force.” V'Alen finally turned his attention to his ally's mate.

Her skin was like Alaina's. Similar to his. They were all different shades on the same wavelength.

Ka'Cit's mate was...beautiful.

His gaze shifted back to Alaina as he took a step forward.

She was beautiful, but not as beautiful as Alaina.

Alaina was...different...

And Alaina was...his.

The thought ran through his circuits even before he had time to process it.

Reaching down, he scooped Alaina into his arms.

“V’Alen, what are you doing? You can’t just—”

Ka’Cit held back his mate; her eyes were flashing anger that he knew was only because she cared about the human in his arms.

For that reason only, he gave her a response. “You cannot cure her malady. She has a compromised brain.”

“What?” the female whispered.

“A mass. In her brain. She was...dying before she left Earth.”

The female slapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

“I must take her from here,” he continued.

“Wh-where are you going?”

“Someplace that will make her last moments...peaceful.”

As he walked from their lodging, he was thankful at least that they did not try to stop him. Whether they wanted him to or not, he would not stay.

Activating his thrusters once out the door, he eased into the air. Dark smoke mixed in with small pieces of debris still lingered in the air from all the ships he had taken down.

[Location Scan: Known Kyron]

Yes. Just as he had expected, he was not far from the nearest Kyron.

That only meant one thing.

He had little time.

He hoped she’d wake before then.

ALAINA'S EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, AND SHE WINCED.

Fuck.

It felt like she was always waking up from some slumber she didn't mean to take.

Eyes squinting in the bright light, she turned her head slowly.

Where was she?

Above, the sky was clear and pink. It almost looked like strawberry milk, and the thought immediately brought a smile to her lips. Around her, the tall grass almost obscured the rest of the landscape, the long yellow-orange strands reaching upward to the warm sunlight.

Easing up on her elbow, a slight ache in the back of her head made her bring her other hand to her skull. Fingers brushing against the bandage there, her eyes widened.

Shit.

How had she forgotten?

V'Alen.

Scrambling to her feet, her heart thudded so hard in her chest that it made her dizzy.

"V'Alen." Eyes wide, she didn't see him. All she could see was the vast expanse of the plain before her and a few animals grazing in the distance.

“V’Alen!”

“Alaina.”

His voice. Behind her.

Spinning, she froze.

He was there, looking as handsome as he usually did. The sunlight reflected off his armor as he stood still, watching her.

Memory of how he’d taken down those ships on his own came flooding right back and she rushed toward him, throwing herself against him.

“V’Alen,” she breathed.

“You are awake.”

“I’m sorry. Was I sleeping for long?”

“Not long.”

“What happened to your friend and Nia?”

“They are safe in their lodging.”

She eased her head from his chest, smiling away the tears that threatened to fall. “What are we doing out here?”

V’Alen lifted his hand, brushing his fingers through her hair. His touch was so gentle. So different from the way she’d seen him when he’d attacked those ships.

“I guess...everything’s alright? Your people aren’t coming?”

He didn’t reply. Instead, his fingers slipped down her cheek to tilt her chin so she was forced to look up at him.

“Why are we here, V’Alen?”

His gaze bored into hers, studying her. “I wished for you to have some peace.”

A lump formed in her throat, one she tried to smile away.

Truth was, there was a strange ache in her heart at his words.

“You said this world was beautiful. It was the first time you truly smiled.”

“I...” Yes. He was right. She hadn’t realized he’d been watching her then. “It *is* beautiful.”

She gulped, forcing herself to face all of his words. “It will be soon, you think?”

“Affirmative.”

Lips stretching into a forced smile, she nodded as his fingers left her chin and he allowed her to press her forehead against his armor.

“Would it be selfish...if I asked something of you? My last request?” When he didn’t respond, she hurried on. “I want to...I want to feel again. One last time.”

Now that she’d said it, the nervousness, the shame she’d expected, was nowhere to be found.

Instead, she lifted her gaze to his.

“It might be too much to ask of you. I know you don’t experience life as I do. You have no clue how much this mission meant to me... You have no clue how much I...”

How much she’d fallen for him without even realizing it?

How much she wished more than anything that she didn’t have to go, just so she could live a few more weeks traveling the stars by his side?

None of that felt right to say.

“You wish for me to help you feel?”

When she nodded, V’Alen tilted his head slightly. His hand returned to her hair, stroking the back of her head, and she tried not to lean into his caress.

But it felt so good.

With him, it was the first she’d felt any sense of calm in all these weeks.

But how could he understand that?

Was she insane?

Crazy to want a being like him to—

When her head suddenly tilted back, V'Alen's fist in her hair as he pulled gently on the strands, just enough pressure to turn her eyes up to him, a gasp lodged in her throat.

Those blue pits shone as his lips suddenly crashed against hers.

The feeling caught her unaware.

Bliss. Complete bliss, as a moan rumbled through her, her eyes fluttering closed.

Reaching up, she cradled his jaw in her palm as spasms went through her just from the brush of their lips. Her whole body felt like it was surging with a fever that had nothing to do with being ill. Like electricity was the currency of her veins. Like she could transcend her being and enter a place where it was only him and her.

Vaguely, she knew he lifted her and that they were moving. Soft grass touched her back as he set her down, and as her eyes fluttered open, she saw his skin take his armor.

His eyes were closed as he kissed her, that soft skin flooding over every bit of metal until he was bare before her.

As his lips ripped from hers and his eyes fluttered open, his gaze flicked down to what was left of her cloak and tunic.

“Off,” she panted and he didn't hesitate.

The cloak was ripped with one finger and she shrugged out of the tunic, the fabrics discarded somewhere in the grass beside them.

“More,” V'Alen said, his voice no longer that measured force that she was used to. Now it was deeper, almost as if he was as affected as she was.

“More what?” she whispered.

“More of you. I want all of you.”

His words made a ball form in her throat and a flutter go through her belly.

She stared at him, unable to believe what she'd heard.

Afraid to believe what she'd heard.

As his fingers hooked into her underwear, ripping them from her body, she could only stare at him as she lay before him bare.

“For your research...” she whispered.

“No, Alaina.” His eyes snapped to hers and she realized he'd been consuming her with his gaze, roving over her breasts, her belly, that patch of curls between her legs.

“Not for research. For myself. *I* want this.”

So it wasn't only her? She hadn't imagined it all?

“How?” Was all she could whisper. This shouldn't be possible, right?

“My code has been altered.”

His words made her eyes widen.

“Before I destroyed those ships...Alaina. Altered by you.”

She couldn't speak. She didn't know what to say. Every word he said only made her more speechless.

“Every moment I spent with you on that vessel...every moment before we departed on this mission.” He paused. “Alaina, I did not propose this contract for research.”

Her breath stopped in her throat as she waited for him to continue.

“It was all because I wanted to experience more of *you*.”

He gazed down at her and time moved on as they lay staring into each other's eyes.

What could she say?

Nothing she could think of would make sense. Nothing she could think of would express the level of emotion she was feeling.

“The orb...” he continued. “Do you remember what you saw?”

She was almost afraid to nod. What she'd seen when she'd touched that orb had all been projections...right?

“It was all real, Alaina.”

“What?”

“You. Me. We were always destined to meet.”

Emotions made her choke, her chest racking with breaths that fought in her lungs.

“You were always meant to be mine, Alaina. Across time. Across space.”

But even as unbelievable as his words were, tears welled in her eyes because deep down, she couldn't find the words to deny it.

Maybe she wanted him too badly. Maybe she wished his words were true.

“V'Alen,” she whimpered as he lowered his head and captured her lips once more.

This time, there was an urgency to his kiss, as his tongue dipped into her mouth and one of his hands closed over her breast.

He teased her nipple, pulling the sensitive skin between his fingers before he returned to kneading the fleshy mound underneath his palm.

“You are perfect, Alaina,” he whispered as his lips trailed from her mouth, brushing over her ear before going down her neck, her collarbone, to close over the other breast.

“V'Alen,” she squealed his name, her back arching.

It shouldn't feel this good, should it?

Of all the times she'd been caught in lust, it had never felt like this before.

His tongue vibrated on her nipple the moment her back arched and her eyes widened at the new sensation.

“I didn't know you could do that,” she panted.

“I intend to show you all I can do, my Alaina. For as long as I am able.”

His words disappeared into her skin as he moved down her chest, his kisses forming a trail that made her grip his skull as soon as he came to that spot above that tuft of curls.

“V’Alen?”

He looked up at her, a devilish glint in his eye that she was sure she imagined. “Let me taste you.”

Her hand shuddered. Even if she wanted to stop him, could she? Did she even want to?

All thought disappeared with that first flick of his tongue. It sent her pressing back into the soft grass, her eyes rolling back as his tongue delved between her folds, pressing into her clit as he opened his mouth wide and licked her.

“Haa.”

She trembled in his grasp as he gripped her hips and pulled her down onto his face, his eyes on her as he made her go wild.

“V’Alen.”

That warm tongue swirled through her softness as if he knew every path to her pleasure. With his eyes locked on hers, mouth closed over her pussy as if he was eating his favorite fruit, she could already tell she was nearing her peak. If he made his tongue vibrate, she wouldn’t last.

As if he could read her mind, his tongue pressed against her clit, a deep vibration running through its entire width as he reached down and slipped a finger deep inside her.

Alaina screamed, pleasure crashing through her that made her jerk away from him, the different sensations almost too much to bear. It was only when she got a moment to breathe that she realized he was frozen, his gaze locked on her soaking pussy as if he was discovering a wonder of the universe.

“My vibrations heighten your pleasure,” he said, eyes flicking to hers.

“Mhmm.” She couldn’t even manage words.

Gripping her thighs, he pushed her back into the grass.

“Again.”

Before she could protest, his tongue swiped through her again before he closed his mouth around her clit, sucking on the little bud before he teased it with his tongue.

“Alaina...you are above everything else.”

Her eyes rolled back as he dipped his tongue into her entrance, the entire width of it vibrating as he moved his finger to her clit.

“I want all of you.”

Her body spasmed as she writhed, unable to stop from squirming on his face as his tongue delved deep inside her.

More pleasure than she could manage crashed through her, bringing her to another peak.

“V’Alen...” she panted.

For a moment, he lifted his head from between her thighs.

“I wasted so much time,” he said. “This is what we should have been doing all along.”

As he dipped his head again, Alaina whimpered. “I want more.”

“Affirmative.”

“No,” she panted. “I want you. I want you too.”

V’Alen stared back at her before slowly releasing her thighs so he could climb between them. When he was face to face with her, he studied her as if she was something he wanted to commit to memory forever.

“You would do that with me? You would let a being like me invade your most treasured space?”

“What do you mean a ‘being like you’?”

“A Kyron. One that has gone rogue. A male that is more machine than flesh.”

It may have been inappropriate, but his words made her smile because she understood.

“All that you just listed is exactly why I like you, V’Alen.”

Something throbbed between them and she glanced down.

His cock was bigger than she’d first thought. Thicker. And there was a part to it she hadn’t noticed before. A curved, shorter protrusion at the top. Almost like a—

Alaina gulped, her eyes flying to his.

“You have a monster cock.”

He tilted his head slightly at her.

“A monster cock that looks like a rabbit vibrator.”

“Affirmative. I can make it vibrate, if you wish.”

Her eyes widened even more.

“Does its appearance not please you?”

“I—I don’t think it can fit.”

V’Alen stared down at her before resting his forehead on hers.

“Understood. I can make it smaller.”

“N-no.”

Shit. What was wrong with her?

Widening her legs, she wrapped them around his waist.

“Just go slowly, okay?”

It was intimate. More intimate than she’d expected it to be as he held her gaze, his hands reaching down to spread her legs wider as he lined up his head with her entrance.

She could feel the hardness press against her, and knowing that he was about to enter her made her quiver.

As he moved forward slowly, pushing against her resistance, she tightened her arm around his neck.

So many feelings were going through her, making her weak. The moment his cock slid in, her pussy closing around

his width as he stretched her, she knew she couldn't turn back even if she wanted to.

He had her. Forever.

V'Alen was hers.

He slid deeper before withdrawing till only the head was still inside her, only to slide deep again. Pleasure rocketed through her.

A soft vibration began through his shaft, sending any words she had to say out of her mind as her eyes rolled back and she clung to him.

“V'Alen...”

“You're so small,” he whispered. “And you're taking me so well.”

Her eyes rolled back some more. He had no clue what his words did to her. He probably wasn't even doing it on purpose.

The more he worked himself deeper, the more sweet honey gathered in her channel. Her legs shook and only the fact that he was holding her to him kept her there, that impossible stretch making her feel so incredibly full and still yet, wanting, *aching* for more.

As he seated himself inside her, they were closer than they could ever possibly be and she opened her eyes, pleasure making her head loll backward.

V'Alen cradled her neck, forcing her to face him as he surged the rest of the way, leaving no space between them.

Something pressed into her clit and began circling it, another range of vibration coming from the tip. That other part of his cock. The part she'd failed to notice before.

It was like a tongue, licking and sucking as he stretched her, and as he started a rhythm, his hips pulling back before surging forward, over and over again, Alaina finally screamed his name.

She pressed her hips toward his as another orgasm crashed through her, this one making her see stars as V'Alen continued

to pummel into her. Her entire body shook as the pleasures collided and just when she couldn't take it anymore, he shuddered above her, his eyes flicking from a blinding white to blue and back again as his armor flickered through his skin.

“V'Alen?”

He released her suddenly, turning his eyes to the sky as a white laser shot from them, zapping through the air.

Chest heaving, she could only stare at him.

“V'Alen?” Was he okay?

“My system overloaded,” he said, gaze moving back to her. “I have never...never experienced this with any being before...”

“What just happened?”

“Release.”

Her eyes widened slightly as she stared at him.

Did he just...Did he just come?

She didn't expect him to. Didn't think he could.

His cock was still hard inside her and even though it made a new sense of warmth wash through her, she didn't think her body could take any more. Not yet.

As if reading her mind, he eased back, his thick rod sliding from within her with an obscene squelching sound.

Her cheeks warmed as he settled over her immediately.

Above them, the world was at peace.

But even in the quietness of the plain and no matter how much she wanted it to, she knew this moment wouldn't last forever.

“V'Alen...” she whispered.

She didn't want this to end.

“Alaina...” he said. “I will go soon.”

He was right. She would go soon.

Wait...what?

“What do you mean *you* will go soon?”

“They are coming for me.”

Despite all that pleasure, all that goodness that had flooded through her being, her universe seemed to stop in those few words.

“Who?”

He didn't reply. All he said were more words she didn't understand.

“Remember, Alaina...after all this...remember these words: You are the key.”

THEY APPEARED IN THE SKY AS IF OUT OF NOWHERE.

Alaina startled, her hands moving for her tunic as she slipped it over her head, even as V'Alen rose and turned to face them.

Three massive ships, their sleek silver metal reflecting in the sunshine to make them look almost pure white.

Shaped like diamonds with one end more pointed and longer than the rest, they moved through the sky as if hovering in place and propelled by nothing.

“They have arrived,” V'Alen said, his skin disappearing to be replaced by his armor.

Standing now, she stared into his back, a new slew of emotions overtaking her.

“Why didn't you say anything?”

“There was nothing to be done.”

Why? Why were tears rising in her eyes?

Forcing them away, she glared at his back.

“There is *always* something that can be done. *Always!*”

V'Alen didn't even glance her way as he spoke. His eyes remained on the ships as they neared. “Not in this case. There is nowhere to run. The Kyron would find me, anyway.”

Alaina gulped, her hand forming a fist as she fought against herself, fought against her emotions, forcing herself to

stay in check.

But she couldn't.

Slamming her fist into his back, she screamed. "No!"

"Alaina..."

"I refuse to give up on you! Back there, when you attacked those assholes, it was because of *me*. You were trying to protect *me*. You *protected* me. And not only me, but Nia and her mate, too. You did all that for us."

"Affirmative."

Whatever cold, calm mask he usually wore was back in place. It was as if she could no longer reach him.

"V'Alen," she begged, leaning her forehead into his back. Sobs racked her frame. "You're not evil. Surely they know the difference."

"I broke the law. I will be punished as the Kyron see fit."

"No. I won't let them."

"It is not for you to decide."

She could scream.

"It doesn't make sense! I refuse to just...*give* up on you! I can't lose you—"

"You have no choice, Alaina."

He turned then, to face her, grabbing the fist she hadn't realized she'd been pounding into his back and holding it in his hand.

"My time spent with you, Alaina, is time I have treasured. Of all the moons I have spent as an emissary, I have cherished the time spent with you above all others."

She gulped, a sob lodging in her throat, her head shaking even before he finished speaking.

"This isn't how our story's supposed to end, V'Alen. *I'm* the one that's supposed to go. Not you. *Me*."

Again, she swore she saw some sort of smile, albeit a sad one.

“Alaina...if you could spend more time on this plane... without your illness...where you could be free of it and without worry...would you accept that gift?”

She blinked at him, not understanding just what he was asking.

“Of course, I would, but that—”

“Understood.”

Turning away from her, he released her hand as he rose into the air.

Her whole body shuddered as she watched him leave, and not because she was weak, not because she was tired, but because, at the end of the day, she was powerless.

What could she do?

Nothing.

As he rose into the air, coming to a stop before one of the huge vessels, she realized they too had stopped moving.

A space opened in the side of one and three beings exited.

Alaina squinted.

She couldn't see them clearly from where she stood, but they all moved to hover before V'Alen.

They were speaking to him, and God knew, she would give some of her time to hear what they were saying.

The seconds seemed to tick by so slowly that even as the wind picked up around her, she didn't feel it.

Her heart was under atrophy as she paced, flattening the long grass around her as she ran a hand into her hair.

It shouldn't matter to her. She was leaving soon too. But no part of her could be that cold.

She cared about him.

Fuck.

She more than cared.

She was falling in love with the cyborg, goddamnit. And she didn't want this to be their goodbye.

She wanted him to live on after she went. Wanted him to find new experiences. To continue to exist, because she couldn't.

When all four hovering beings suddenly turned in her direction, she forgot to breathe.

Their strength. The power they held. She could sense it, feel the foreboding brush across her skin as they looked down at her.

That video V'Alen had shown her, of his people and what they did to that planet had been almost like watching a movie. Standing beneath them now, she could see how these beings would have been seen as gods.

As they all moved in sync, slowly floating in the air as they descended, that instinct within her, the one that told her to run, screamed at the back of her mind.

Through some form of resilience she didn't know she had, she stood still, hardly breathing as they approached.

The three new Kyron preceded V'Alen, all descending at the same rate while he stayed somewhat behind. And they weren't like she expected them to be.

Instead of black and gold armor like V'Alen had, theirs were the same color as their ships. The purest silver, it looked almost white.

And their faces. The closer they got, the more her eyes widened.

"V'Alen?" she gulped.

They were identical. In every way, identical.

As the three Kyron came to land in front of her, their feet touching the soft grass with such grace she wouldn't have believed they were capable of the things she'd seen, three V'Alens looked back at her.

“What...the hell...” Her whisper was one she was sure they heard, but the shock pushed the words from her lips before she could hold them back.

“Flesh being,” the one to the left spoke. “From the planet designated HREX4X1.”

Hearing his voice, the same voice V’Alen spoke to her with, the same face was unsettling. Because it wasn’t V’Alen.

They all looked like him, but that was all.

Their eyes were cold. Unfeeling. And, at that moment, she realized that all this time she had been thinking V’Alen felt nothing, she’d been wrong. *He’d* been wrong.

For she already knew, these beings in front of her looked like him, they sounded like him, but they were *nothing* like him.

Eyes darting behind them to land on the being she’d inescapably fallen in love with, her heart cracked as he stared at her.

Unlike the cold gazes of the “V’Alens” before her, his was warm. His had feeling. He was looking at her as if he *knew* her and she wanted nothing more than to reach out to him.

“V’Alen,” she whispered, but instead of a response, the Kyron in the center spoke.

“Our brother has committed the inexcusable. We are here to return him to Voltaris and fix the damage he has done.”

Alaina shook her head. “He has done nothing wrong. He was only trying to protect us.”

As if ignoring her, the third Kyron continued. “We will make amends with any flesh beings affected. Do not be concerned.”

“What? No one was hurt.”

The one on the left picked up. “We Kyron will exact punishment as written in the Code of Voltaris for the Law of Voltaris.”

“Such incidences have been few and far between in the millennia that we have existed,” the one in the middle continued.

“Do not be afraid. We Kyron will continue to uphold our law. There is no need to fear us.”

Alaina blinked at them. Were they even listening to anything she'd said?

“Clone 457896...designated...V'Alen, will be purged.”

Her heart cracked at the words. “No. Y-you can't do that. He wasn't being cruel. He wasn't mindless! He was in full control.”

“Even more dangerous,” the middle one said.

“Affirmative,” the others agreed.

Her gaze flicked to V'Alen. This was hopeless. There must be something she could do.

“Clone 457896 had one request,” the one in the center said.

Her gaze flicked to V'Alen again. That calmness was back in place, and unlike before, it did nothing to slow the beating of her heart.

“That you, flesh being of HREX4X1, accompany us to Voltaris to undergo enhancement.”

“Life state critical. Chance of survival...one percent,” said the Kyron to the left.

“Wait, what? Enhancement?”

“To remove the mass compromising your semioval center. To make you whole once more and remove the critical state threatening your existence.”

The world stopped as her gaze moved to the male she'd fallen in love with. Tears sprung into her eyes as she stared at him, unable to form words, unable to say anything.

He'd wanted to heal her?

He'd said it was possible. She didn't actually believe he'd cared to that extent. To make her life his dying wish.

But how did he expect her to live on without him, knowing that he was sacrificed while she still existed?

The thought made her chest hurt.

She'd prayed so long for a cure, for some miracle, but as time passed, reality had been a bitter pill she'd had to swallow. Now that miracle was presented before her, she was almost too afraid to reach out and grab it.

"Why should I trust you when you can't even trust one of your own? Look into his memories. See that he wasn't being cruel. See that his actions weren't a repeat of your mistakes. It isn't as cut and dry as you make it out to be."

"We have seen his memories," they said together.

"It is a risk we cannot take." The one in the middle turned slightly away from her, his gaze going over the distance.

"We return to Voltaris." As he turned his back to her, her heart skipped a beat.

That was it?

"Do you accept Clone 457896's final request?" another asked.

If she didn't accept were they just going to leave? Was this going to be the end? Just like that?

At her hesitation, the other two Kyron turned their backs and it was obvious they were about to head back into their ships.

"Yes!"

They paused.

Her mind was spinning with a thousand possibilities, a million ideas, but nothing she could think of lengthened her time with him except for following them.

"Yes. I agree."

The one in the middle tilted his head slightly, enough for his blue gaze to land on her.

“Understood.”

As they rose into the air, leaving V’Alen standing in front of her, it felt like her heart was being held up by masking tape and it would break apart at any moment.

“V’Alen...”

He approached her then, crouching as he lifted her into his arms, turned, and began floating upward. A sob lodged in her throat as she buried her face into his armor.

This is not how she wanted to say goodbye.

This was not how it should be.

She must have whispered those words out loud because, as they neared the huge vessel in the sky, V’Alen tilted his chin, those calm eyes finding hers.

“It is how it is,” he said.

She shook her head. “No. We can still find a way to change this. There is always hope.”

A ghost of what might be a smile moved his lips. “Alaina...I am not afraid. My mind will go. My memories. My framework...”

“You will die. You’re not the one that’s supposed to die.”

“I will. I will be deleted.”

Her chest felt like it caved inwards. How could he say it so easily?

She guessed that was the difference between them. Where he was logical, even when faced with his own death, all she could feel was resistance.

She didn’t want any of this to happen.

“I...I’ve fallen in love with you.”

There. She’d said it.

“And...I can't...I don't know how I'd continue living knowing you died because you tried to save me. I know it's only early, and I know whatever's changed within you mightn't even be close to understanding this, but I love you. I've fallen in love with you, V'Alen.”

He gazed down at her as they came to the threshold of the ship, a vast doorway opening before them.

“I should have warned you of how illogical it is to fall in love with a Kyron,” he said, the same moment that his feet touched the entrance to the ship.

White light filled the room but she didn't care to look around.

“Illogical?” a sad laugh huffed through her nose. “Baby, I'm human. Most things I do are illogical. But you...you were an easy choice. A logical choice. The right choice. I don't regret the time we spent together.” She stared into his eyes.

It wasn't a usual thing to say everything that was weighing on her heart...but what did any of that matter when she wasn't sure she would ever see him again?

“And you will have much more,” he said, bringing her over to a curved white seat. As he set her down, V'Alen activated something on the side and a transparent cover slid around the seat, enclosing her.

Alaina's eyes widened as she jerked in the seat, but automatic restraints were already wrapping across her chest, holding her still.

“V'Alen!” Panic. Pure panic and a pain in her chest.

Was this what a broken heart felt like? Like the bones in her ribs were dry and cracking, falling into a hole that her heart had dug.

“You will have the best life, Alaina.” He stepped away, standing upright as he gazed down at her in the little pod. “A gift to a being I have come to treasure.”

“No!” she screamed.

“You are my —”

She didn't hear that last word, the blood rushing in her ears too loudly, her heart slamming against her chest too hard.

It didn't really matter because he was walking away, her screams and shouts reaching nowhere as she struggled against the restraints. And as her body slowly grew tired, she cursed herself.

She cursed her fragile being.

But, for once, it wasn't her body that was failing her.

As her eyelids drooped, her body slumping back in the seat, tiredness overcoming her far too quickly, whatever drug was being filtered into the little pod took quick effect.

The last she saw of the male that had changed her world was his backward glance, those calm eyes reaching hers before her world went dim.

THE KYRON, HIS BROTHERS, THE COLLECTIVE, DID NOT SPEAK. They did not need to.

Connected through the source, their central consciousness was wired together.

It was how they found him so quickly. How he could know the location of any other Kyron that was within radius. And how they knew of everything he'd done since being deployed to the Restitution.

All seated before him, they skimmed over the data, their primary concern being two things.

The first appeared from his memory as a holo image before them.

“Vikteki technology...in our era,” 125 said.

“A threat,” 761 said.

“One that must be eliminated,” 311 added. “But not by us, Kyron. We cannot interfere.”

They spoke at each other without looking at or acknowledging each other's presence. After being away for so long, he must have forgotten the old ways. Forgotten how... *different* he was before he left Voltaris to be an emissary.

“And if the threat comes our way?” 311, the youngest of the three. The one with the fewest experiences of the trio. His gaze followed the holo-image with so much interest, it was as if he was going to rise and reach out to touch the orb.

“We will deal with it as we deal with any other threat.”
125, the eldest of the three. Almost as old as Source himself.

“We will eliminate it.”

125 lifted his gaze and looked at him for the first time since they entered the meeting chambers. Staring back at a replica of himself had always been...normal to him, but now, all he wondered about was Alaina.

What did she see when she looked at him?

Did he appear as cold and unfeeling as his brothers?

As lifeless?

“457896,” 125 said, as the holo image changed to that of his attack on the Hedgeruds. The destruction played without a hitch and V’Alen could only gaze at himself depicted there.

He remembered every laser. Remembered how it felt taking out those scum. And he would do it again.

“As per the Law of Voltaris, we will purge you from the system.”

“Your memories and all data wiped. The body you inhabit reset.”

“Everything deleted.”

“Affirmative,” he replied. The thought did not scare him, only the idea of leaving Alaina alone did.

She was small. Delicate. And she had fiends out to get her.

“You defied your sleeper code.”

“We cannot overwrite it. Only hide it. Even within us, the same code lies.”

“But we must determine how you managed to do so. That is still not clear.”

Alaina, he thought. *She was the key.*

“We will download all data concerning this event and save it to the Archive.”

“Tell us 457896...you are using facets of your system that we have locked away...”

“For the good of the collective...”

“What has this flesh being done to you? Or was this an effect of the Vikteki orb you discovered?”

Something pulsed in his system. It was the first time they'd mentioned Alaina. Even when he'd requested that they'd heal her, they hadn't acknowledged his request until they were before her.

And now...they grew curious.

What was this new sensation? A snagging of electricity across his circuits.

He did not like their interest in his female...but he had no choice but to speak to his brothers. To tell them about her. After all, when it was done, when the body he inhabited was purged and his memories wiped, he would no longer recognize her. He would no longer exist to recognize her.

She needed the Kyron. More than she needed him.

“She is...” He paused.

He'd never put words to the enigma Alaina had created within him.

“She is life,” he finally said. “Alaina is life. She is meaning. She is purpose.”

His brothers all looked at him from eyes that could be his own, their faces masks that betrayed nothing.

“Compromised,” 125 finally said.

“Perhaps by a foreign entity. This has not been recorded before.”

“Or perhaps by this.” 761 changed the holoimage before them and Alaina's face appeared.

V'Alen tilted his head as he watched her smile.

This was before he'd even rescued her from the Hedgerud. He had files on her. Recordings.

In one shot, she was helping Kerena in the lab and she turned and looked his way. A smile graced her lips, the skin across her cheeks growing darker as she eyed him furtively. In another, she was helping her fellow humans. Tending to their wounds after they were rescued from stasis. Her eyes on him. That same brush of warmth across her cheeks.

“Perhaps this flesh being should be investigated,” 311 said.

“Negative.” V’Alen took a step forward. “She is no threat.”

“That is for us to decide,” 761 replied.

125 rose from his seat. “She has agreed to let us transform her brain. We will investigate its workings then.”

V’Alen stiffened. It took him a moment to realize his eyes were glowing red. He only noticed his reflection in 125’s eyes when he faced him.

125 tilted his head, his ocular lens spinning as he recorded the scene. “We will not harm the female.”

Curiously, he did not comment on the malfunction. But Kyron do not lie. He knew that. If they said they wouldn’t harm her, she would be safe.

125 tilted his head slightly, his gaze lifting to the smooth white roof.

“Brace,” he said. “We fold the void now.”

The movement through the fold made his atoms lag before everything came up to current time and his body tilted forward slightly before righting itself.

Even without looking out the viewport, he could sense their location. The connections in his head all began humming and he had to make an effort to dim them.

He was back at source. Voltaris.

He was home.

It was time to say goodbye.

ALAINA WOKE WITH A START. HER BACK ROSE AS SHE FLUNG herself upright, her eyes wide, a scream on her lips as her arm outstretched to...nothing.

She wasn't in that little pod anymore. The restraints weren't holding her down.

She was...in a room. A plain white room. On a plain white bed.

Lights almost too blindingly white were overhead and not a sound could be heard except the beat of her own heart, thumping in her ears.

Where was she?

Where was V'Alen?

About to jump off the bed, she pressed down with her hand and winced, forgetting that her wrist had been broken.

But there was no pain.

It felt like her mind was taking a little too long to catch up as she looked down at her hand.

Shock made her heart beat even faster.

Trembling, she lifted her hand before her face and turned it over.

Sleek white armor covered her entire arm.

Panic went right through her as her gaze fell to the rest of her body and her lungs seemed to cave as she took in a deep

breath and released it just as quickly.

She was naked. But the rest of her was still flesh.

Only her arm had the strange robotic thing, from her fingertips right up to her elbows.

It seemed like a sleeve, but she couldn't pull her arm out.

Wriggling her fingers, they moved with fluidity, as if she was wearing a glove. But if it was a sleeve, why wasn't her wrist hurting?

She wasn't sure how she felt about it, but other things needed her attention. Like the fact she was completely naked and she didn't know where she was, or where V'Alen was.

Were they still on the ship?

Almost stumbling to her feet, Alaina ran a hand through her hair and paused. Eyes wide, she tilted her head back slightly, as if they would help her to see what she'd just felt.

Her hair.

It was gone.

Her head was bald.

Her heartbeat picked up again as her breaths increased, making her chest heave.

Wait.

They'd done it?

Trying to focus, she realized one thing. That headache. The one that had been in the background all along was gone.

She was still tired, but the everlasting headache was gone...and so was the nausea.

Running her hand over her bald head, she barely felt the thin line running from ear to ear across her crown.

They'd done it.

They'd healed her? Removed the cancer?

She was almost too scared to hope. Almost too afraid to figure out *how* they did it.

Now on her feet, she turned slightly, her gaze flicking around the room. There was no door. Nothing except that one bed.

“Hello?” she called. “Anyone there?”

Measuring her breaths, her fingers still moving across the line on her head, she took a few steps forward.

“V’Alen?”

It was almost too painful to even say his name.

What happened to him? Had they done it yet? Deleted him?

She hadn’t even said a proper goodbye.

“Anyone out there?”

The wall quite literally opened, an oval hole presenting itself and the Kyron standing on the other side.

His gaze remained on her eyes as he entered the room and Alaina’s heart skipped a beat.

But it wasn’t relief that came. Only pain.

He looked like V’Alen. Exactly like him. But instead of the warm feelings that usually came when she was around her cyborg, nothing but cold vacant space presented itself when faced with this one.

“You’re not V’Alen,” she whispered, taking a step back.

“Affirmative,” the Kyron said. “I am 125.”

“You have no name?”

“Affirmative. I have not chosen one.”

Alaina dropped her gaze, nodding slightly. So, V’Alen had chosen his name then, she presumed.

She liked his name. She hadn’t realized that till now.

“Where is V’Alen?”

“Clone 457896 no longer exists.”

Her heart shattered and Alaina gripped her chest. The tears that sprung in her eyes hovered at the border of her lids.

“You...deleted him.”

“Affirmative.”

“Why.” Said so low not even she heard the word as it left her lips, it wasn’t a question. She knew why. She knew their reasons. But she couldn’t accept them. “He’d done nothing wrong.”

“Negative. A Kyron that has gone rogue cannot be free to roam the cosmos. We Kyron have taken great lengths to prevent—”

“Your past mistakes. I know. I get it.”

125 tilted his head as he studied her.

“It is not usual for a flesh being to understand.”

“I’m a human. Why do you insist on calling me a flesh being? You were once like me.”

“And we were inefficient. Pathetic.”

Alaina shrugged. “Whatever.”

In all the time she’d spent with V’Alen, she’d been at her weakest. And never had he made her feel pathetic or weak. Not once.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she turned slightly away from him. Looking at him, even though he wasn’t the man she loved, was hurtful. It was like looking at a lesser copy of the male that wasn’t there anymore.

“You were important to 457896,” 125 suddenly said.

Alaina didn’t respond. She wanted to be alone, but how could she even tell him to leave when she was at his mercy?

“You treasured him.” His voice was closer now and Alaina jerked when she glanced over her shoulder and realized he was looming over her. Taking a step back, she shifted away from him.

“And you know this because...”

“We accessed your memories when we augmented your brain.”

Augmented? Touching that almost invisible scar on her head, her gaze darted to the Kyron before her.

“What exactly did you do to me?”

His head tilted slightly as if he was taking in all of her facial expressions before he lifted his hand and a holo image appeared in his palm.

It was the likeness of a human brain. *Her* brain, she assumed.

The diagram before her split, her brain being divided into parts, the cerebral cortex lifting, and something emerging from underneath. Not a part of her brain, but something else.

It spun slowly in the air as she took a step closer, eyes narrowing as she stared at the object.

“What’s that?”

“Your augmentation.”

“You removed the cancer.”

“And retrofitted the device.”

Alaina blinked at the image.

“Your brain will operate as usual.” The diagram in 125’s hand vanished. “Your limb was also augmented.”

Alaina’s gaze fell to the armor on her arm.

“You will experience increased strength while using that arm.”

She stared at it, flexing her fingers. So...it wasn’t her hand after all. Why could she feel sensation through it then?

A question she pushed to the back of her mind as she lifted her gaze to the Kyron before her.

“Why do all this? Why did you help me?”

“We saw 457896’s memories. We saw you did not fear the end of your existence.”

Her gaze moved between his eyes. His cold gaze betrayed nothing.

“And we saw how you managed to influence him. We were...curious.”

Staring at the being before her, she had no words.

She was an engineer. But no training had ever prepared her for any of this. V'Alen. His people. These Kyron...

They baffled her.

“You are an anomaly,” 125 said.

“And what does that mean for you?” Standing here before him, she wasn't sure what to expect. He wasn't outwardly aggressive. She didn't think he meant her harm. And yet, no trust began to spark within her.

Only pain.

“You are a threat. To all Kyron.”

Maybe she stopped breathing, because her lungs felt full and burned.

“A threat?” But Kyron eliminated all threats. “What does that mean?”

“The source wishes to observe you. To learn.”

“The source?”

125 tilted his head slightly, a movement that made him look so much like V'Alen that her heart seized and ached.

“Come,” he said. “Follow me.”

AS SHE FOLLOWED 125 THROUGH THE DOOR, HER GAZE AT THE back of his head, the fear that his words should incite was nowhere to be found.

Her heart no longer thundered. Her limbs moved freely.

All that was present was a gaping hole in her chest. A part of her was missing.

V'Alen was missing.

As they stepped through the door, 125 hardly glanced behind him, yet his voice reached her without interference.

“Depress the control by your smallest digit.”

Frowning, she glanced down at her new arm. Her wrist splint had been fine, now she was partly cybernetic. She was sure after the shock of this all passed, that fact was going to throw her for a loop.

As her gaze slid over the arm, she spotted the control he was referring to. A light-gray circular patch beneath her little finger. Stretching her thumb to the spot, a shriek almost left her lips as her body jerked to a halt.

It was seamless and fast. The armor spread across her skin, covering everything except her head.

Staring down at herself, eyes as wide as saucers, she couldn't move.

“I thought you said you only augmented my arm.”

“This is not an augmentation. It is simply armor. It can be removed.”

As she stared at it, words stuck on her tongue, 125 continued. “It can be removed with a touch of that control. Alternatively, you may traverse Voltaris bare. We have no modesty laws here. Such things are...archaic to our kind.”

She blinked a thousand times. She’d forgotten she was naked. Maybe because he didn’t even acknowledge it.

“This...seems like a lot. I don’t understand why you have given me so much.”

“The source decided.”

The source. He’d mentioned it before.

Taking a breath, she took a hesitant step in the armor. It wasn’t heavy. It almost felt like she was simply wearing regular clothes.

125 watched her as she took the few steps to reach his side, those eyes completely unreadable.

“Where are you taking me?”

He watched her and she averted her gaze.

It was like looking at V’Alen. Why did they all have to look alike?

Forcing down the lump in her throat, her hands formed into fists at her side.

There was so much she didn’t know about him. So much she didn’t get the chance to find out.

“I want to see him...his body. I want to tell him goodbye.”

“Affirmative. You might encounter him on our journey.”

Alaina frowned, her body jerking into motion as he suddenly began walking again.

“I don’t understand. I thought you said you deleted him.”

“I purged his system, but his body is still useful.”

That almost made her choke on her heart. “What?”

125 glanced her way, that ring around his pupil spinning.
“Flesh beings find it hard to comprehend.”

“What did you do to him, exactly?”

He turned to face the direction in which he walked and she wondered if he wasn't going to answer her.

“I have explained the process.”

“It doesn't make sense. V'Alen is alive?”

“V'Alen does not exist. Clone 457896 does.”

Alaina pressed her mouth into a thin line and followed him along. What he was saying was that V'Alen's frame, his outer body was still around here somewhere? Moving about? With no memory of who he was before?

What sort of torture was that? She couldn't imagine it but yet...

Her eyes widened as they turned back to the Kyron at her side.

“How many times have you done this before? Purged a Kyron's system? How many Kyron are walking around without memory of their past selves?”

He didn't even glance at her, instead focusing on the way ahead. And there was nothing to see. They were walking along an empty and pristine corridor. No decorations. Nothing out of the ordinary to catch the eye. Just pure white nondescript walls that rose so high, even when she tilted her head back she couldn't see the ceiling.

“The number is minimal. Only a few Kyron have gone rogue since the Collective put the Law in place.”

Her heart thumped louder in her chest. That hole that had formed in her stomach filling with life.

He was still out there somewhere.

There was still hope.

“Take me to him.”

“Negative.”

“Why the hell not?”

The corridor suddenly opened into a larger one that intersected it. Several Kyron stood at various spots. Some looking at information displayed by holo-vids. Others standing like sentinels staring ahead.

She guessed there were maybe twenty in this one area.

As soon as she entered the space with 125, every single one of them looked her way.

Alaina gulped.

Power.

She could feel it. But the worst thing about them all was that they all had the face of the man she loved.

She found herself staring, unable to look away. But not one of them was V’Alen. And it wasn’t just the fact they were dressed in silvery-white armor and not the black and yellow she’d come to love.

They just weren’t him and she had no idea how she knew that.

125 kept walking as if he didn’t notice a thing and Alaina jogged to catch up with him.

“Where are we?”

“Voltaris.”

V’Alen’s homeworld. She had to find him. But if they all looked like him, how was she going to do that?

She followed 125 until he walked out of the strange building and only the momentum of her steps stopped her from halting completely.

It was a city.

White arches filled the skies, high as towers themselves and glistening in the light. So many, it was almost as if she was looking at the skeleton of a strange creature.

There were probably over a thousand Kyron walking before her, all completing various tasks. All dressed in the

same silver armor that 125 wore, they looked like the exact thing she was realizing they were. A network.

A network of indescribable power.

They were on some sort of bridge that didn't look solid, yet when she stepped on it, her feet didn't sink through what looked like water filled with golden energy lines.

It was like walking on a circuit board.

"Pulse only slightly elevated," 125 said. "Breath rate steady."

"You're scanning me?" she whispered, turning her eyes to the sky.

"Affirmative."

Above them, she wasn't sure she was even looking at the sky, as every now and then, she was sure she saw pathways of information there, like lightning traveling through a soft blue ocean.

"And what results have you drawn?"

"You are adjusting thirty percent quicker than we expected."

"We who? All of you? Or this source you keep talking about?"

125 tilted his head slightly.

"You're clones, aren't you? And I suppose 'source' is the original?"

"Affirmative."

Alaina stared off into the distance, watching all the different V'Alen. Because they were him...but not him at the same time. Her mind, her heart, she didn't know what to think.

"Where is he? I want to have a word with him."

"Negative. No beings meet the source."

"So what does he want from me then? Why bring me here? Why heal me? Why take away the one thing that had come to matter to me?"

125 tilted his head the other way. “I mattered to you?”

His words made her lean back a little, staring at him. “Not you.”

“457896 is me. We are all the same.”

“No. He was *V’Alen*. My *V’Alen*. He was different.”

“His experiences.”

She didn’t reply. Instead, she turned her gaze to the others. They did not seem to notice her presence, though she was sure they were aware of her being there.

“What are you doing? Why are there so many of you working out here?”

125 stepped by her side and she flinched a little. He possibly noticed, but said nothing.

“We are processing data collected from the emissaries.”

“How many emissaries are there?”

She could almost feel his gaze on her and she forced herself to look up at him. Her heart ached again. Looking into his face was doing her no favors.

“Do you really wish to know...or is there something more pertinent you wish to ask me?”

She didn’t expect an answer like that and it threw her for a loop for a moment.

“Yes,” she finally replied. “I want to know where *V’Alen* is. I want to know why you are not taking me to him. I want to know what this *source* wants from me. And I want to know why—”

“Why we have not terminated you.”

Silence descended between them.

“The answer to your final query is not simply explained,” 125 said after a few moments.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You are important to Source.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

But his words pulled at a part of her memory. When V’Alen had said the same words to her many times, but out of context.

You are important, Alaina.

Had he been referring to the same thing? That she was important to his source?

He’d never mentioned the source. Only the collective.

“Why am I important to Source, 125?”

“For the same reason that you were important to 457896.”

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she looked up into their strange sky and released a slow breath.

They shared experiences. Knew everything that happened to each other. So what she had with V’Alen...if it was shared among them all, were they all like the V’Alen she knew?

No.

“That can’t be. What V’Alen and I had was special.”

“Was it?”

Glancing at 125, she forced herself to avert her gaze. He wasn’t like V’Alen...and yet...he wasn’t as cold as she’d first determined. He was different too. Not just a mindless clone.

His questions made her think...and worry.

“It *was*,” she stressed.

125 stared at her for far too long, his all-seeing gaze feeling like it was stripping her bare.

“You have given Source meaning,” he finally said. “Life.”

Turning his gaze to the spot in the heavens that she’d been forcing herself to stare at, he continued. “It has been eons since we have documented such an experience.”

Alaina closed her eyes briefly. “You’re telling me...” She huffed a laugh through her nose. “That I’ve basically formed a bond with all of you.”

“We are one.”

“No. You aren’t. Not if you have different experiences. You may have the same DNA, but you are all different people. Experiences shape who you are. You may look like V’Alen... but you’re not him. And you will never be him.”

125’s eyes suddenly flashed white and Alaina staggered back, raw fear shooting through her for the first time since she’d awakened.

He stared at her with those white eyes for a few moments, before they finally died down to their usual blue.

“Understood,” he said. “You may approach 457896 now.”

SHE HAD NO CLUE WHAT JUST HAPPENED. ONLY THAT 125 suddenly turned and walked away.

If this was a test and her professor asked her to explain it, she'd fail.

Alaina watched the cyborg go, nothing making sense as he disappeared into a door in one of the arches.

Should she have followed him? She doubted it. Not from the way he'd left.

Not after what he'd said.

You may approach 457896 now.

V'Alen. He had to have meant V'Alen. But where was he?

Alarm went through her as her gaze flicked over the sea of Kyron working before her. All focused on the screens before them. None took notice of her as she began walking.

This was a test.

She was sure of it.

Why else would he leave her here like this?

You may approach 457896 now. That could only mean V'Alen was here somewhere.

Her heart swelled in her chest as she clasped her hands, wringing her fingers as she walked slowly, studying each Kyron that she passed.

How was she going to find him? There was no way she could pick him out of so many Kyron. And as far as she could see, no black and gold armor presented itself anywhere.

They were all dressed the same. All ignoring her the same way.

Tentatively, she walked up to one who had his focus on a holo-image, her head tilting as she looked up at him. His gaze didn't even shift to her. And neither did that of the other Kyron she approached.

It didn't matter though, because neither of them felt *right*.

For a moment, worry made her gut churn. How was she going to do this?

But, stiffening her shoulders, she kept moving. Kept checking. She wouldn't give up, not even if she had to approach every single Kyron in the city.

He was here, and she wasn't going to stop till she found him.

But as she walked, something made her stop. Turning toward the building she'd exited with 125, her heart skipped a beat. There, a Kyron stood at the entrance, looking her way.

Time stopped.

V'Alen?

He wasn't in his black and gold armor. He was dressed just like all the others, so she wasn't quite sure exactly *why* she thought it was him.

Maybe because he was simply standing there, unlike all the others, staring at her.

"V'Alen?" she whispered, picking up the pace as she hurried his way. Soon, her light footsteps turned into running. "V'Alen!"

But the Kyron she approached just stood there. Looking at her. An unmoving block of ice.

"V'Alen?" Her call turned into a whisper when she was close enough to see his face. Standing a few feet away from

him, her chest heaved as they looked at each other.

She was sure it was him.

It had to be.

“457986?”

His head tilted slightly and tears sprung into her eyes as she leaped toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He didn't reciprocate, didn't even acknowledge her, but she couldn't let go.

“It *is* you.”

“Affirmative.”

Her heart warmed. “I thought you'd forgotten me.”

When he didn't reply, she peeked up at him. There was a sick feeling in her gut and it grew by the second.

“V'Alen?”

No recognition. Nothing.

It was like he wasn't there. Because...he wasn't.

A sob made her body jerk as she released him and pressed her hands over her mouth, trying to hold back the sudden urge to release her tears.

She didn't expect it to hurt this much. When 125 had told her he was still operational, she had felt relief. V'Alen was still alive. That's all that mattered.

But this.

He couldn't have forgotten her.

Forcing her panic away, she approached him once more, gripping his hand in hers.

“Maybe you don't recognize me.” She forced herself to focus. Tried to tell herself this wasn't all in vain. “My hair's gone and I'm wearing this suit. I look like a shorter version of you.” She forced a chuckle. “But you remember me, right?”

No recognition.

“Do you remember the Restitution? Commander Ajos and Kerena? Akur?”

His head tilted slightly. “Such designations are not on record.”

Her breath stuttered in her chest.

If he didn't remember them, beings he'd spent so much time with, would he even remember *her*? How could she expect him to?

The odds were already low. There was nothing she could do but hope. That same hope that had led her blindly through life. The same hope that had pushed her to carry on even when the odds seemed insurmountable.

She could rely on that hope back then. And she would rely on it now.

As V'Alen began walking, his gaze forward as if her presence was inconsequential, she tried to keep up with him.

“Where are you going?”

“To my station at sector 461. I must interface with the Source.”

Alaina gulped.

The more that *Source* was mentioned, the more her feelings toward it turned sour. But, at the same time, how could she even hate it? Hating it was like hating V'Alen himself. Whatever Source was, it had made the man she loved. Source was him.

For a moment, she wondered if she could locate this being. Speak to it. Reason with it to return V'Alen to her. But where would she even start?

This city was a maze of Kyron and she was just a visitor they didn't seem too concerned about.

“V'Alen.” She hurried so she was walking backward before him. His pace didn't even slow down and soon she was jogging backward. Otherwise, it was like he would walk right through her.

“V’Alen,” she called his name again, but there was no response. No recognition.

But she wasn’t going to give up. She couldn’t.

“V’Alen, stop!”

Pressing both arms against him, a surge of power flooded through the suit and into her arms, making her skid as she tried to slow him down.

Her wide eyes stared down at the suit and then back up to him as he slowed to a halt.

“You *have* to remember,” she begged. “You have to remember me. *Us*. What we shared. I know...I know you’d want to.”

Those tears were coming back and she fought them away.

“I know you’d want to!” Through her pleading gaze, all she could see was the nothingness in his eyes. “You’re the reason I’m here! You expect me to just go on without you?!”

No recognition.

“You’ve given me more time and now you’re gone! What am I supposed to do? We didn’t even get to say a proper goodbye...”

V’Alen sidestepped her and continued walking, leaving her behind and Alaina just stared at the direction in which they’d come, that hole in her chest spasming. Aching.

He was gone.

The thought, the full realization, made her fall to her knees. She couldn’t even turn around. Couldn’t watch him go.

The only thing she had was those last few words he said to her.

You will have the best life, Alaina.

But it was one that she’d have to live without him. The time he had given her was precious...but that didn’t make the fact he was gone hurt any less.

A gift to a being I have come to treasure.

When he'd said it, she hadn't thought about it in the moment, but wasn't that like saying he loved her? For a being who didn't have access to his emotions the way that she did, him saying that was monumental.

You are my...

Turning, she watched him go. She couldn't remember the last word he said, and she wasn't sure it mattered anyway. All it would do was make her hurt more to know they'd come that far, passed so many barriers, only to be ripped apart.

But she couldn't get the words out of her head.

You are my...

What did he say?

Queen? You are my queen?

That made sense. He'd said he treasured her, and to her, he was her king. But that word didn't *feel* right.

It wasn't what he'd said.

Tears gathering in her eyes, she watched him go as everything within her broke apart.

This pain...she'd never felt pain like this before. Pain that rivaled the agony she'd gone through with her illness. Pain that had no physical source but yet threatened to rip her apart.

But then...it happened.

The words. They came back.

*You are my **key**.*

Her heart thumped.

Yes.

He's said it before that instant. Once. Did it mean something or was she grasping at straws again?

You are my key.

"V'Alen!" she called, but the Kyron walking away from her did not halt.

“I am your key.” She didn’t know why, but saying the words gave her hope. Rising, she said it louder. “I am your key!”

But he was still walking away.

What did he mean by those words?

She didn’t have much time to figure it out.

“V’Alen! It’s me. You *have* to remember me.”

He didn’t stop. Her words did nothing.

“V’Alen!” She almost screamed. “It’s me, *Alaina!*”

The breath stopped in her nose as he suddenly came to a halt, the air itself feeling like it was no longer moving. She didn’t dare to breathe.

Seconds ticked by that felt like long minutes as she held her breath, waiting. Waiting for something. Anything.

As V’Alen turned around, those calm eyes landed on her. Time ceased existence.

“Alaina,” he repeated.

Blue light, brighter than the one that usually lit his eyes, suddenly shone from them.

“Key identified. Deep system root accessed.”

She still couldn’t breathe as she waited.

A few more seconds passed as she stared at him, unaware of even the other Kyron that continued working nearby them.

“V’Alen,” she whispered.

“Loading system record. Alaina.”

Her breath stuttered from her chest as that same hope that she’d leaned on came flooding back.

“System record loaded.”

As his eyes faded back to their regular blue, a lump formed in her throat as she stared at him.

Did she even dare to believe?

Calm eyes focused on her once more as she took a hesitant step toward him.

“Hello, Alaina.”

Her name. That could only mean—

Her heart swelled so big, it felt like her chest was about to crack as she closed the distance between them, throwing herself into his arms.

This time, he didn't just stand there, his arms at his sides, completely unaffected by her presence. No. This time, he bent to lift her, his arms surrounding her as she wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face into him.

“V'Alen,” she whimpered.

“Performing scan,” he said. “Alaina, you are well. Life state, no longer critical. Heart rate, elevated. Breathing rate, elevated. You are exhibiting signs of panic.”

She could only laugh, a breath shuddering from her as she continued to grip him.

“That's because of you. I thought I lost you forever.”

He didn't say anything for a moment. “I am here, Alaina.”

Wiping her eyes, she leaned so she could see his face. “You remember me. Can you remember everything else?”

“Records of all past experiences have been restored.”

“But that means...do you remember what you did to the Hedgeruds?”

“Affirmative.”

“You remember everything?”

“Negative.”

“I don't understand.”

“There is only record of past experiences involving you.”

Alaina gulped as she stared at him.

“My system created a record. Of *you*. It saved it all.” His gaze moved over her features. “It saved *you*.”

Her heart skipped a beat as she turned her gaze to the rest of the Kyron.

They had all stopped working and were looking their way.

“Why do I feel like this isn’t where it ends,” she whispered, holding on to him tighter.

As his eyes flashed white, she knew even before he said it that there was more to come.

“The Source,” he said.

“What about the source?”

“The Source wishes to meet you.”

THE BUILDING DIFFERED FROM THE REST. TALL. LOOMING. Dark. And as V'Alen flew through the skies, under and over the many arches that rose throughout the city, she didn't have to ask where their destination was. It was clear that building was where the source dwelled.

She didn't know what to expect as he landed, his feet touching the ground softly on a bridge that connected with the strange building.

Alaina looked toward the entrance, a dark hole that connected with the bridge.

“What does he want?”

V'Alen set her down, his gaze moving to the entrance as well.

“A meeting, is all he says.”

Somehow, she didn't think that was all, and as they entered the strange building, it only added to her reservations.

She didn't know what she expected, but a swirling ball of light was not it.

“Alaina of Earth.” The voice sounded like it came from everywhere at once. “We finally meet.”

They were on a platform facing the light. Above them, the tower rose upward, so high she couldn't see the roof. And below, a chasm. Darkness. There was no floor.

The ball of light hovered there, in the center, and there was nothing else within.

“It has been eons since a visitor has graced these walls.”

There was only one place the voice could be coming from. Alaina frowned at the ball of light hovering before them.

“Source?”

“Hello, Alaina.”

It was V’Alen’s voice. *Unnervingly, V’Alen’s voice.* She’d never get used to this.

“457896, designated V’Alen,” the ball of light said. “Of all my aspects...you have found the greatest treasure.”

This was Source. The being that made V’Alen. The being that made all these Kyron. She hadn’t expected him to be anything like this.

Give her an egomaniac with a face, something she could scream and claw at, but not this. She didn’t know how to even respond.

“You have done what only one Kyron has done before,” Source continued. “You hid something from me.”

The way the voice spoke, she wasn’t sure if the being before her was upset or simply stating facts. The voice remained level. Unaffected.

Stepping closer to V’Alen, she gripped his hand. She didn’t like where this was going.

“Tell me...V’Alen...you broke the Law of Voltaris. For that, we purged you. However, your system was corrupted. The process was a failure.”

“Affirmative,” V’Alen replied, facing the light before them without hesitation. It probably was normal for him, speaking to an entity like this. It was his creator, after all.

No. It was, in a way, *him*.

“Such errors are an anomaly to the system,” Source continued. “There is only one other course of action.”

“Extermination,” V’Alen replied.

“Extermination,” Source affirmed.

“What?” Alaina took a step forward, gaze darting from V’Alen to the ball of light and back. “No.”

Not again. They weren’t going to discuss getting rid of him again.

“You reject the course of action, Alaina.” The ball of light glowed as it spoke, reminding her of the orb she’d embarked on this journey to defend.

“You’re talking about killing the man I love. Of course, I object.” She frowned at the light. Anger was rising within her. Anger and frustration.

She was completely at this being’s mercy. It could do whatever it wanted and she’d have no say in it.

“Love?”

The word echoed as she glanced over her shoulder. V’Alen was focused on her. But the word didn’t come from him alone. It came from Source as well.

They’d spoken in unison as if the thought came to them at the same time.

She’d said it out loud and she wasn’t going to take it back.

Forcing down her reservations, she stepped before V’Alen and faced the ball of light. “Yes. Love. I love him and I reject your course of action.”

She could almost feel the energy emanating from the being before her. The raw power.

“As anticipated,” Source said.

Her brows furrowed in confusion.

“You have entered my domain. My world. And you have not reacted in the way that most flesh beings would have.”

She could only wait for him to continue. Why would her reaction be a problem?

“I have been monitoring you ever since you arrived on Voltaris,” it continued. “You are an anomaly, Alaina of Earth.”

Silence descended as she glanced back at V’Alen. His presence was a comfort at her back, but fear swirled around her nonetheless.

“Aren’t you the type to get rid of anomalies?” It was a wonder her voice didn’t shake as she spoke. She didn’t know what sort of intuition she was relying on, but something told her this being before her wasn’t going to kill her. Why go through the trouble of healing her, upgrading her failing body just to get rid of her shortly after?

It made little sense. It wasn’t logical.

Based on that, she would take her chances and see how far she could push until she found a way out of this. Until she found a way to get her and V’Alen off this world and safe once more.

“I propose an experiment,” Source said.

Measuring her breaths, she waited for Source to continue.

“457896 designated V’Alen will keep his current memories if you, Alaina, keep him by your side.”

Alaina gulped. At least it wasn’t talking about extermination anymore, but it all seemed too easy.

“Why? What do you get out of this?”

For a moment, only her steady breaths made a sound in the cavernous space.

“Life,” the light finally said, and as she stared at it, her shoulders slowly lost the stiffness that had held her rigid.

“You knew this would happen, didn’t you?” she whispered. “You knew there was that hidden record in V’Alen’s system. You tested whether I could get him to recognize me. You knew that if I did, your purging process would have become invalid. A failure.”

“I know most things,” Source responded.

Thoughts whirled in her head as she stared at the light. Was this all an elaborate plan that she couldn't recognize?

With a being as intelligent as this, she would have to tread carefully.

“Why?” she asked. “Why do all this?”

“To proceed, there needed to be one hundred percent surety,” it said. “That what 457896 recorded included no errors. That you are, indeed, life.”

Alaina blinked at the light, unable to respond.

“I rarely encounter anomalies, Alaina.”

“And so...you want to figure me out?”

“Negative,” it said.

“Then what?”

“I would like to get to know you, Alaina of Earth. I wish to see you live.”

Alaina gulped again. “Why? Why me?” Whatever Source said didn't matter. If it would keep V'Alen alive, she was fine with it. But still...a part of her wanted to know.

“We have met before, Alaina of Earth. On another plane.”

She gulped again, waiting for him to continue.

“You are aware,” it said.

“You're talking about those images I saw. The ones where I was with V'Alen when I touched the orb.”

“Not images,” Source said. “You were there. *We* were there.”

“Me and you...”

“Affirmative.”

“Because you are V'Alen...”

“Affirmative.”

Alaina gulped once more. “If you are V'Alen, why do you kill yourself when you make a mistake? Why not learn from

it...continue to live?"

"A story for a thousand more years, Alaina," it said. "When I first came to this world, it was nothing. I was alone. The last of my species."

"Why were you alone? What happened to the rest of the Kyron?"

There was a moment's pause where Source remained silent and she wondered if she'd pushed too far.

"I am Kyron."

"Your name?"

"Affirmative. Kyron of the Ofeils."

"What happened to your people?" Did she even want to know? It felt as if, should Source answer, she would have information that would either place a burden on her back, or be something critical to the whole universe's survival.

"They perished. I alone survived. A tool of the Vikteki."

A wisp of cold air blew by her as she stared at the floating light.

What? "Isn't that the species that created the orb?"

"Affirmative."

"But I thought..."

"You believed they existed long before most modern civilizations were born."

"Yes."

"And that all their technology was destroyed."

"Yes."

"Then you are correct."

Her brows furrowed some more. "Then how..."

"I have lived for eons, Alaina. My first augmentation was a relic of that great civilization," Source said. "How do you presume only V'Alen was able to interact with the device you hope to harness?"

The orb.

So that's why it all happened? V'Alen interfaced with the orb because a part of him was made by the same beings that made the orb itself?

"Others do not know of my connection to the Vikteki. I erased such information from known archives."

And she was glad he erased it. If that information was still present, then V'Alen might have never existed. Source would have been terminated as a relic of a civilization too powerful to exist.

"So..." Too many thoughts were swirling in her mind at once and she fought to put it all together. "You know what the orb is. You know what it does. How to use it?"

"Affirmative. It is a tool that opens the gate."

"A transport device," V'Alen suddenly said behind her.

"Affirmative," Source agreed.

"So, V'Alen was right. The High Tasqals have found something that can make them travel across the universe in a blink of an eye."

Again, there was a momentary pause before Source responded.

"Negative."

"What?" Confusion made her brows knit.

"Not only across the void, but above and below."

Nothing it just said made sense.

"Recall what you saw," it said.

Her brows furrowed some more. "Those images..."

"Not images." For the second time, he corrected that same thing.

"Dimensions." Even saying it felt ludicrous, but she was standing before a ball of light, having a conversation with it. What could be more ludicrous than that?

“Affirmative. The Vikteki traveled to many places. Many worlds. Many levels of time and space.”

“And now the Tasqals are going to be able to do the same?”

“They have not yet completed the puzzle. Their intelligence is lacking.”

“But they will,” V’Alen said. “Eventually.”

Her heart pounded in her chest as she stared at the ball of light before her.

“What is your plan?”

Again, another pause and Alaina held her breath as she waited.

“My experiment,” it finally said.

“Your experiment,” she repeated the words. “What experiment?”

“457896,” Source said. “My aspect designated *V’Alen* will not be exterminated.”

Alaina’s breath stopped in her nose, her heart thundering as Source continued.

“His capabilities will be reduced, rendering him only 30% access to all weapons systems.”

Relief almost made her knees go weak. He was letting V’Alen live.

“This is an unexpected occurrence,” V’Alen said.

“Affirmative,” Source replied. “It shall be written in the Archives.”

“And he can go free?”

“Negative. As emissary to the Restitution, 457896 must return to his role.”

As he spoke, V’Alen’s armor rippled, and Alaina turned just in time to see it go back to its usual black and gold.

Tears welled in her eyes, more relief rushing through her.

“Why are you doing this? What changed your mind?”

There was another pause before Source replied.

“I have seen his experiences with you. I have seen what you have shared.”

Alaina smiled, reaching back to wrap her arms around V’Alen.

“You’ve watched me fall in love with him,” she whispered.

“An emotion that should be treasured,” Source said. “One I have never experienced before...and one that should not be lost.”

“Does that mean you love me?” She glanced up at V’Alen. She was teasing, but when he gripped her and spun her to face him, her breath stopped in her throat.

“Affirmative,” he said.

“You...love me?”

“Enough to face deletion for you,” he replied.

“Don’t say that,” she said, glancing back at Source. “He might change his mind.”

“Negative,” he said. “Kyron do not lie, Alaina. With you, electricity floods through my circuits. I want to experience only you. It is different for a human...but I hope it is enough.”

Alaina smiled. “Oh, V’Alen,” she whispered. “I love you too.”

As he gripped her tighter, that booming voice that had been speaking to her all along pulled her from the comfortable warmth V’Alen’s arms provided.

“There is one more thing,” Source said.

V'ALEN LOOKED DOWN AT THE FEMALE HOLDING ON TO HIM, A new sensation tickling his neurons.

All the memories they'd shared were fresh in his mind. Vibrant. Experiences that he treasured.

Looking down at her now, it was as if he was reborn. A new being hatching from his incubator. Life at his fingertips.

The only other memory that came close was the day of his actual birth...and even that didn't stand up to this.

This female had saved him.

He'd never been lonely before...not until he'd met her and it became clear that he'd been lonely all along.

Alaina was his. Over time and space. Always his.

A few feet away from them, another bridge formed out of thin air, growing as it extended itself and connected with the other side of the tower.

There, a door opened and a Kyron stood.

"125," he said.

"Affirmative." The Kyron approached slowly, his gaze on Alaina.

"You," Alaina said, her eyes narrowing as 125 approached. "You left me out there? What if I hadn't recognized him?"

"Affirmative," 125 replied. "It was all a part of the test."

V'Alen tilted his head slightly, watching the exchange.

He had no memory of what happened after he was purged.

What horrors had she endured?

When he'd come to, she was before him, waters in her eyes.

Had she been begging for his recognition? Had he caused her pain? Had 125?

Shifting, he placed Alaina behind him as he faced his counterpart.

"I will not harm her, brother," 125 said, noting the change in position. "She is as important to you as she is to us."

Behind him, Alaina scoffed. "I'm not going to ever get used to that."

"Explain," 125 said, his gaze shifting to find her, but Alaina remained in place. V'Alen could feel her comforting warmth against his armor as she tilted her head forward and rested her forehead on his back.

"You guys talk like you'd have one big orgy with me if I said yes."

"Affirmative," 125 replied and a pulse went through V'Alen that made him tense.

"Negative," he countered. "Alaina is mine. She will not be shared."

For a moment, he could see data being calculated behind 125's lenses before he straightened.

"I have something for Alaina of Earth."

Shifting, Alaina popped her head from behind him and V'Alen kept his arm draped across her as she stepped in front of him once more.

"457896..." 125 began. "*V'Alen* was the carrier of a strange serum. One confiscated during the purge."

"Affirmative," he replied. That, at least, was in his memory. He recalled storing the vial with Alaina.

Glancing at the compartment in his arm, he knew he'd put the vial there for safekeeping.

"Do you have it?" Alaina asked. "It's a serum. One that might heal the Tasqals."

125 studied her and another strange pulse went through him. 125 was his brother. His exact copy. Yet, watching his eyes land on his female made him...uneasy. That was the only way he could describe it.

Alaina said she loved him. One of the strongest forms of emotion a human could ever bestow.

But did that mean that she loved him, or the source? Did she also love 125? Did she feel the same about all his brothers?

He found he could not look away from her as these questions rose in his mind.

"This serum," Source began, "could heal your enemy...or eradicate them, if you reversed the effects."

Alaina's mouth thinned into a line and his gaze fastened on it. He needed to focus. To listen. To support her. But one of the last experiences they shared was strong in his mind.

Memory of her in the tall grass of Hudo III. Bare before him. Panting his name.

She'd exhibited joy.

He wanted her like that again.

"We want to reverse it."

He could feel a slight zing as Source thought, his synapses flooding with energy.

"You wish to eradicate an entire species," Source said.

Alaina's throat moved. "After all they've done...do you think they should live?"

He could feel the moment Source put that question to rest. It was not one they could answer. It was not an area in which they could interfere.

“We will give your species a choice,” Source finally said, as 125 closed the remaining distance between them, brandishing two vials in either hand.

“One serum will heal your enemy. The other will kill them.”

Alaina gasped, her eyes widening.

“You reversed the effects of the serum?!”

“And made a sample of what you need,” Source said.

As Alaina took the vials into her hands, she looked at Source. “Why are you helping me with this? I thought you said you didn’t interfere.”

V’Alen knew the answer even before Source said it out loud.

“Because, Alaina. You love me. It is a gift for the one I love. A female from the planet HREX4X1 who managed to change me. To make me feel again. To live. I will treasure your gift for eons to come.”

Alaina gulped. “And these?” Lifting the vials, her brows furrowed as she looked at them.

“Their use is for you to decide. I would warn you not to make the mistake that I did, eons ago.”

“But such a warning would be useless,” 125 added.

“Because the female that loves us is an anomaly, from a world filled with illogical beings.”

“Affirmative,” 125 agreed.

As he looked down at his Alaina, her focus on the vials now in her possession, he knew they were right.

She was an illogical being ruled by feeling.

But that was the exact reason why she was his key. The exact reason she’d changed him forever. And the reason he’d found a way out of his cold existence.

Alaina was perfect.

Whatever decision she made, he’d stand by her side.



WALKING toward the shuttle with V'Alen behind her, Alaina gripped the box with the vials, her knuckles almost going white.

They were leaving Voltaris.

A part of her wasn't sure this was all even real.

V'Alen. His history. The Source. The Kyron. Their future. Everything.

It was almost as if she was dreaming.

And she could be.

Back then, had she actually died and this was her version of the afterlife?

Why was she imagining all this and not some sweet version of her on Earth, where none of this was real, and she was living with V'Alen in some secluded Alaskan cottage?

Glancing behind her, those calm blue eyes met hers, and a nervous shiver went down her spine.

They would be alone again soon. Not surrounded by Kyron. Not surrounded by *him*. It was a confusing concept. One she realized she hadn't quite come to terms with yet.

One that she'd need time to digest.

Ahead, 125 stood on the ramp leading to the door of the sleek shuttle. His head tilted as he watched her, but he said nothing. Source had already said it all, and she had a shit-ton of thinking to do. As V'Alen walked past, however, he stopped him and placed a small black square in his hand.

As they entered the shuttle, she looked back to see 125 still standing there, his gaze on them until the door closed completely and blocked him out of view.

“Are you going to miss them? They are the closest thing you have to a family.”

“Negative,” V’Alen said. “*You* are my family now.”

A soft smile graced her lips. She couldn’t believe they were here together again. She’d almost lost him.

As a low hum began and the engines fired up, she watched as V’Alen lifted the small square 125 had given him.

“What’s that?”

“All of my experiences before they were purged.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Source returned them to you... why?”

He glanced at her before setting the little square down. “Perhaps you have made him reconsider things.”

“Me?” She huffed a short laugh through her nose, as she tried to ignore the little shivers of anticipation crawling all across her skin.

They were alone now, and after all that they’d been through, she wanted nothing more than to throw herself at the male before her.

“I understand now,” he said.

“Understand what?”

A delicious shiver ran through her as he approached slowly.

“That emptiness. Source was always...alone.”

She swallowed hard as he closed the distance, coming so close there was only a breath between them.

“That means you’ve always been alone, V’Alen.”

“Affirmative.”

A part of her ached as she reached up and brushed her hand across his jaw.

“It’s a cold existence.”

“Affirmative.”

She smiled. “I hope I can make it better for you.”

“You already have.”

Closing the remaining distance, his lips fused with hers as the shuttle lifted off the ground, a slight vibration going through its frame as it headed toward the stars.

V’Alen groaned. A sound she’d never heard him make before and it only made anticipation flood through her.

But this wasn’t a slow, languid type of need. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her and when his hands found her skin, his armor disappearing almost instantly, Alaina groaned into his mouth at the contact of their bodies.

Moaning, she nibbled on his lower lip, her back arching into him as he pressed against her.

She could feel him throb. Feel how much he wanted this too and her body wasn’t telling her to wait.

He’d given her this gift. Time. The greatest gift she could have ever received, and she wanted to make use of every second of it.

Spinning her away from him, a gasp escaped her lips as V’Alen pinned her against the panel before them. Another sound like a groan went through him as his hands slipped between them, gripping her buttocks and squeezing before one hand snaked into that valley between the firm mounds and swiped through her hot flesh. Alaina cried out and arched into him some more.

She wanted this and she wanted him now. She wanted him to take her hard. She wanted him to make her scream.

After everything they’d been through. After almost losing him so many times. She only wanted to feel him. Only him. Nothing but him.

“Alaina,” he mumbled, mouth pressed against her skin. “If I do this, I fear I will break you.”

She’d said it out loud?

Well, she wasn’t going to take it back.

“I need you, V’Alen.”

Hot and hard, she felt as his cock bobbed at her entrance.

“I must make you ready for me.”

A laugh huffed through her nose, turning into a moan against the panel as he slid his length through her folds, rubbing against the little bud that was begging for attention.

“I’m already ready for you.”

“Alaina,” he murmured.

Her wish was his command as he pulled back, lining himself up again, before he pressed forward.

Her fingers slid against the flat panel, nothing to hold on to as he ground his cock into her tight little hole.

It felt like she was splitting in two as that stretch, that sweet pressure, made her knees go weak and she collapsed against the panel.

In the background, the ship shuddered as it rose higher into the air, leaving the planet behind and signifying their new life ahead.

Gripping her thighs, V’Alen spread them as his cock began to vibrate, sending more tremors through her as she panted his name.

Pulling back, he surged forward once, twice, three times until he was almost fully seated.

“Alaina,” he murmured once more, his voice so deep and low it sounded like a growl. “This...” he said. “I want to have you like this all the time.”

“You can,” she whimpered.

“Every day.”

“Mmmhm.”

“I want to spread you. I want to see you feel.”

“Mm,” she whimpered.

“I want to watch you reach release.”

“You want to watch me come?”

“I want to watch you come.”

“V’Alen,” she whimpered. “Your cock...”

“Do you enjoy this, Alaina? Do you enjoy me?”

“Mmhm. More than anything.”

“Then so it shall be.” His vibrations increased as he surged forward, gripping her hips and pulling her back into him. Her eyes rolled back, her body convulsing as that secondary protrusion pressed against that other hole. The sensation sending her over.

“V’Alen!”

Her vision blacked out as she shuddered at the same time that his eyes lit up as he stared at her, soaking her in.

“V’Alen,” she whispered as her body melted against the panel before her. Boneless, she accepted him as he lowered against her, pulling her into his arms.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Alaina.”

“There’s a lot we have to do.”

“Affirmative.”

“It’s a long ride ahead.”

“Affirmative.”

“You sure you’re ready to do it all with me?”

“I will do it all and more, Alaina.”



[[System Root]]

[[Record Name: Alaina]]

[[Record Status: Recording]]

[[All experiences being saved]]

AFTERWORD



A.G.: The plot thickens.

Alaina: Almost as thick as those fingers, V'Alen.

A.G. <*blushing*>: Please keep your shenanigans in the confines of your chapters, lady.

V'Alen <*eyes glowing red as he looks my way*>: Negative

A.G. <*hands up in the air*>: Listen, that wasn't a threat. By all means, go ahead. Make me a voyeur or whatever. <*clears throat and makes a point of staring at her keyboard*> Anyway, this page marks the end of V'Alen and Alaina's story, though, as you can imagine, their story still goes on with their off-page, erm, shenanigans.

If you've reached this far, thank you so much!

Ready for the next book in the series? [Join my mailing list for New Release updates!](#) As of yet, I do not have a date for the next book. I can tell you that it will star Akur and Constance, however. I cannot wait!

Years ago—and that's not a figure of speech. I cannot believe it's actually been years—, I wrote Ajos and was ready to publish V'Alen's story possibly a month or two after that.

So, what happened? Life. Life happened.

It's taken me a while to put this story on paper, but I'm happy the concept itself didn't change from my original idea two years ago.

I contemplated changing the entire plot for something simpler and not as complicated as dimension-hopping and string theory all wrapped up in a cyborg romance with beings who have evolved so much, their physical bodies aren't necessary anymore...but...I couldn't.

Shoutout to all those lovely readers in my [Reader Group](#) who said they wanted to read the original idea in all its "complicatedness". I am thankful for you.

And if you've enjoyed this story, please take a moment to leave a review! I truly appreciate it.

Want NSFW artwork, ebook copies of all my new releases, and sneak peeks/first looks of upcoming work, then [join my Patreon](#) <3.

Once again, thank you so much for being such great readers!

♥ A.G.

ALSO BY

Xul

Athena wakes up in hell.

Well...it's an alien slave ship, but it might as well be hell because she only has three choices.

Mate. Become a sex slave. Or be killed.

Great options.

Desperate for freedom, a chance for survival is presented in the handsome rogue alien called Xul.

But Xul is caught up in problems of his own and a mission he cannot afford to let fail—one that could be easily compromised if he dared open his heart.

That doesn't leave her with many options and it doesn't help that she finds him utterly frustrating...

...and strong, hot, irresistible...

She shouldn't really be thinking about him like that. Should she?

[Find on Amazon](#)

Other books in the series: [Crex](#), [Yce](#), [Kyris](#), [Kyro](#)

Riv's Sanctuary

Abducted from Earth over a year ago, Lauren spent most of that time getting accustomed to her new life as one of the "animals" in an alien zoo.

When she's sold by the zookeeper, her life takes a turn she wasn't expecting. She has no idea where she'll end up till she's brought to a sanctuary owned by a tall blue hunk of an alien called Riv.

Riv's life is quiet and peaceful in a place as far away from civilization as he can manage. So when an annoying chatterbox of a human ends up on his doorstep, he's less than pleased. The human disrupts his life and his solitude and he can't wait to get rid of her.

He's not interested in helping her, and he's definitely not interested in love.

Except...she's managed to wheedle her way in and suddenly those barriers around his heart don't seem so strong anymore.

He has two options: Let her go.

Or let her in.

[Find on Amazon](#)

Other books in the series: [Sohut's Protection](#), [Ka'Cit's Haven](#)

Ajos

She didn't move to the big city just to be kidnapped by aliens.

That wasn't even possible...

Right?

WRONG.

When Kerena wakes up, she's not on Earth anymore.

Heck, she's not even in the same galaxy, and the face hovering so close she can make out every detail? That face is definitely...not...human.

But before she can really figure out what's going on, Kerena realizes she's caught in the middle of a war—one she was thrust into as soon as she was ripped from Earth.

She's surrounded by aliens in a rebellion, but there's one—the one with the strange golden eyes, minty-teal skin, and rippling muscles—that holds her attention.

His presence is magnetic and his heated gaze makes something stir deep within her.

He's battling something that has nothing to do with the war and his warning that she should stay away does not go unheeded.

He's a dangerous rebel fighter. She gets that. So...why is he still hovering so close? And why is he growling at everyone that so much as looks in her direction?

Most of all, why does he keep looking at her like she belongs to ... HIM?

[Find on Amazon](#)

—

Arrival

ADIRA

The machines came, and they trampled us all.

I have nothing left. No family. No friends. No home.

They harvest us. They breed us. They feed from us...

There is no hope...Not until one fateful moment when my eyes open and I see something streaking across the skies.

What appears is like a demon before my eyes...

But can they be worse than the evil already upon us?

I will just have to wait and see.

FER'RO

Sailing across the stars for what feels like eons...we have followed our enemy to a little blue planet.

We had wanted to arrive before them...now I think we may be too late.

But when we kill the first Scrit and I see the being drowning within its depths, I know I have to save it.

And *it*...turns out to be a *her*. **A female.**

This planet has hope yet. I will save her and her kind.

...Little do I know...she's the one who ends up saving me instead.

Dark. Steamy. Gritty. A thrilling romance intertwined in a plot that will give you chills.

[Find on Amazon](#)

Other books in the series: [Base Zero](#), [Cataclysm](#), [War](#)

CONTENTS

V'Alen

Before you read!

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Also By](#)

[About the Author](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. G. Wilde is an avid reader, a gamer, a lover of all things space, alien, and sci-fi.

She is addicted to intense romance, irresistible heroes, and deliciously naughty things.

