



A
MONSTER'S
TREASURE

KADRIXAN MATES BOOK 1

LYNNEA LEE

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A Monster's Treasure – Kadrixan Mates
Book 1

A Sci-Fi Alien Romance

By Lynnea Lee

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Contents

[Contents](#)

[A Monster's Treasure](#)

[Chapter 1: Clara](#)

[Chapter 2: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 3: Clara](#)

[Chapter 4: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 5: Clara](#)

[Chapter 6: Clara](#)

[Chapter 7: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 8: Clara](#)

[Chapter 9: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 10: Clara](#)

[Chapter 11: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 12: Clara](#)

[Chapter 13: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 14: Clara](#)

[Chapter 15: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 16: Clara](#)

[Chapter 17: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 18: Clara](#)

[Chapter 19: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 20: Clara](#)

[Chapter 21: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 22: Clara](#)

[Chapter 23: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 24: Clara](#)

[Chapter 25: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 26: Clara](#)

[Chapter 27: Krxare](#)

[Chapter 28: Clara](#)

[Chapter 29: Krxare](#)

[Epilogue: Krxare](#)

[ALSO BY AUTHOR](#)

A Monster's Treasure

CLARA

Unfairly convicted of a crime, I'm sent to serve the Kadrixan males for their rutting season.

The Kadrixans. Even their name inspires terror. Fiery-skinned and devil-like, they stand head and shoulders taller than any human man. Our colony made a terrible bargain with these monsters. The Kadrixans give us precious ore in exchange for the one thing they need.

Women. Like me.

When we meet our Kadrixan captors, I come face to face with a massive, brawny beast who claims I belong to him. And not just for the rutting season. He wants me forever.

KRXARE

I never expected to claim a human mate, but one look at the curvy female and I know she's mine.

Hunger claws at my mind and that of every other warrior in my regiment. All of us are on the brink of the rut which makes us more belligerent with each passing day. Without females, we'll tear each other apart with rage.

We depend upon our bargain. Human females for Kadrixan ore.

The females arrive and there is one who stirs my primitive desire: Clara. She thinks I'm a monster; I see it in her eyes and scent it in her fear. She vows to

return to her people after the rut is over, but I vow to claim my mate, to woo her and prove she's mine.

Chapter 1: Clara

I hadn't run yesterday when authorities came to my apartment to arrest me. I was a shitty runner and an even shittier fighter. Besides, where would I go?

I was broke and struggling, and I'd already received my last eviction notice the day before. It was illegal to be homeless in Nova Vita, so as of last night, I was a criminal.

Now, I sat inside the holding cell with another woman. Julie was in her twenties like me. She was here because she'd missed repayment of her medical advance three months in a row. Her cheeks were gaunt as if she'd been starving for a while, and her complexion was pale. Her stomach complained loudly every so often.

"There's no way I'm going to Utopia." Julie sat cross-legged on the bench, picking at the peeling pleather of her worn-out shoes. "I'd rather chance it with the monsters."

She was brave. Me? I wasn't so sure I'd survive.

If you'd asked me yesterday which one of these two horrible fates I preferred, disappearing forever into this colony's Utopia Project or being fucked to death by monsters that look like Old-Earth-styled demons, I wouldn't have been able to give you an answer. I still couldn't today, but after a long night of deliberation in a cold concrete cell with only Julie as my companion, I was leaning toward the rut, as crazy as that might sound.

I just wasn't sure if I was making the biggest mistake of my life.

As I debated silently, the re-education officers sitting outside my cell talked about the bonuses they'd get for every worker they sent to the Utopia Project. *Cell* was a bit of a misnomer; there were no bars and no

doors, just a line on the floor. They didn't need bars to control us when stepping foot across the line meant a debilitating electric shock delivered by the tiny chip implanted in our arms at birth.

The asshats monitoring us were sure that any sane woman would choose Utopia over the horned monsters. They practically celebrated our misfortune. Just for that fact alone, I wanted to choose the rut, but fear of the unknown, and massive alien cocks, stopped me from making my decision.

I analyzed the other option. They called it the Utopia Project, and at first glance, it looked very much like a utopian society. The government gave you everything you needed to live, food and board, and you didn't have to work a day in your life. At least, that was how the project had been marketed through colony-run media when it had first launched eight years ago. At the time, it was marketed to the poorest of the poor: those living in the Nova Vita's outer edges.

The only catch? You didn't get to keep anything. Those in Utopia owned no possessions. *You won't miss your things at all*, the ads had insisted, because everything was provided for you. *Join the Utopia Project. It's paradise.*

For those with very little to their names, this had been a siren's call, and some families even encouraged their adult children to apply for the program. That was, until the ones who'd left for the project stopped calling altogether. Within months of joining, those people had disappeared, replaced by doppelgangers who only replied to transmissions with the same few rehearsed lines.

I never thought I'd be forced to choose between disappearing into Utopia or being shipped off to the Kadrixan monsters who lived on the next continent.

If I'd just kept my big mouth shut, I wouldn't be in this position. One little comment, and I was deemed unemployable.

It was unlawful to say anything bad about Nova Vita, especially about the way the colony was run. All citizens of Nova Vita should be grateful to live here. We had clean air and fresh water, two things people unfortunate

enough to be born on Earth didn't have, and we should always be grateful, especially to our glorious officials who kept our colony going year after year, despite attacks from savage natives.

But the Utopia Project wasn't my only fear. Even if it was unlawful to mention it, Nova Vita had been struggling for a while. Year after year, the poor got poorer as officials funneled resources to those lucky enough to be born in the inner colony. Our leaders had made a deal with the devil.

Well, maybe not the Devil himself, but demonic-looking aliens with red skin, glowing eyes, and horns, who called themselves Kadrixans. In exchange for supplies, they traded yearly shipments of women to "comfort" the monsters during their "heat." And the time of their spring rut was coming soon.

Unlike Utopia, where no one ever heard from you again, a woman sentenced to sate the monsters' heat could technically return after the rut was over, if she survived. However, the few women who'd returned that first year had been treated like tainted goods and had trouble finding jobs. They'd ended up back in the cell, making the same decision the next spring, except for the few with family to take them in.

"Think about it," Julie continued in a whispered tone. "No one ever comes back from the project. Ever. And I heard the only reason they claim participants don't need to work is that they're forced to volunteer every day. If they don't pay you, it's not work, just volunteering. It's basically the prison camps re-named."

I looked nervously around to make sure the re-education officers hadn't heard her. "Shh. Not so loud." I'd heard the same thing, but repeating it could get you thrown in the prison work camps for sure. At least I still had a choice right now.

"I'd rather take my chances with the monsters," she continued. "I heard their rut is happening soon. We won't have to stay locked up for long before they ship us out."

There was a sound from the front, and our jailors stepped out into the hallway.

"What about the women who didn't come back that first year?" I wasn't

exactly the glass-half-full type. "I know why later groups never came back, but that first year, they didn't know they'd be treated like pariahs if they returned. Did they not...survive?"

"I think the women who came back would've said something. And some demanded to go back the next year."

"Everyone's heard of that. Doctors claimed they were so depressed they wanted to die and that's why they went back."

Julie cracked up laughing. "And you believed them?"

"No."

She had a point; the story didn't add up.

The officers returned and we zipped it.

They came to our cells to let us each choose our fate. By law, they had to give us the choice between the project or the rut. It was rumored they had to send women to the rut if they chose it, no matter what they were in for.

One of them approached with a smirk on his face, as if he already knew what we'd pick. He asked Julie first and when she picked the rut, he lost it on her, screaming and yelling at her for being "a stupid slut." He raised a hand to hit her, but another officer stopped him.

"They'll dock our pay if the sluts go in injured. You know those motherfuckers get upset when we send them bruised women."

"The bitch fucked us over. You know we don't get extra for sending them to those monsters, and we are so close to that bonus."

A bonus? These assholes got extra pay if they sent us to Utopia? Something about that had warning flags waving all over my head.

Before I could speak, a young man in the next cell interrupted. "You've got the wrong person! I still have time to get the money. The guy at the bank said I had two more days. My uncle is going to help me pay it."

The officer in front of me rolled his eyes as if he heard things like this every day. "Not according to your file." He waved a folder in the air. "Just go to Utopia. The system is put in place to *help* people like you. You'll never have to worry about paying your bills again. *Join the Utopia Project. It's*

paradise.”

Because he'd have no bills to pay and no say about anything. But most importantly, this asshole here got paid a hefty kickback.

“What's my other choice?” said the man, who looked ready to run out of the cell, shocking chip or not.

“Someone can post bail. You said you have an uncle.”

“How much is bail?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“That's four times more than what I owe!”

The man in the next cell started freaking out, and one of the other officers subdued him and pulled him into another room.

Jesus! If this system was really here to help people, then why make the bail so high? That was more than for a violent crime. What was wrong with this colony?

There was only one person in my life who would bail me out—Chris, my brother. He was the only family I had left, but he worked hard to keep himself afloat, living credit payment to credit payment, much like I did when I still had a job. Springing for my bail might end us both in this same predicament a few months down the line, especially at that price.

I couldn't do that to him. Chris could be annoying when he wanted to be, as all brothers were, but he was family. He wouldn't hesitate to spend his entire life savings to get me out, ruining his own life. I couldn't let that happen, especially since Chris wouldn't have the choice between the rut and the Utopia Project. They'd take him straight to the project, and I'd never see him again. He wouldn't even have the chance to come back afterward.

All this because we'd been born into the outskirts of the colony, meaning our grandparents, our family's original settlers to Nova Vita, had been laborers.

Suddenly angry at the colony and the situation they'd put us all in, I was no longer stuck between a rock and a hard place. I made my decision. It made the words that came out next easier.

“I’ll take the rut,” I blurted out before the officer could ask me.

The man’s face turned red, and he looked ready to punch my face in, but he didn’t do anything. He couldn’t unless he wanted the Kadrixan angry with him. Those aliens were terrifying, and they’d made it plenty clear that any female who asked to join the rut must be treated well.

“Go stand with her,” he gritted through clenched teeth. “They’ll pick you up for processing in two days.”

Those who chose the rut at any other time during the year were kept locked up until the spring. We were lucky we only had two days.

Our jailors move to the next cell to talk to the two young men left inside. The two men didn’t get the same choice we did, and the officers took their information to join the project. The women in the next cell both chose Utopia as well.

The woman in the last cell chose the rut, and the guards threw her in with us, disgust plain on their faces. “Maybe you sluts want to be rutted on, but I hope you all die, split in half with alien dicks.”

I wasn’t sure I’d made the right choice, but looking at the man’s red face, I sure felt like I had. When the truck came for those heading off to join their precious project, my suspicions were confirmed. The guards gave them numbers instead of names and treated them no better than animals.

One of the women changed her mind and asked to be put in with us, but she’d already signed her life away. Julie and I exchanged a glance as they dragged her off, screaming and kicking.

“Thanks for convincing me to join you,” I whispered.

“Don’t mention it.”

When the guards left, we introduced ourselves to the new girl. Her name was Michelle, and she was in here because she’d defaulted on her instruction advance. Together, we sat in the cold, damp cell and awaited our fate.

Chapter 2: Krxare

I paced the command center floor as I waited for this year's human females to arrive from the colony. Their leaders had greedily accepted our payment for the females, and the shuttle was on its way. I hated dealing with the officials from Nova Vita; they always stank of lies and deceit, but it was a necessary evil.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a kukee peeking out from her hiding hole. The creatures had lived in these mountains long before us and we now shared our living space with them.

The fluffy grey animal chittered at me. I knew what bothered it. The kukees didn't like the vibrations from the human aircrafts, and most had already hidden away in their borrows in our walls. This one was particularly brave. Brave enough to make her complaint known.

"I know," I said. "They're here. I promise I'll make them leave as fast as I can." I reached down to pet her tiny head with the fleshy pad of my finger.

It chittered at me once more before disappearing into the walls.

I'd go into my rut soon, and so would all the males under my command. It'd be our third rut shared with human females. We'd been lucky to find a compatible species so far from home and on the very same planet we'd chosen to rebuild on: Vokira.

Home. I'd never see home again. Exiled from our own solar system, my warriors and I'd thought we were done for. We'd survived one bout of heat on our own with no females at all. Without females, my males had gone mad fighting each other. We'd lost many good warriors to the rut that first year.

When the heat hit, there were only two things on a male Kadrixan's mind:

fuck or fight. Without females, our tempers flared and we fought. Friends turned against friends as madness took our minds.

After we'd buried our comrades, I promised my warriors I'd never let it happen again. It had been pure luck that we'd found this colony of humans so far from their home planet. The stars smiled kindly on us.

We knew humans were compatible with Kadrixans. This was not the first time our species had met.

Several millennia ago, a Kadrixan ship stranded in this quadrant had landed on the barely-civilized planet and raided their villages for females, claiming them for their rut. Legend had it the warriors on the ship had returned to Kadri with their human mates and lived happy lives among our people. It was rumored that inside many Kadrixans were genetic markers of these past unions.

Rumors had it that Kadrixan had made it into human art and texts too, which was why they thought of us as demons. Now, here humans were again, at the right time and place to save us from ourselves.

I rubbed absentmindedly at my temples just under where my horns sprouted from my head, wondering if I'd be lucky enough to find my mate this year. The first year of our treaty, the human colony had sent only four dozen scared, crying females. The females had called us demons and devils, and they were sure they'd been sent to their deaths.

And at first, it had seemed as if they were correct. Four dozen females spread among my contingent of males meant a ratio of one female for every six Kadrixan warriors. Then add the fact that nine of my warriors had immediately fallen to their knees upon seeing the females—their mating bond triggered—which meant eight fewer females to go around. Two of the warriors were close friends and had formed a triad with a female; Kadrixan warriors did not share their mates unless it was with their mate brother.

At first glance, human females bore many similarities to our own. Kadrixan females were smaller and weaker than us; they did not grow wings and could not fly. They had small horns, and their claws were short and dull.

More importantly, female Kadrixans did not get stricken by the mating bond; only the males suffered that delightful curse. Males had to convince

females to stay with them by providing a good life or risk being bonded to a female who did not love them back.

The first year, we found human females differed from our own in one crucial way. Kadrixan females could only climax once a day. Their channels tightened after receiving our seed. They needed a cool down before they could share sex again. Human females did not have this limitation.

Once the human females had found out how rewarding it was to have Kadrixan males between their thighs, some were willing to take several partners. Others were less enthused but learned to enjoy our touch.

At the end of our heat, we offered the women the chance to stay with us, mated or unmated. Only a few chose to return to Nova Vita. With us, they were well-fed and cared for.

“The shuttle from Nova Vita has arrived.” Vostak stood by the door. He was like a brother to me, and we’d fought at each other’s side for decades, just as our fathers had once fought side-by-side.

“Should we scare the representative and make him shit his pants again?” I asked.

Vostak chuckled. “That was pretty funny. He really thought we were going to eat him. I don’t think he’ll fall for it twice though. They sent the same one.”

I followed Vostak as he led the way out to the landing pad in front of our fortress. Our base was built into the side of the largest mountain on the continent, just like our ancestors’ homes back on Kadri. Vokira was beautiful and wild and would have been the perfect place to settle, even without the human colony across the ocean.

There were other intelligent species on the planet—tribes who’d been watching both the new human settlement and ours for years. Vokira was their native word for this planet, meaning Life-Giver. We did not plan on encroaching on their territories. We’d simply needed a place to settle.

The human leaders, however, were greedy, and it wouldn't be long before they started a war with the native tribes living in the forest. Or perhaps the tentacled beings of the ocean would attack first, rising up from the depths in protest against the pollution streaming down into the waters from the new

human settlement they called Utopia.

As I walked through the stronghold we'd built into the mountains, the lights brightened as I passed. Many of the caverns had already been in place when we'd arrived; we'd simply had to finish them and add lighting and climate control. This planet was perfect, and many warriors had already claimed various peaks in this mountain range for their nests.

Too busy finding a solution for our yearly rut, I had yet to start building mine, though I'd claimed a small, protected cave at the side of a cliff near the top of the largest peak. When and if I found my mate, it would be there that I'd claim her as my own and convince her to stay with me and join together for life.

Traditionally, our mating nests had been set high in the cliffs of Kadri and lined with all the lavish items we could afford. Sumptuous fabrics, ornaments of gold, faceted gems; all were the life-long bounty of wealth we planned to bestow on our mates. There were no such things here on this planet, except for the precious gemstones we'd excavated out of the mountainside as we built our stronghold.

I'd had an impressive nest once; one I would not hesitate to fly a mate to and convince her to be mine. It had been on one of the more beautiful peaks in Kadri, and I'd fought many battles to win it.

But what was lost was lost, and I'd had to start over. We all had.

Exiting into the sunlight, I turned my focus to the single, rectangular shipping container being detached from the human shuttle, and frowned. Where were the rest of the females? Surely, they'd not crowded all the females into one single container just to save on fuel.

The human colony's representative paced nervously in front of the container, looking just as pathetic as I'd seen him last. To this honorless male, the females he traded were nothing more than commodities.

Most humans still cowered in front of us, which I didn't mind. They thought of us as demons, not knowing that the very demons they referred to had been Kadrixan visitors to their home thousands of years ago. I wasn't about to enlighten them.

The container opened down the center, splitting into two halves. Each half

had a dozen females strapped to the wall for transport. Most were still asleep, but a few were already waking.

I frowned again. Why must they put the females to sleep for the travel? It was a simple trip across the ocean, not the void of space—a few hours at the most. We'd made it plenty clear after that first year that we only wanted females who chose to come, so why would they need to be sedated?

Each female was dressed in a fancy gown and ridiculous shoes that weren't useful for anything other than ornamentation. Research told me they were dressed as if for a special event, and while a rut was a special yearly event, indeed, the frivolous clothing wasn't something we had requested.

They'd come dressed similarly every year, even the ones from last year who'd been so sick they barely survived the trip. Since we never asked otherwise, they'd continued sending them like this.

No matter. We'd been trading with local tribes who wove the softest materials. We'd be able to outfit each female with comfortable clothing.

A female wrapped in red stirred as she woke, catching my eyes. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders, a rich brown, dark against her creamy skin. At first glance, she looked healthy, her cheeks rosy and flushed. Her red dress was slit high on the thigh, showing shapely legs with plenty of tantalizing flesh. Her body was rounded and soft-looking, and I had an urge to see for myself how soft she was up close.

Our eyes met, and the very ground beneath my feet seemed to shake, though no one else noticed, and my knees felt weak. This female was different from the others next to her, a class above, though if you asked me why I'd not be able to tell you. I wanted to unstrap her from the wall, carry her in my arms, and—

Vostak elbowed me, jolting my attention to the fumbling colony rep who looked ready to piss himself and run back to his shuttle.

Chapter 3: Clara

I woke up paralyzed and panicking. Across from me, a row of women were strapped up against the wall. Some of them were awake and looking around, terrified. Others were still asleep.

The last thing I remembered was being primped and prepped with the other women. They'd put me in a slinky red dress with a slit that showed too much thigh and matching ruby-red heels. They'd washed and styled my hair, and a makeup artist had painted my face with garish colors.

I'd felt like a present, gift-wrapped and tied in a bow. It was ridiculous, especially since every aide prepping me had looked at me like I was a sacrificial lamb, which I guess I was.

Julie, on the other hand, had seemed to enjoy the attention. She'd spun in her dark forest-green ensemble.

"I can't believe you actually seem excited."

She'd shrugged. "I have nothing back at the colony to live for. I lost my family in the tsunami last year, and I have a medical deficit out the wazoo from when I had a kidney infection. Plus, I can't find a job to save my life. My friends all ignore me now that I'm in financial trouble, and my boyfriend dumped me too. As of last week, I have a negative amount in my credit account. I see this as a new start."

Julie was a glass half full type. It was almost contagious—almost.

"I still have my brother," I'd told her. They hadn't let me call Chris before I'd left. He was going to be so worried when he couldn't contact me, and the guilt was real.

"Maybe the aliens will let you send a message back to him."

“Maybe. Aren’t you even a little scared? Those Kadrixans look terrifying.”

“They look like demons. But you know the saying, never judge a book by the cover, right?”

I always judged a book by the cover, but I’d kept that little tidbit to myself.

Then they’d herded us into the next room single-file, like cattle to their slaughter, a herd of young, pretty cows in slinky dresses and heels.

“Moo,” I’d mooed out loud, and the lady beside me had sent me a pissy look. It looked like someone hadn’t had their simulated coffee this morning. I shrugged and mooed again.

This time, Julie and Michelle joined me. Then, as if deciding to throw caution to the wind, the entire room erupted into loud mooing. I blamed it on the stress of our impending meeting with monsters, but damn, did it feel liberating not to care about how anyone felt.

One of the men responsible for getting us ready for shipment looked at us nervously. I didn’t like the way he looked down on us, so just for him, I encouraged my pretty cows to sing louder. One of the women started laughing maniacally, adding to the effect.

Yup. It was absolutely the stress.

The man backed away from us, looking terrified.

Good. I hope this haunted him forever.

“What the fuck is wrong with these women?”

“Who the fuck cares?” replied someone dressed as a pilot. “They’re the Kadrixan’s problem now.”

A strange smell had hit my nostrils, and suddenly, I was out like a light.

I woke up here.

Sounds of heavy boots against hollow metal floors echoed in the room. No, not a room. We were in a container, hence the metal floor, shipped like merchandise instead of traveling in a shuttle like people.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a pair of red, horned demons. Monsters. My heart pounded in my chest, and if I weren’t still mostly paralyzed from whatever they’d given us, I would’ve screamed. They were

even more terrifying in real life.

I'd only ever seen blurry videos of the Kadrixans. The videos had been taken at formal government meetings, and the alien warriors wore human-styled suits, at least on top, to fit in with the colony officials. They'd almost looked civilized and handsome in a strange sort of way.

The two monsters I saw now were dressed in no more than black leather pants that went only to their knees, and they were totally naked on top. The black of the leather contrasted with the devil-red of their skin. Their legs didn't look humanoid at all, and their knees were backward, like those of beasts. Their bare feet ended in giant, black claws.

Every last muscle on their giant bodies was on display. Leathery wings lay folded on their backs. The fronts of their pants bulged massively, and I was sure if one of them were to mount me, I'd be split in half.

I should be panicking, but whatever was keeping me paralyzed also prevented me from freaking out. So, I just watched and listened.

The man who stood up front was shaking like a leaf. I recognized him. He was the dickasaurus who'd asked what was wrong with us when we'd all stress-moored back at the loading bay. He stuttered when he spoke to the two monstrous demons. "We...we...we on...only have two dozen this year."

One of the demons growled. "Two dozen? You claim your colony is overpopulated and you cannot feed all the mouths. How can it be so hard to find females for our heat?"

He didn't speak Nova Vita English, but somehow, I understood him.

"The criteria you requested are hard to meet." The man fidgeted awkwardly, taking a step back. He was clearly terrified of the alien beasts before him.

"We only require that the females are not violent criminals and that they are of breeding age and healthy. Surely the supplies and ore we trade are worth more than two dozen females." His tone was low and menacing, and something in my belly stirred at the sound.

The human representative stammered, "But, but, you also require that the females agree to come. We have written consent from all these females.

They all chose to be here. The others refused.”

The lead devil monster grunted. “We’ll take these females, but since you only provided half the numbers we asked for, I’ll reroute the outstanding ore back to our stronghold.”

“But...but,” the rep stammered. “We need that ore. I can’t go back without it. They’ll blame me.”

“And we need the females promised,” he growled back. “Now get out of my sight before I decide to take you as well. I’m hungry for some red meat.”

The cowardly colony representative nearly tripped over himself to get back into the shuttle. If I looked more carefully, I was sure I’d see a trail of pee behind him. The shuttle took off and we, the well-dressed cattle, were left alone in the abattoir with our butchers.

Movement returned to my hands and feet, and I considered unstrapping myself from the wall. I felt as if I were being held on by Velcro and the very thought of my body being Velcro-ed to the side of the container like I was on some strange Japanese game show of old had me giggling uncontrollably. I blamed the stress.

Shit! The big Kadrixan who’d threatened to eat the cowardly rep strode toward me, muscles rippling. The giggle turned nervous, then I started to panic, struggling against my straps.

He was right in front of me now as blood pounded in my ears. He reached for me, his terrifying, clawed hand touching my cheek more gently than I thought possible.

I felt it the moment we touched: the zing of excitement and attraction that was beyond my control. I swallowed hard as the air between us lit up like fireworks.

I avoided his gaze, choosing instead to look at his chest. His bare, muscular, and extremely defined chest. My eyes drifted lower to his perfect six-pack abs. Damn! If I ignored the red skin, the horns, the claws, and the fire in his eyes, he was kind of hot.

He could be an old-style movie star—they did everything through CGI now—all dressed up in costume for the next big sci-fi or fantasy action film. The

horns and ridges on his skull could be prosthetics and the glowing eyes contacts. He had that movie star feel too: cocky and proud.

My eyes strayed down to his waistband, where firm red skin met dark leather. He had that line really fit men had running diagonally in a V from his sides and disappearing into his pants. I wondered what else he had down there.

I caught myself and banished that line of thinking. That sentiment was totally inappropriate! *What's wrong with me? I wake up, and the first thing I do is ogle the very monster I'm supposed to be scared of?*

Movement behind him had me focusing on the triangular point at the end of his tail as it swished from side to side. The tail reached forward and stroked the thigh exposed by the high slit of my dress. My skin tingled everywhere he touched.

I closed my eyes, confused by my body's strange reaction.

It didn't make sense. Had they drugged us all while in transit with something that made us horny? That had to be it. There was no way I felt attraction to this monster.

With my eyes closed, I noticed how good he smelled: a delicious earthy, spicy, masculine scent that every cologne maker tried but failed to produce. I crossed my legs at the sudden need that overcame my senses.

“Open your eyes, little human.”

I did, just as his tongue darted out to lick his lips, and I gasped. It was forked!

Then our eyes met, his turning into swirls of dancing flame. My arms, all I could move while strapped to the wall, reached out toward him automatically, and when my fingertips touched his shoulder, the terrifying monster froze.

Then, in slow motion, he sank to his knees.

Chapter 4: Krxare

My mate! I froze and dropped to my knees.

“Krxare!” Vostak started toward me but stopped when he realized the significance.

Leaning in to bury my face against her belly, I took a few deep breaths, inhaling the female’s scent. She smelled divine. I knelt there, unable to move as the universe continued without me.

My warriors filed out from the stronghold, eager to meet the new arrivals. I heard their voices but could not turn my head to greet them. I was focused solely on the being of perfection in front of me.

There were three ways for Kadrixan males to recognize our mates. The first was to slowly build a bond during the rutting season with a suitable female. During the rut, males of my species released pheromones for all compatible females. The main reason was to soothe the females so they wouldn’t fear us. Female Kadrixans were much like the humans we now relied on: small, wingless, and mostly helpless.

Our pheromones encouraged the production of oxytocin, while touch multiplied its effects. While many mate bonds started during ruts, most pairings did not form any bond at all. Still, it was common for a male to fly a female to his aerie for the rut and try to force a bond, especially if he was sure in his heart that she was his mate and that he could convince her to stay with him.

The second way to recognize a mate was for a male’s body to create these pheromones in the presence of a female outside the rutting season. For most of the year, our bodies only produced these calming and love-inducing hormones when in the presence of someone mate-worthy.

In these cases, it was rumored it was possible to resist the bond if one was strong enough, though it rarely happened. I had not once witnessed such a resisted bond in my entire life.

The last way was to fall on our knees at the first connection. This seemed to be the way many of my army had found their females. We'd never quite figured out how our bodies chose our mates, but this outcome was most common close to or during a rut when our hormones were hard to control.

The fear that had emanated so strongly from the female just moments ago calmed when she realized I meant her no harm. Then slowly, insidiously, something else replaced the acrid scent of fear. Arousal.

My pheromones were working on her already.

After a few minutes, which felt like a near-eternity, I was finally given back control of my legs.

I paused, not knowing what to do. I needed to organize my warriors so that each ship, and therefore each sector of the stronghold, would have enough females for the upcoming rut. But the need to claim my mate, the drive to hide her away and get to know her, was overwhelming, so I hesitated, stuck between duty and need.

“Go, Krxare. Go get to know your mate. You can meet us again for the evening meal,” Vostak urged me. “We can handle a rut on our own. Congratulations.”

I'd bring my female to my quarters here in the stronghold first. The rut wasn't upon me yet, which meant I still had a few days to prepare a proper nest for her. I thought of the nearly barren nest that awaited us at the top of the highest peak. It would not do. She deserved so much more, and I wanted to do this right.

I released her from the wall, and she tumbled down over my shoulder. I trapped her in place with my arm and started back toward the stronghold.

My mate started struggling over my shoulder. “Let me down! I can walk on my own.”

Several warriors turned to watch.

“Quiet,” I warned. I gave her a smack across the buttocks, but instead of

stilling, she struggled more, slapping at my folded wings ineffectively.

Delightful! I tightened my arms over her legs and stomped to my quarters. I reached over with my other hand to massage the full bottom of her ass, my fingers just inches from her pussy.

She immediately stilled as arousal thickened the air.

Good. These Earth females reacted so well to our touch. The natural pheromones we gave off through scent, and more strongly through touch, both calmed and excited, but they only worked on species who are a match for us sexually. More importantly, they only worked on individuals who already found us attractive on some basal level.

These humans might fear us because they thought of us as demons, or monsters. But somewhere hidden in the lizard brain, the system that controlled fight, flight, freeze, feeding, and fornication, was a deep-rooted attraction. Their brains might tell them to be frightened, that we were alien, *other*, but their bodies knew we were compatible.

This little human female might protest and struggle, but the very fact that my pheromones worked on her meant that hidden just below the surface, there was desire for me, waiting to be sparked. She'd burn so brightly with lust; she just didn't know it yet.

I continued down the corridors to my quarters. The cave-like interior welcomed me. This female would change this cavern into a den.

I deposited her on my bed—our temporary nest—a mattress piled high with pillows and draped over with dark netting. It was a pale imitation of a real nest in a cave high in the mountains, lined with furs from beasts I'd slain and filled to the brim with treasures I'd collected. But here in the stronghold, this was all I could offer her.

She stared at me with frightened eyes and crab-walked backward on my mattress.

"Don't." She put her hand up, as if she could stop me with her little palm. I stalked toward her playfully, but before I could reach for her hand and snap at it with my teeth, she snatched it away with a gasp.

I grinned at her, showing my sharp teeth and fangs. I'd been told they

were impressive, and I hoped she was impressed. Instead of admiring me, my mate continued backing away. The scent of fear hung strongly in the air. These humans might remind us of our females, but they were clearly impressed by different things. My sharp fangs had scared her instead.

I needed to soothe my female. Our pheromones could do that too. They knew what the female needed and affected them accordingly.

I grabbed her and stripped her of the dress she wore as she gasped and covered her body. She wouldn't need it. We needed to have skin-to-skin contact for my touch to have the correct calming effect on her. She struggled ineffectively and was soon naked, save for the thin scrap of fabric covering her sex. That could stay on for now.

I held her to my body, willing my touch to calm her. It worked on our females, and the last two mating heats with human females had proved that it worked for them too. Her struggling subsided and her heartbeat calmed.

She looked up at me with her big brown eyes. "What's happening?"

"I am soothing you, my mate."

She continued to look at me, confused. "I know I should be scared, but it's like I forgot how. What are you doing to me?"

"Kadrixan males soothe our females through skin-to-skin contact. What causes lust also causes calm, but it only works to a degree. If you were truly in danger, you would still be able to react. You are in no danger from me."

She nodded. "I guess you haven't hurt me yet. I'm really confused right now."

Hurt her? Never. I'd never hurt her. She was mine, and now that I had found my mate, I'd do anything to keep her safe.

"I will never hurt you, my mate."

Her brow furrowed. "My name is Clara."

"And I am Krxare."

"Hello, Ker-zar." Her pronunciation of my name was a bit off, but the mistake was adorable, and I did not correct her. "Can I have my dress back?"

Clara was calmer now, and we no longer needed to be touching skin-to-

skin, but I enjoyed her mostly naked. There was no one here but us, and I delighted at looking at her body. It was rounded with feminine curves and a soft belly, so different from mine and so very beautiful.

“No. You have no need for clothes when we are alone. You are my mate.”

Chapter 5: Clara

The unnatural but addictive calm enveloped my body, and I relaxed into Krxare's muscular arms. I should have been terrified. A giant, hulking beast of an alien had claimed me, thrown me over his shoulder, and stripped me bare. But somehow, instead of terrified, I was calm. I knew I was safe. I knew that Krxare wouldn't hurt me.

Was this his doing? Did he cast some sort of spell on me? I wasn't religious; worshiping anything other than the colony itself was frowned upon. I hadn't paid much attention in history class, but didn't people on Earth once believe that demons could control women and make them do sexual favors? Or was it incubi that did that?

Surely, these monsters only bore a physical resemblance to the demons of Earth culture. They didn't cast any magical spells. Magic didn't exist.

I'd known coming into this what choosing the rut entailed. I'd be having a lot of sex in the next few weeks, but I'd thought I would at least be clothed some of the time. No matter. I'd survive this. Krxare wasn't as scary now that I'd talked to him. And he was still dressed, even if it was just a pair of tight-fitting leather pants that left nothing to the imagination.

"I claim you as my mate," Krxare repeated, and for the first time since waking, I wondered how I was able to understand him.

"How can I understand you? I know you don't speak Nova English."

"We provided translators. They must have implanted them while you were sleeping." He growled. "I do not understand why they put you out for the procedure. It is a simple one."

I was kind of pissed they'd put me out too. "I would've preferred to ride in a shuttle like a person rather than in a container like some merchandise."

This had the giant red alien grumbling in agreement, and I suddenly felt a little closer to him.

“You are here now, my mate.”

There was that word again. Mating meant sex. Did this mean this Kadrixan claimed me for this entire rut? Or just for tonight?

“What does ‘mate’ mean? Does it mean you claim me for tonight or for the entire rut? Is it a word a Kadrixan uses to label a female they sleep with? Will all Kadrixans call me this?”

He growled, and the sound was terrifying. Still pressed up against his hard body, I felt the rumble straight to my belly.

“No. You are my mate. Mine alone. I claim you for always.”

“Always?” I shook my head. Had there been a miscommunication? “I’m here for the mating heat, the rut. I’m going home after. I have a brother back at the colony. I have to get back to him.”

He growled again. This time it sounded urgent, desperate.

Almost instinctively, I put my hand on his perfectly-formed pecs to calm him. I changed the subject from me leaving and asked about the other thing I was confused about. “We were under the impression that the Kadrixans share all the Earth females during this time.”

“The unmated males share the unmated females. But those with mates stay together always and do not stray.”

“And you believe I am this person for you. How? We just met.”

“I know you are mine. You will stay with me.”

His words held an air of finality, and I did not reply. I just sat there in his arms, one hand on his chest.

I concluded that mating and mates meant two different things, and when he called me his mate, it didn’t just mean he planned to sleep with me. It was something much more permanent. I was flattered but weirded out at the same time. I didn’t even know him.

And besides, I had a brother out there I had to return to.

But if Krxare believing I was his mate meant I wouldn’t be shared among a

bunch of big, scary aliens, then I was willing to play along. One monster was all I could handle.

A buzzing sound rang out from a device clipped to his belt, and Krxare sat up straight. "I am needed. I will return."

Krxare got up from the mattress, and I missed his warm and calming presence immediately.

He stomped out and left me alone in his room. Well, maybe room was the wrong word. It was more like a cave. The walls were jagged and made of solid rock. The place was lit by sconces; the lights within flickered as if they were fire lighting the darkness, though I was certain the light was artificial.

Everything in this stronghold had a bit of a *Castlevania* meets *futuristic caveman* vibe.

The mattress I sat on was covered in furs and skins, and dark netting hung from above like a gothic mosquito net.

I noticed my dress crumpled at the foot of the bed, picked it up, and pulled it over my head. The dress had looked elegant at first glance, but further inspection saw that it was made of a cheap stretchy material—easy to pull on and off.

There was a desk and a chair against one wall, but the chair was like no other chair I'd ever seen. The seat was tilted forward at an angle, as if it wasn't for sitting but for leaning against, though I wouldn't be able to use it with how tall it was.

I heard running water and got up to look around the cavern. A small sink with a constantly flowing fountain of water ran in one corner. Next to it, a door led to what I believed to be the bathroom.

Two large, gilded chests sat against one of the walls. That must be where Krxare kept his belongings. Curious, I tried to open one to see what was inside, but the lid was so heavy that it didn't budge, no matter how hard I heaved.

The trip across the ocean had been tough on me, even though I'd been asleep through all of it. My face felt dirty, my hair was tangled, my stomach was empty, and my bladder was full. I took care of my business in the

bathroom but found no sink for cleaning my hands.

I went to the fountain, dipping my fingers into the running water. I hoped this was the right thing to do. I wanted to splash the water on my face to wash off the dirt from my trip.

The door to the room slid open and Krxare walked in. This was the first time we were standing at the same level. Previously, I'd been strapped onto the wall, he'd been kneeling down, or we'd been on the bed. I looked up and up and up to his face. He was huge; I was positively tiny in comparison.

I was not a small woman either. I had more than a few pounds to lose, according to my last tax check-up. According to the scale, I'd crossed the line from overweight to obese. Not only did I have to pay an extra tax for it, but the colony had also limited the types of food I could buy to the most basic.

Since losing my job, I'd only gained more weight from the stress and low-quality food I was able to afford. You'd think that being poor meant I'd be thin. Nope, I just got bigger.

I stepped back involuntarily as Krxare loomed over me, and my back hit the edge of the fountain.

"You are dressed." He frowned at me. "It is customary to steal the female away and hide her in an aerie, naked, and care for her until she agrees to stay."

Aerie? Like a nest? The only times I'd heard the word was on nature documentaries. I decided to ask him.

"What is an aerie, and why is it customary?"

"When a male Kadrixan is stricken with the mating bond, it is customary to kidnap the female and keep her alone for days, sometimes weeks, until she agrees to stay with him. The male carries her to his aerie, a nest made high in the cliffs. Female Kadrixans cannot fly. He keeps her there, hunting for her, feeding her, warming her, and learning her body until she agrees to stay with him. If it's during a rut, he keeps her there for the duration."

Wait! Did he just say fly? I stared wide-eyed at Krxare. I'd seen the wings on his back, but for some reason, I hadn't thought they were capable of flight. He was so muscular, so dense. There was no way he could fly, no

matter how hard he flapped; forget carrying another person up with him.

“Did you say fly?”

“Did your colony not tell you this?”

“But you’re solid muscle. There’s no way any wings can get you airborne.” Then, realizing I might be coming across as rude, I backtracked. “I mean, that’s impressive.” Very impressive.

“Then I will impress you when I take you up to our aerie. I have claimed a nest but have not outfitted it suitably for a mate. I promise you that in a few days’ time, at the start of the rut, it will be ready.” He said it with such conviction it must be something important. “I wish I’d had more time to collect the finest goods this planet has to offer. I wasn’t prepared to meet my mate. I apologize.”

I shook my head, still utterly confused. This wasn’t how I’d imagined my time here.

The awful buzzing came from his belt again, and Krxare made a face so terrifying I shrank away from him.

“I am needed, again. I need to delegate my tasks if I am to complete our nest and spend time with you.” He took me by the hand, and the moment we touched, everything felt right again. He wasn’t so terrifying. “I apologize again.”

I tittered like a schoolgirl. “No, don’t. You have work to do. I don’t need to be babysat. I’ll be fine.” I glanced around the room, wondering what I could do to pass the time.

“This is my quarters in the stronghold. I will program the door to open for you when I’m not around. You only need to approach and wave your hand over the sensor. I regret I must leave you to acquire the bounty for our nest.” He walked us over to the door, took my hand, and held it over a black dot at the center. Moments later, the door opened. “I’ll bring you to the other females so you can join the tour.”

“Wait. You’re leaving me with the other women? What if one of the other ali—er ... Kadrixans tries to...” I’d never been particularly shy, but just mentioning sex in front of Krxare had me tongue-tied.

“To maintain order, no males will touch a female until the start of the rut, unless they are destined to be mates or the female asks for the attention. The start of the rut is variable, but we are sure there is still time. No one will touch you.” He turned me to face him. “Except for me. I will touch you because you are mine, and I am yours.”

The last words were no more than growls. The sound, low and enticing, made me tingle everywhere. I inhaled sharply, and he focused on my lips.

“This is a mating ritual our species share,” he said, with a predatory grin that showed off his sharp teeth.

Strong hands tightened on my hips, pulling me into the heat of his body. Then he was on me, his mouth questing for mine. Despite his fangs and teeth, I felt nothing but firm lips and forked tongue. Commanding, demanding, taking every thought I had and turning them into thoughts of him.

A feeling of helplessness had me clinging to his shoulders as he plundered my mouth. He supported me with strong arms as the world around me spun. Giddy with desire, I felt my knees give way as I sagged in his hold. The taste of him was all I could focus on.

A hand threaded through my hair and pulled my head back, exposing my neck to him. He finally released my lips to trail the line of kisses down my jaw and throat. His touch drove me wild, and, despite having my mouth back, it still felt as if I were drowning, unable to breathe. Yet, I wanted more.

Oh god. What was happening to me? What was Krxare doing to me?

He tore his mouth away, panting. “What are you doing to me, female?” The fires in his eyes were bright; they glowed with an otherworldly beauty as if I were the one burning up and not the other way around.

Did I have it all wrong? Was I doing this to him? Was I driving him as wild as I felt even now? Did I hold the power here?

He turned from me and took the few steps to the door, his movements awkward. “Come. I have matters to attend to.”

Chapter 6: Clara

It wasn't a Kadrixan warrior leading our tour of the fortress. Instead, we were met by a group of human women: volunteers, and voluntolds from previous years. I searched for the women who'd been on the news for choosing to go back to the rut the second year, after returning home to the colony, but couldn't recognize them.

All the women looked so healthy and happy that I wondered if it was a façade. Surely, they couldn't be happier here than living with our own people.

They separated us newbies into groups and took us on separate tours, starting in different areas of the stronghold. Two dozen of us all piling through the narrow hallways and into small rooms was a bad idea. Apparently, some of the corridors were narrow, just big enough for a single Kadrixan male to pass. It made defending parts of the base easier.

I ended up in a group with Julie, Michelle, and three others.

The stronghold was a lot larger than it looked from the outside. We were in the largest section of the sprawling base. There were six sections in total, each area reserved for one of the ships that had settled here. They were similarly built except for the one we were currently in, which was the largest and held the great room where we'd started the tour, as well as the Kadrixans' command center.

The great room was large enough to hold all of the Kadrixan warriors at once for special events.

"How many warriors are there?" asked Julie.

"I haven't actually counted," answered Penelope, the blonde tour guide closest to us. "Several hundred maybe?"

Each section had living quarters for the warriors as well as a separate living area for the women.

“You get your own place?” I asked, confused. For some reason, I’d thought everyone just bed-hopped around. Then again, I was going off the garbage the colony had fed me.

“We’re allowed to divvy up the rooms however we want. Some of us have roommates and some of us have our own rooms,” Penelope replied.

“And those of us who are mated stay with our mates,” said a brunette in front of us, turning to join the conversation. She was the other of our two tour guides.

I perked up. “You’re mated. Did one of them drop to their knees in front of you?”

She beamed. “It happened a few weeks after that first rut. They’d just done that big trade mission with the natives, and I snuck into one of the ships to check out the cargo. He caught me sneaking around and nearly dropped a crate of fruits on his own foot when he went down.” Her eyes sparkled as she talked about her mate. She was clearly very smitten with this crate-dropping alien.

“Don’t get Tasha talking about her mate. She’ll never shut up.” Penelope rolled her eyes and continued the tour.

The smell of cooking meat wafted down the hallway, which, like Krxare’s room, was formed of a mix of smooth metal and natural rock. Every room and corridor was lit by long, narrow lights set into the metalloid areas of the wall, about a foot down from the ceiling. Occasionally the same gothic-looking sconces with flickering fire-like lights as I’d seen in Krxare’s room added an ambient glow.

“And here we have the kitchen. One of six kitchens in this compound. It’s a little excessive, but when you realize they are doing full-on barbecues indoors, you see why they need it in six different places and why each one is thoroughly ventilated.” Penelope stepped through the door, and we followed her through one by one in a long line.

I saw something moving out of the corner of my eye, but when I turned my head to check, there was nothing. It must be my nerves playing tricks on

me.

“Against that wall are the food replicators,” Penelope continued. “We have a class on how to operate one tomorrow, so don't miss it. It makes a mean faux-cappuccino.”

“Isn't what we have at the colony a faux-cappuccino already?” Michelle asked.

“Alright. So it's a faux-faux-cappuccino. But it's really good. I promise. Replicating teas and coffees is the first lesson of the class tomorrow, so I can't give anything away yet.” She grinned. “Trust me. You don't want to miss it.”

I made a mental note to make sure I was present for that. I hadn't had a good coffee since I'd lost my job a few months ago.

I'd thought Penelope was kidding when she said they barbecued meat indoors. In a large open space, I understood, but inside a stronghold set inside a mountain? I inhaled deeply, but the air was only a tiny bit smokey, nothing like I'd expect with giant hunks of meat roasting away on the other side of the room. They must have great ventilation, though I couldn't see the vents at all.

The next stop was the training room, which was shared by all six sections. When Penelope had first mentioned the training area, I thought it was going to be an indoor gym; imagine my surprise when the door opened to the great outdoors.

We were in a valley, and a large area had been cleared away for use as a fighting ring. Two Kadrixan warriors circled each other with their wings folded. They fought with each other, lunging, kicking, and fighting. Their physiques were top-notch, and the women around me had their eyes glued to the two perfect specimens, but somehow they didn't look nearly as impressive as Krxare.

Behind them was something that resembled a large jungle gym, except instead of the single-level one I'd gone on as a kid, this one was multi-level and huge. There was a woman on it, swinging from bar to bar. A thick mat had been placed under her section.

The kid in me screamed to go try it, but the adult in me told me I'd

probably fall on my ass and pull muscles I'd never known I had. I hadn't done anything like that for years.

In another section were a bunch of obstacles. A few warriors leaped over, crawled under, and sidestepped them as they made their way across the course.

Farther off, there were rows of plants in a garden. The Kadrixans ate mostly meat and fruit, but Penelope explained that they did season their food with herbs and spices and supplemented with the starchy stems of what we lovingly called the tatertot plants. I'd never had this mythical "tatertot" before, but I'd had fried tatertot stems many times. Apparently, they were supposed to taste similar.

Returning back indoors, they showed us the rest of the section, which were the warriors' living quarters, the women's quarters, and storage areas. The women had commandeered one of the extra rooms and turned it into their own little rec room. A few heads swiveled as we walked in, and we were greeted by genuine smiles.

As the tour continued, I lost track of all the different rooms, but I was sure I'd eventually figure it out. Every so often, something in my peripheral vision had me turning my head, but it was gone when I looked.

By now, the smell of food was all I could pay attention to, and my stomach complained loudly about how hungry it was. Technically, I hadn't eaten since yesterday, and that had only been a few bites as I was trying to conserve food.

We ended up back in the great room, which had completely morphed in our time away. It had been mostly empty before, but now it was filled with large floor cushions set in many small circles around the room. At the center of each circle was a low table set with place settings.

"At events like these, the food is served family-style. It's weird at first not sitting at a table, but you'll get used to it," Tasha said. "Kadrixan chairs aren't very comfortable for us, and they find our chairs awkward with the way their legs are shaped, so we meet in the middle and sit cross-legged on cushions."

I remembered the chair I'd seen in Krxare's room.

"What do you mean by events like these?" I asked, taking a seat on a

fluffy cushion next to Julie.

“I mean during the days leading up to the rut when there are new people to get to know. Usually, each section of the stronghold eats on their own,” she explained. “We’ve been doing Christmas since the first year too.”

“Are you telling me these giant demon-like aliens celebrate Christmas?”

“We kind of made them. It's not like we're super religious and traditional at the colony. We already celebrate a bastardized version of it anyway, so it's just an excuse to get together and have a party. They really don't mind as long as we're happy.” She made a gesture with her hand.

That was when I noticed the scar on her arm. It was faint, barely there.

“Your arm,” I started before I had the time to process the meaning. “That's where your chip is.”

“Oh, that thing?” She held out her arm to show us better. “I took that out the first year.”

Julie, Michelle, and I exchanged three-way glances. The other three women were just as shocked.

“You took it out?” one of them asked.

“But the chip is basically your ID and a bank card.” I said, frowning. “Without it, you can't go to work or ride the public rail. You can't even buy anything. It has all your money on it.”

“Here, let me show you rather than tell you.” Penelope stepped over to a pair of warriors, spoke to them briefly, and returned with something we all recognized: a chip scanner. “Let's see your chip.” She held out the scanner waiting for my arm.

I hesitated. If I scanned it, everyone in the room would know I was broke and jobless. And of course, it would now also show that I was a participant in the monsters' rut this year, though I suppose that wouldn't matter to these women.

“Whatever yours says, I guarantee mine looked worse.” She gave me a wry grin.

I held out my arm to the scanner.

“According to this, you can’t get a job, ride the rail, or go shopping anyway.”

I made a face. “I can too ride the rail.” It was the only thing I could do. “I still have—”

She turned the device around to me. Instead of the twenty-eight fifty I’d still had in my bank account the last time I checked, I was now in the negatives.

“What the fuck?” I snatched the scanner from her.

It was only twenty-eight fifty, but I’d made triple sure I never went below zero. That was a cardinal sin. It was better to be late on a payment than to have less than zero on your chip. I’d starved myself and ate nothing but stale sweet crackers, the only thing I could afford, for a week.

“That’s not right.” I clicked into my finances and gasped. “Those assholes charged me a thousand-dollar processing fee for choosing the rut!”

“Surprise! They did that to me too, and they seemed pissed we were coming here instead of to Utopia. I wonder how much they got if we went to the project.” She took the scanner back from me and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “I’m sorry you’re in the negative. I was too. I decided staying here was the best choice, even though none of the Kadrixans has bonded to me yet.” She shook her head and sighed. “Always a bridesmaid, never a bride, even—”

Our circle of women went eerily silent as every eye at our table looked up behind me. I felt his presence a split-second later. I knew who I’d see when I turned around. His heat permeated the gap between us, making the hairs on my arms stand at attention.

Krxare stood there with a large frown. Menacing. Imposing. And his entire focus was on me.

Chapter 7: Krxare

My female was unhappy. I felt it in the air and saw it in the way she held herself when I walked into the Great Hall. I immediately searched for the cause of her distress, looking for something, someone, I could destroy to bring her happiness, but there was nowhere to direct my violence.

I'd hated leaving her alone so soon after we met, but she was safe with the other females. The females had also assured us that spending time with them would calm the new arrivals and show them that there was nothing to fear from us. They'd formed something called a *welcoming committee* whose sole function was to make sure the new females settled down well among them and felt welcomed.

The females who'd been with us for a few years now considered this stronghold their home and took great pains to make sure things ran smoothly. To be completely honest, our fortress ran much smoother now with them around. There was always someone to alert us of supplies running low or other issues.

I thought back to how Clara had insisted she'd be leaving at the end of the rut, and clenched my fists at my sides. Many of the females who came to us had nothing left at the colony, and that made it easy for them to stay. But Clara still had family. I'd need to work twice as hard to convince her.

It had also become clear in the short time Clara and I were together that I needed to delegate my leadership if I were to have any time with my mate, especially if I needed to convince her to stay. Twice I'd been pulled away for problems that could've been solved by someone else.

I stormed over to the group of females, not knowing how to fix her unhappiness. The group quieted as I approached, and Clara turned around. Her eyes were round as she took in my form, and I tried to make myself look

less menacing.

There was still no sign of what had upset her.

“Did you enjoy the tour?” I pulled her up into my arms.

She looked shocked for a moment that I’d asked her about her day. Was it not customary for human couples?

She shook off the shock. “The stronghold is very well-organized. It’s much bigger than I thought it was. I think I’ll stay in this part for now so I don’t get lost.”

I grinned, and her eyes went to my sharp teeth. Remembering that some humans were afraid of them, I covered them with my lips. Perhaps the females were right about letting the new arrivals socialize with them first; they didn’t react to our teeth anymore.

“We’re doing classes on how to use the replicator tomorrow,” Penelope said helpfully. “To avoid what happened that first year.”

“What happened that first year?” Clara asked.

“You’ll have to come and find out.”

I guided my mate from the low table toward the raised platform where my captains and I sat during large gatherings, while she waved goodbye to her new friends. Friends were good. If she made friends here, she would be happy and choose to stay. Her friends waved back.

It was such a charming custom, hand waving. Kadrixans simply nodded to each other.

I sat down on my cushion, pulling her down to sit next to me, so close we touched. Her slinky red dress pulled up over her knees, the slit exposing much of her thighs. I took the opportunity to press our legs together.

Some of the females had called our pheromones “cheating,” but to us, it was natural. We had no control over their production, especially as we neared our rut, and I was not against using this advantage to influence my female. The more we bonded, the better.

The one capitulation I’d regretted agreeing to was allowing the females to choose to return to their colony so soon after. At the time, I’d been focused

on the survival of my warriors and allowing the women to leave right after the rut meant more females would be willing to sign up.

“Why do we sit up here?” Clara asked as she adjusted her skirt. It was no use; the stretchy fabric bounced back up again.

“I am.” I paused, then corrected myself. “I was the Champion, the leader, of this army back on Kadri. The other six places on the platform are for each of the six captains of the ships in my fleet.”

She eyed the six other sets of low tables and cushions. Only one of my captains had found his mate over the last few years. Rrak sat at the end, talking animatedly with his mate in his arms. Tasha had been part of the welcoming committee who'd shown Clara around. Two other captains sat alone, scanning the now crowded great room. Three had yet to arrive.

“So you are the leader of your people?”

Was that a good thing or a bad thing for her? I couldn't read her face.

“When we arrived here, I dissolved our detachment. We are no longer military here but settlers, colonists, and civilians. I no longer have my status, but my males insisted we continue with tradition. They re-elected me their leader, and my captains became my counsel.”

“You don't sound very happy about it.”

My mate was observant.

“I didn't ask for a leadership role. It is...stressful to have the fate of so many on my shoulders.” Now that she was here, I'd delegated some of my responsibilities to my captains, something I should have done long ago. I had felt so bad that many warriors had been exiled along with me that I'd taken on all the work, hoping it would somehow absolve me of the guilt.

The Great Hall was now filled, and the first platters of meat were being passed from group to group. The platter came to us, and I picked up one of the warm towels. Taking her tiny hands in mine, I cleaned them. Her tongue darted out to lick at her lips, and she looked away shyly, as if somehow just cleaning her hands was an intimate act.

Being so close to her and aware of her every movement, it almost felt as if it was.

I chose the juiciest pieces for her plate before serving myself and passing the platter to Vostak.

Kadrixan warriors required large amounts of protein to maintain our physiques. We were lucky that this continent had plenty of prey animals. According to our calculations, a small colony such as ours made no dent in their numbers, and hunting as we did now was sustainable indefinitely as long as we did not destroy their habitat with agriculture, and took only what we needed.

We'd need to recalculate should our population increase, however. Humans were not just sexually compatible with us; they were breeding compatible as well. Kadrixan warriors were only fertile during our rut, but as former soldiers in the Kadri army, my warriors and I'd all had procedures to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

With the drive for sex so strong in our species once a year, wide-spread mass contraceptives were needed to keep our world from being overpopulated. The procedure was simple to reverse however, and here on Vokira, we didn't need to earn our right to reproduce as on Kadri.

One of my warriors who'd found his mate that first rut had already gotten the procedure reversed, and they were trying to start a family.

I frowned when I noticed Clara had yet to start on her meal. Was she one of those humans who only ate plant matter? I hadn't even asked. I watched her carefully, and she licked her lips, clearly hungry and not turned off by the meat.

"Eat," I said, wondering if she was waiting for some special order or prayer.

I resisted the urge to pick up the food and feed her. We'd been told some human females would react badly to being fed. When we'd tried to do so the first year, some of the females had told us that only children and babies were fed in their culture. Adult Kadrixans fed each other to show sexual interest.

She looked around the Great Hall, then picked up the piece gingerly, as if afraid to touch it.

"What is wrong?"

“I haven’t had meat in so long. It’s expensive, and I’ve only been able to afford the fake stuff.”

“Then eat and enjoy. There is plenty here for everyone.”

She took an experimental nibble, and the look of awe on her face was replaced by one of sheer joy. She moaned, and I’d never been so envious of a piece of meat before.

“Do you like it? We adjusted the seasoning for human tastes. The females told us the first year that our flavors were too spicy for them.”

“It’s perfect,” she mumbled around another mouthful.

I watched her lips hungrily but tore my eyes away before I scared her. I grabbed the meaty bone on my plate and took a bite instead, though what I really wanted to taste was her.

“Tell me about yourself?” I asked between bites. “Tonight is supposed to be spent getting to know our new arrivals, though there’s only one female I want to get to know better.” I smiled at her, being careful to hide my teeth.

“What do you want to know?”

“What was your life like back at your colony? What do you like to do for fun?”

Her eyes darted away, and for a moment, I thought she wouldn’t reply. Then she sighed loudly and said, “You might as well know. I didn’t have much of a life back home. I lost my job a few months ago because I said the colony was jacking up the prices for food for the poor unfairly, and I haven’t been able to find another job since.” She watched me intently.

“You are not the only female to believe that here,” I said.

“I had proof on my phone. At my old job, I designed water features for those who could afford them. I got to visit the inner colony to survey the worksite. If I was running late, I’d pick up my groceries there instead of near my home.

“The last time I was there, they’d already started hiking up food prices, you know, because of the blight that wiped out half our crops and the virus affecting all our livestock. But all the prices in that fancy-schmancy store

were the same as before. They'd only jacked up the prices for those living at the edge of the colony, because they knew we had nowhere else to shop." Her face turned red, and she spoke louder. "I took pictures and showed them to my co-worker, and she accused me of lying. That I was spreading conspiracy theories." She looked around as if worried she'd been too loud.

I put a hand on her lower back, calming her. "I believe you. You can speak your mind here. We have heard many stories about life at your colony."

"Well, she got me fired, and I haven't been able to find a job since. I haven't been eating well for a while."

"The health records we requested from your colony show that many are lacking nutrition."

She rolled her eyes. "We have to do yearly health scans, and they tax the unhealthy. According to my last three scans, I'm B12 deficient. They taxed me for that too." Fire flashed in her eyes.

"I will care for you. Deficiencies are easy to solve with good food."

Another platter arrived, and I spooned some of the noodles onto our plates before handing her a set of food holders. She took them from me, then looked around the room, her eyes landing on a warrior using a set himself.

"Oh! That's how you use them." She tried to put them on her fingers, but they fell off, too large to fit her tiny hands.

I put mine on, slipping my first two fingers into the covers before putting my opposable digit into the other side. They fit over my claws and made it cleaner and easier to pick up slippery foods covered in sauce.

She tried hers again, but again, it slipped off her fingers, even though I'd already given her a child's pair.

"I will help you eat," I declared, glad to have an excuse to feed her.

She looked ready to protest, but I held up a hand.

"I insist. You will like this dish; many females do." I picked up the slippery noodles and held them to her lips.

She hesitated for a moment, but the delicious aroma drifted to her nose

and she relented.

“Mmm,” she hummed. “This is so good. What’s in it?”

Before I could reply that it was made from highly nutritious floating sea vegetables from just off the coast between their colony’s continent and ours, someone gasped loudly in the crowd below us. The gasp turned into a screech, and one of the new females leaped up from her cushion.

Chapter 8: Clara

The woman screamed again, jumping up from her cushion and pointing to something on the ground. It was a... something. A creature. A dark, furry creature the same color as the cave rocks. The creature I'd been noticing out of the corner of my eye the entire tour.

I hadn't been imagining it after all.

"It's okay," a lady next to the screaming woman said. "That's just a cooki."

"A *cookie*?" she screeched. "That's not a cookie. That's a rat."

"Cookis are harmless," the one pacifying her continued. "They help keep our caves clear of bugs and creepy crawlies. They're just coming out to beg for extra food. They know the warriors are total softies and can't help but give them handouts."

Then, as if to prove her point, two more of the creatures scurried out of the small flap in the wall—the warriors had built teeny, tiny doors for their mouse holes. They approached the closest Kadrixan warrior and sat on their hind legs in front of him, eyeing his food. The Kadrixan looked as if he dealt with this every day; he picked up a few of the wet, saucy noodles and tossed them to the creatures.

"See, totally harmless."

They looked like living pom poms with big eyes and oversized, perky ears. Long, fluffy tails curled back behind their bodies. One of them was carrying a small stick in its tail. I looked a little closer. No, that wasn't a stick. It was a piece of the herbs used to season the meat.

"They're kind of cute," I said softly, mostly to myself.

"The kukee were here before we were. This is their home."

The way Krxare pronounced it wasn't quite the same as the way the woman had. The women here must have used a familiar-sounding word instead.

"We elected to let them stay," Krxare continued. "And as Sarah said, they keep the invertebrate population in check. They also help turn our food scraps into fertile soil."

"How do you manage their waste and get it out to the field?" I asked.

"They do it themselves. Kukees do not soil the place they sleep and eat. Each year they pick one spot in the valley, and they all go there. We locate our gardens each spring on last year's refuse patch."

That was convenient. Back at the colony, they would have exterminated these little guys and called them vermin. I assumed that since the Kadrixan kept them around that they were also disease-free.

One of the little critters approached us.

"Is it okay to feed them? Won't they stop hunting if we feed them too much?"

"They do. So if we see invertebrates around, we put a temporary ban on hand feeding. It seems to work. There is no ban now. Go ahead." He picked up a slippery piece of noodle and handed it to me.

The noodles were delicious, but they tasted a lot better than they felt. The slimy thing slipped out of my hand and landed with a wet *plop* on the floor next to my cushion. The creature ran in but stopped just out of reach, unsure if I was safe. It looked at me, then at the noodle, then back at me.

It was adorable.

I froze, not wanting to scare it. Slowly it crept forward, one step at a time, getting braver and braver. Suddenly, another cooki dashed in from the side, picked up the noodle, and ran off, tripping over the slippery strand. The first creature, the one who'd taken too long to work up the courage, made a soft squeak of protest. Then its tail, which had been perky and curled in an S shape, drooped, flopping to the ground.

It looked so sad. I reached for one of the noodles on my plate with my bare fingers, struggling to pick it up. I had my hand all up in my food, but I

didn't care; I just wanted a single noodle. Just as the cooki was about to give up and try his or her luck with someone else, I managed to pick up a piece.

“Yes! Finally.” I clicked my tongue at the creature, hoping it would turn back.

Its ears twitched at the sound, and it stopped mid-step.

“Here you go,” I said, tossing the noodle in its direction.

It snatched it up immediately. Then, with its tail back in a happy S-shaped curve with an extra little curl at the top, it hopped away, its prize in its mouth.

I knew I was grinning like a fool, but I didn't care. That tiny interaction had just made my day. People at the colony frowned at the local wildlife. They forbid anyone from owning animals that hadn't descended from the handful of Earth animals that had come with the original colonists. As a result, pets were only for the upper class.

“You are happy.”

“It's cute.”

“You like animals.”

“When Chris and I were little, Dad took in a baby toffer who'd lost its mother.”

“Who is Chris? And what is a toffer?” Krxare held up more of the food for me. It was strange to have someone feed me, but it was kind of sweet.

“Chris is my brother,” I answered, taking a bite. “He's still at the colony. Toffers are what we call the animals who have naturalized to live alongside us in the outskirts of the colony. Some people called them Nova raccoons, after the same animals from Earth. It's illegal to keep them, so we had to go to great lengths to hide the creature, never telling anyone outside our home about it.

“Eventually, the authorities caught wind of it, and we thought we were all going to be cited for endangering public health by harboring a dangerous animal. We were lucky we'd taught Potluck to run out on the balcony and hide.”

“Potluck?” Krxare asked with an amused look.

“Yeah. We’d say we needed to go pick up food for the Potluck. Or clean after the Potluck. It was code. At first, Dad thought Chris or I had told our friends, but I hadn’t and neither had Chris. This was the moment we realized the rumors of the colony monitoring us through our devices were true.”

“What happened?” Krxare seemed genuinely interested in my story.

I’d never told anyone about this before. It was our family’s little secret: the time we were all secret criminals to raise a baby toffer.

“They turned our place inside out but didn’t find enough evidence we’d kept the animal in our apartment. We made sure to keep it outside from then on, leaving food behind a flower pot for it. One day it stopped coming back.” I shook my head, clearing the memories from my mind. It had been a long time since I’d let myself think of it.

“Your colony has strange rules.” Krxare pulled me closer, and with the cooki gone, I was suddenly very much aware of his body and the way he made me feel whenever we touched.

“How come I haven’t seen them all day, except for a few shadows here and there?”

“The kukees here are very friendly. They’ve been hiding because of the arrival of the human transport shuttle earlier today, but they should be more active by tomorrow. You’ll see them around the stronghold then.”

Another platter arrived, this one with small, sticky sweets that were very difficult to pick up bare-handed. Krxare insisted on feeding these to me as well. I protested at first but stopped when I realized it was useless and I was just drawing attention.

It was a very intimate act, especially since we’d gotten closer and closer throughout the meal, so I was practically on top of him. When a bit of sticky syrup got on the side of my lip, I was sure he was going to lick it off. My heart pounded as he leaned in while I held my breath, but all he did was wipe it off with the damp towel we’d used earlier to clean our hands.

I exhaled, disappointed but unsure why I felt that way. I shouldn’t be lusting after a Kadrixan. I’d be leaving after the rut.

“Krxare!” one of his captains shouted from next to us. He held out a pitcher full of something that looked like cold tea, dew beaded on the outside.

Krxare took it and filled my cup. I hadn’t realized how thirsty I was until now. During the tour of the stronghold, we’d come across several more of those fountains I’d seen in Krxare’s room. They all had clean, potable mountain water, but I hadn’t drunk any.

I gave the cool liquid a try, but instead of tea, I got something fruity and refreshing. I took several gulps.

“Careful. The berry wine is potent.”

Wine? I didn’t taste any alcohol in this. It tasted like watered-down juice, maybe made of some foreign tropical fruit I’d never tasted before. But even as I took another sip, the effects were already starting.

“Oh,” I said, as the warmth filled my tummy and the world took on a cheery, rosy glow.

Krxare took the glass from me and finished it off, tilting his head before slamming the emptied glass on the table. He sighed exaggeratedly, and I laughed, leaning into him. His arms snaked around me, pulling me onto his thighs.

I curled up in his lap. I didn’t fully understand it, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t view Krxare as the enemy. These guys were scary looking, and I was sure they were formidable in battle, but the second I was around Krxare, every instinct to run from these predators disappeared. It must be those pheromones he was talking about.

Earlier, when we’d first met and in his room, the pheromones had made me horny as a teenager. I’d noticed every ripple of his muscles, and his touch had me wanting more. Now, it was different. Instead of lust, I felt calm.

Calm and happy. And relaxed.

I yawned.

“Are you tired, little treasure?” He stroked my hair.

I closed my eyes, and hummed a yes. I hadn’t realized it, but I was

exhausted. The last few days had been quite the adventure. I'd gone from a simple girl trying to find a job, to losing my home, to being arrested and imprisoned. Then they'd shipped me over here.

The fruity wine must have been the straw that broke the camel's back. I yawned again, suddenly too tired to stay awake.

"Sleep then." He petted my head. "I will care for you."

He continued playing with my hair, and I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again briefly, I was in the soft bed in his quarters. A fluffy, grey blur caught my attention, and I wondered for a moment if it was the same cooki I'd fed earlier, before sleep came to claim me again. The last thing I remembered was Krxare climbing into bed next to me.

Chapter 9: Krxare

I woke up next to my mate for the first time in my life. Not knowing how she'd react and because her clothing looked comfortable enough, I hadn't removed her dress. I had, however, stripped myself. I hated sleeping with clothes on.

Her tiny form didn't keep heat well, and I finally understood why the females living with us often complained about it being too cold in our fortress. I kept her warm with my body. It was challenging to keep my body from reacting, especially now as she cuddled with her rounded ass against my front.

She moved in her sleep, rubbing up against me.

Fuck.

Her breathing changed, and she stiffened as my cock rose between us.

"Good morning," I whispered, knowing she was awake.

I buried my face in her neck and tightened my arms around her, willing my pheromones to work, if only to calm her. The more contact I had with her, the better. Instead of calm, I got something more enticing: the heady aroma of her lust.

Despite her body's reaction, she pushed away from me and rolled over to face me. She gasped, and her lust blossomed even more as her eyes landed on my cock.

"You're naked!" she said indignantly.

She looked down at her body.

"I do not like to sleep with clothing. But your dress looked stretchy, so I left it on." I eyed her luscious body; the skirt had hiked up around her waist,

and most of her thighs were showing.

She shoved the dress down to cover herself. “This isn’t the most comfortable for sleeping.”

“You can sleep naked, too, if you like.” I licked my lips.

“Ugh! Men. You’re all the same.” She shook her head, but there was a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

She pushed herself off the bed and headed to the privacy area. “I wish I had a toothbrush.”

I got up and followed her. “This dispenser here is a formula that cleans your teeth.”

Her eyes didn’t meet mine. Instead, she stared at my still mostly-hard cock. I cleared my throat. “Hello? My eyes are up here.” I waved my hand in front of her face. “Ugh! Females,” I said, copying her tone before heading over to my wardrobe to give her some privacy.

She giggled softly to herself in the bathroom, and I grinned, happy I’d made her laugh.

For the first time in my life, I felt unsure. I’d trained my whole life to command an army for the Kadri. I’d expected any female I ended up with to be wowed by my impressive nest up in the Kadri’s prime aerie real estate. I’d expected a mate who would show me off to her friends, listing my accomplishments and titles. I hadn’t expected Clara.

For some reason, I knew I couldn’t win her with my status or achievements, though having been exiled from Kadri, I no longer had any standing. I still had the respect of my warriors—warriors who refused to let me step down from a leadership role, despite the fact that they’d all been exiled with me.

By the time she returned, I was dressed.

She frowned at her clothes. “I don’t have anything else.”

“You will be given basic necessities today. If there’s anything else you want, I will be happy to provide for you. Just ask, and it is yours.”

She nibbled at her lips as if she wanted to say something but didn’t.

“Say it.”

“I have a brother back at the colony. He’s the only family I have left. Is there a safe way I can contact him?”

Safe because she didn’t trust her own colony.

“You can use my comm. All the comms in the stronghold can contact your colony’s numbers.”

She looked hesitant.

“They won’t be able to listen in on your conversation,” I assured her. “We are technically not a part of your colony’s network.”

“Would they know he got a call?”

“If someone was checking on him right as you called, they would know. But they wouldn't know who or where it's coming from.”

“Alright. Thanks for letting me contact Chris. It means a lot to me.”

Clara entered her brother’s contact information and waited. She chewed her lip nervously as our system hacked into the colony communication network. After a while, a prerecorded message played.

“Hey brat, I know it’s you. No one else calls me. I’ll call you back.” There was a beep, followed by, “This mailbox is full,” said in a robotic female voice.

“Perhaps he is busy. You can try again later. There’s a comm in the female dormitory.”

“Maybe.” But the worry didn't leave her face.

“Let's get you to that training session so you can make this coffee drink you females seem so excited about.”

That had her smiling again. I couldn’t resist kissing those smiling lips, so I did until she was clinging onto me and panting.

What a way to start a day. I wanted to start every day like this for the rest of my life.

When I left her with the other females, she looked happy and calm. Clara was taking this very well compared to many of the females, who had come in crying and certain they’d been sent to their deaths.

I headed to my first task. First thing first; with my workload spread among my captains, I now had the time to hunt for treasures to fill the nest.

I pulled up Clara's file. Along with their health reports, we'd asked each of the females to fill out a questionnaire when she signed up to join us. The survey was meant to determine the females' preferences and make our job of keeping them happy easier.

According to the file, her grandparents and parents had been laborers in food production. She'd lost her parents to a burning field during the hot season years ago. By then, Clara was already grown and working on her own. The step up from laborer to designer had been considered an upwardly mobile step, and they'd put a note in her file to monitor her.

Curious, I peeked into her health history. Just as she'd mentioned yesterday, she'd been taxed three years in a row for being vitamin B12 deficient. What she hadn't mentioned was that they'd recommended she eat more to prevent deficiencies. This last year she'd been taxed twice, once for the vitamin deficiency and again for excessive weight gain. They'd also blocked her from purchasing many types of food, including red meat, which would have gone a long way toward solving the deficiency.

Red filled my vision. There was nothing wrong with her weight; she was lush and beautiful, a perfect armful. As for the deficiency, if the food they provided for their colonists weren't complete trash, this would never have happened. This planet was fertile and full of prey. I wasn't too worried though; she'd be a shining beacon of health after a few months under my care.

Aside from that, she was healthy unlike the females they'd sent last year.

Last year, the colony sent almost two hundred females, but most of them had been extremely sick. They'd all told the same story; they had cancer or some other form of illness but did not have money for medicine. They were dying, and the colony was getting rid of them.

The most frustrating thing was that cancer was easily treatable, and humans already had the cure; they simply chose to withhold it. We healed a few females during our rut, but many passed in our arms, too far along in their illness to be saved.

My males had mourned those we'd come to care for. Luckily, none of my males had bonded to the females that year, or else we would have needed more graves.

It wasn't all for nothing, though. All the healed females chose to stay in our stronghold, and some had even formed mate bonds with my warriors after the rut. If the human leaders wanted to give us their sick females, we were more than willing to care for them, though we wished they'd send them over before they were at death's door.

Having seen enough, and glad that she my Clara was relatively healthy, I pulled up the questionnaire and gawked at her answers.

For her favorite color, she'd put "black like my soul," but for some reason I wasn't sure that was an honest reply. For her favorite food, she'd put "calories" and, worse yet, her answers for her top hobbies were "staying alive" and "being an upstanding citizen of the colony."

This was useless.

"You look like you're stuck in a rut with a Golorian whore. What's wrong?"

I shoved my hand in front of Vostak and brought up the file as a hologram for him. "This is what's wrong. Who has "staying alive" as a hobby?"

"I should have warned you about that. Most of the forms we received were useless." Vostak kept reading her replies and blew out a breath. "Either the females purposefully put in silly replies, or they were afraid to put in honest answers."

"How am I going to build a suitable nest before the rut consumes me?" I'd thought we had more time, but it was getting bad already. At least, for me. Being around Clara didn't help.

"You'll have to guess like we did when we built our first nests." A pained look crossed Vostak's face, as if he were remembering the nest he'd built back on Kadri. "I don't think human females are as picky about nests as our females are. I'm under the impression that many who end up spending our heat with us did not have much at home."

I knew that much. The human colony had much wealth, but it was not evenly distributed. Many of their riches stayed at the top. In that way, it

wasn't very different from Kadri under the rule of the Usurper Queen and her daughter.

I started with the items that were the easiest. Our nest would need a large sleeping area. It would take at least a day to process the furs, and I hoped I could hold out that long. Hunting was exactly what I needed to clear my mind of the tempting female.

"Come hunt stolix with me."

The creatures had some of the softest fur I'd ever felt, and I'd hunted on many planets across the galaxy. Available in a range of colors from a silvery gray-blue to rich red-brown, there was sure to be one Clara liked. I could have one made into a capelet for her. They were also plentiful, and taking a few extra had no effect on future populations, as they multiplied so quickly.

There wasn't much to do in the days before a rut, and Vostak agreed eagerly.

"I should cure some of their hides for my nest as well. And our meat stock could use a replenish. They are mighty tasty, though it's not the best season for them."

It was the start of spring, and the thick layer of fat the stolix put on for winter was mostly gone. A few human females thought they tasted like birds they called ducks, though most had never tasted duck either. The human colony had brought livestock from their home planet, but they were difficult to raise here and were considered rare delicacies.

Perhaps my Clara would think of stolix fur and meat as delicacies as well. The creatures were not native to their continent, and we had a strict no-poaching agreement with the colony. Just as our treaty stated that no Kadrixan would set foot within a certain perimeter of their colony, hunting on our continent or fishing in our coastal waters was strictly prohibited.

Breaking any of these rules by either side would shut down our treaty, stop all trade, and most likely start a war. For a race that did not raise warriors, humans sure did start many spats.

We entered the armory and suited up for our hunt. Perhaps I'd be able to find a rare black stolix to match her heart.

Chapter 10: Clara

“So what actually happens when the rut starts?” It was Michelle who finally asked the question we were all wondering.

“The Kadrixans had this elaborate system all figured out, but when the shit hit the fan that first year, it all went to hell in a handbasket.” Tasha chuckled. “It was a mess, and the guys started fighting left, right, and center.”

Giant alien warriors fighting sounded frightening, but Tasha spoke of it like it was totally normal.

“You’re not doing a good job selling me on this,” I said.

“Nah. We worked it out.” Tasha pulled a neatly-wrapped bundle of clothing from the shelf and handed it to me. “When the rut starts, the need consumes them and is only temporarily satisfied by sex. Whenever warriors show signs of violence or a fight breaks out, we do our best to break it up and distract them. Usually, they get the hint and carry us to their rooms. After sex, they calm down for a while before it starts up again.”

I unfolded the first layer of fabric. New clothes! They were super soft, and I couldn’t wait to get out of this cheap, mass-produced dress the colony had given me.

“So we get to choose?” I asked, looking around the room.

Everyone was changing right here, so I did too, pulling off the offending garment. I pulled a super soft, knee-length sheath dress over my head, the stretchy fabric forming around my curves. I rolled up the other pieces I’d been given—a tunic, a wrap-style cardigan, and a pair of leggings—and stuffed them into my bag.

They’d given us these backpacks first thing today, and we’d slowly filled

them with things we needed from the supply rooms. I hadn't realized how much my hair needed a brush until I got one. Socks, underwear made from a thinner version of the wonderfully soft and stretchy fabric as our clothes, and shoes had been welcomed.

Unlike the clothes, the packs were made from a futuristic, indestructible fabric that reminded me of everything Kadrixan. The shoes were simple fabric sandals, which were all we needed inside the stronghold and in the valley.

"Most of the time," Tasha answered as she handed out more of the soft bundles, "the mated ones stay with their mates. Anyone who doesn't want to help out hides in their room. But trust me, it's worth it to help out. These warriors are amazing in bed. It's not just about them. They need *you* to orgasm to get their moment of sanity."

"Oh, and their tails." Penelope waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "You'll never forget their tails."

I gawked at them. They were talking about sleeping with these giants as if it was nothing.

"Note to self, check out their tails," Julie said with a laugh.

"What about after the rut? What do the women here do?" I asked. I knew our job here was to help them survive the rut, but just sleeping with alien men for a living kind of felt like prostitution.

"I know that look. I thought the same thing when I first got here. 'This is sex work.'" Penelope rolled her eyes. "Maybe it is to some, but these warriors; they really need us. You'll realize how much when the rut starts. They know our worth and treat us accordingly. They don't treat us like common whores, but like valuable members of their community."

Tasha collected our dresses and stuffed them into a bin marked *laundry*. "We all have one assignment for the rest of the year. Be happy."

"What?" Had I heard her wrong?

"Be happy," she repeated. "We're not expected to work, but we can if it makes us happy. If we have a hobby that requires tools or materials, we let them know, and they'll try to acquire it."

“Some of us find odd jobs around the stronghold. Others join the Kadrixans when they go out hunting or when they farm the valley.” Penelope headed out the door, and we followed her.

The idea of these terrifying warriors farming had been funny until I remembered they were cut off from their planet. Every human colonist knew the Kadrixans living here had been exiled from their home planet. They’d stolen the ships to get here. The colony’s media made sure everyone knew these monsters were disgraced and untrustworthy.

“Guess what I do?” Penelope asked with a mischievous grin.

I took the bait. “What?”

“I write erotic short stories about human women with their Kadrixan lovers. If I run out of material, I just ask around for ideas.” She waggled her eyebrows again. “And the best part is that their communication expert, Trsak, hacked the colony’s system, then we put them up as a free download on EshopU.”

EshopU was the colony-owned e-commerce one-stop shop.

“No! You did not!” Julie exclaimed.

“I did. And it sells. A lot. And the authorities can’t take it down because my account doesn’t actually exist. I don’t make anything from it, but it tickles me pink that people are reading about twisted ridges and hypermobile tails.” The smile on her face said it all. “I wonder how many women I can convince to join us.”

That had me remembering Krxare’s erection from this morning. His cock wasn’t like any I’d ever seen. It had a flared head, but the shaft twisted around with hard ridges along its length. I hadn’t noticed any balls at the base either.

That gave me some food for thought. Now that I was actually here, it wasn’t anything like I’d expected. Penelope’s stories were doing double duty: educating and titillating at the same time.

We headed back to the Great Hall. It was set up completely differently than yesterday. Today, instead of large groupings for mingling, there were small eating platforms with two cushions side by side, like the way Krxare

and mine had been.

“They are starting early this year,” Tasha said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“They're encouraging the women folk to pair up and spend time with the Kadrixan warriors. Think of it as speed dating for those who haven't found their mates. They serve several courses throughout the night. The warriors sit down at their stations, then the women walk around and choose who they want to eat each course with.”

“So, Kadrixan old-world speed-dating musical chairs?” I looked around the room at all the paired place settings.

“Yup,” said Tasha. “We're the lucky ones. We don't have to participate. We get to eat the entire meal in peace with our mates. You don't want to join in. It's stressful. It's more fun to watch.”

“How is it stressful?”

“You know those videos you see of people playing musical chairs, and there's like one chair left, and both people go for it, and things get dicey? It's like that, except there are more chairs than players, and no warrior wants to eat alone.

“Last year, this lady sat down at her chosen warrior's station, and another warrior next to them immediately started a fight. Turns out she was his mate, and she'd completely bypassed him, not being able to feel the bond. They're happily mated now, though. So no harm done.”

“Let's head to the platforms. That's where the mated couples sit and watch these poor fools play the game.”

Mated couples. I guess that would be me. It felt strange, because I'd just met him yesterday, and I wasn't sure if I'd be staying once all this was over. I might not have a life back at the colony, but I had a brother.

The contract had stated that if we weren't 100% happy here, we were allowed back into the colony. I knew I'd be going back to nothing, less than nothing with that debt under my name, but staying also meant never seeing my brother again.

The bell rang out, signaling the end of the current course.

Instead of sharing the raised platform with his captains, today Krxare and I sat up here with the other mated couples overlooking the unmated masses. Each couple had their own station, providing some privacy.

Below us, all the women got up from their seats. Some were reluctant to leave their current dinner dates, and some were ready to get as far away as possible. They wandered the room, looking for the next warrior to spend the next course with.

Tasha had been right. It was much less stressful just to sit and eat the entire meal with Krxare.

The activities gave me a chance to take a good look at all the Kadrixans living here, not just Krxare. At first, they all looked the same to me, but now I recognized distinguishing features. Despite them all being tall and muscular, they were not all built the same.

Also, some Kadrixan had a small patch of hair on their chins, but some, like Krxare, had no facial hair at all. They were dressed differently as well, with some favoring dark, silky shirts, and others wearing tight tank tops that showed off their muscles. Others were topless, their broad chests on display.

“I have studied your culture, and your courting rituals include something called a dinner and a movie.”

A dinner and a movie. “That’s an extremely antiquated Earth term. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone use it in real life. We do go on dates though, which I guess is the same thing. Is that what you’re trying to achieve here? Mass speed dating?”

“We try to get the females to spend time with us so they learn not to be frightened.” He offered me another skewer of meat, but I declined, knowing there were more courses on their way.

“Are games like these common for your people before a rut?” I leaned into him, enjoying how he made me feel so completely protected.

“Yes, especially for the younger crowd. It increases the likelihood of males finding a mate.”

Mate. Despite having both Krxare and the ladies explain the concept to me, I still didn't understand how this giant warrior could know in an instant I was right for him. It was strange for me to trust a hunch this strongly. Everyone acted as if it was completely normal for me to ditch my plans to head back to the colony just because I'd found a mate, but one of the reasons I'd chosen the rut was because of the option to go back.

“So what happens when the rut starts? To us, I mean. Tasha and Penelope already explained what happens to the unmated.”

He pulled me close and whispered the words into my ears as if they were a secret just for me. “I will carry you up to our aerie and spend the entire rut making you so deliriously happy you'll never want to leave my side again.”

Gulp. A tingling frisson tickled up my neck. My body felt like it was on fire, and I wanted to climb into his lap and—I pushed the thought away. I had to get a hold of myself. It must be these pheromones he was releasing.

“I can smell your need,” he growled. “You like the idea of me doing unspeakable things to you.”

He hauled me sideways into his lap, then his hand disappeared under the skirt of my dress. A single claw drew teasing circles slowly up my thighs.

“What are you doing?” I whisper-hissed. “It's the middle of dinner.”

I looked around, worried someone was watching, but no one was paying attention. Every couple on the platform was too busy with each other to notice. Many were cuddled together intimately themselves.

Krxare reached over and pulled a thin blanket, which had been rolled up on the side, over my body. “Stay quiet and no one will know.” His tail replaced his hand, moving slowly up my leg.

The ladies had mentioned something about their tails, and I had a feeling I was about to find out what they meant. I buried my face into his chest, biting my lip.

Krxare reached for a skewer of meat with his free hand and ate it, his face a mask as if he weren't feeling me up under the blanket.

The tip of his tail had reached my underwear. I squeezed my legs together, but that wasn't enough to stop it. It snuck underneath. His tail was incredibly deft and mobile. He slid the very tip up and down the seam of my pussy, then covered my clit with the flat triangular end. That was when it started to vibrate.

I whimpered against his chest, trying hard not to make a noise. I didn't want anyone to turn and look.

A hand landed on my thigh, on top of the blanket, then Krxare pulled my knees apart.

"Keep them parted," he ordered quietly.

My knees shook, but I obeyed, not wanting him to stop now that I'd had a taste.

His tail started moving over my clit, vibrating as it massaged. I inhaled sharply through my teeth, and my fingers tightened around his arm. Then I was there, my channel pulsing around nothing. I wished it pulsed around him instead.

He continued massaging me a little more before giving my pussy two pats as he said, "Good girl."

I stayed curled in his arms, both physically satisfied and emotionally confused at what had just happened. Even though our little game hadn't been witnessed by anyone, except for maybe the cute gray cooki in the corner, I was happy to hide in the shelter of his arms.

Chapter 11: Krxare

“Where are we going?” Clara asked.

“I thought you might like an after-dinner walk to get some fresh mountain air.” I took her tiny hand in mine as we walked.

“That sounds great. I haven’t been out in nature since I was a kid. Fresh air sounds perfect.”

I needed air. I needed air and a plunge in ice water. At this rate, I’d take my sexy Clara right here in the hallway instead of waiting to bring her up to my aerie. I wanted to do things right, romance her the way humans did: slowly, over the course of several *dates*.

I’d researched her culture and found that they spent months, sometimes years, dating before deciding to join together. It took them that long to find out if they were compatible. Unlike Kadrixan courtship, which was fast and passionate, some humans dated for years.

I didn’t have years to wait; I didn’t have months or even weeks, so I had to make the time I had count. I didn’t want her to think of me as a *one-night stand*—another term I’d learned about in my research. She was anything but that. I wanted her forever.

I also wanted my mate now. Kadrixan males were given the length of a rut to convince their mate to stay with them. Some joined with a female during the rut and came out mated. Others flew their chosen female to the nest hoping for a mating bond, only to come out disappointed.

The punishment for attempting to force a mate bond in a nest and failing was severe for those in Kadri. Nests could only be used once, for one female. Rejected males were required to abandon their nests and everything they’d collected in them. If they wished to try again with another female, they’d

need to start over, building a new nest.

For this reason, most males only attempted the mating flight to the nest if they'd already felt the beginnings of the bond. Usually, it meant it was the right female and she would stay. It didn't stop those without the bond from trying, however, especially if they'd already searched for years for a mate and never found one.

Vostak had once attempted to convince a female to join with him. Despite his high rank as a captain in the Kadri fleet and his very impressive nest—he'd spent much of his earnings on it—the female had rejected him. He'd been following his eyes instead of his heart, choosing the most beautiful female he knew. There had been no bond between them, but he'd hoped to force one through the rut.

Here, with empty nests, abandoning them wasn't a significant deterrent. Because of this, we'd instated new rules on this planet. Ruts were spent in the stronghold, and only those who experienced the start of the bond could fly their female to their nest.

Still, Vostak refused to choose a nesting site. He claimed he had other things to focus on, like the welfare of the stronghold.

Clara and I were quiet through most of our walk, but I didn't mind. I enjoyed having her around. Her presence made everything else about the mountains that much more beautiful. Even the light breeze blowing in from the ocean was fresher.

The hike up to the summit was easy here, with several switchbacks to make the slopes more manageable, even with Clara's shorter legs. She huffed lightly next to me, but when I turned to her, she was smiling, and her cheeks were flushed. I slowed down, realizing she had to take more steps for every one of mine.

At the top, I leaned against a boulder and pulled her slightly panting body between my legs.

"I'm sorry, little treasure. I will walk slower next time." I turned her so she faced the gorgeous valley.

"It's okay. I'm just a bit out of shape." She leaned against me, her buttocks round and full against my thigh. "Oooh. It's beautiful."

“It is,” I agreed. “But not as beautiful as you.”

I leaned in to inhale her scent. She was slightly sweaty from our trek, and her alluring scent filled my head. Kadrixans did not have the hypersensitive sense of smell some other species in the galaxy had, but it was good enough, especially when my mate was standing so close we practically overlapped.

I’d come here for air, but all I was getting was more of her. I gritted my teeth, lamenting the fact that my nest was not yet finished. If it were, I’d carry her there right now and claim her. Instead, I had to be satisfied with her closeness and the gorgeous view.

If she was bothered by my half-hard cock constantly pressing against her buttock, she didn’t show it. She ignored it instead, and I was grateful. Fucking her now would bring on the rut early. Perhaps she understood that I was trying my best to keep the heat at bay.

“Dad would’ve loved this place,” she said. “He took us out camping once, when it was still allowed. I hated it at the time because I knew it was too hot. But looking back now, I see how happy he and Mom were when they were out in nature.”

“Your file said your parents were farmers. Didn’t they have access to nature?”

“Not farmers, food production laborers,” she said. “Farmers own the land they farm. There are no farmers in Nova Vita, only laborers who work the fields owned by AgriCorp, then return to their bare-bone homes in the colony when their shifts end.”

I had not known of this distinction.

“I wish I could share this place with them.” She was silent after that, leaning her head on my chest as she looked over the valley.

We sat with each other, my arms wrapped around her protectively and my wings half unfolded to block out the chill of the wind. The sunset over the valley was as beautiful as it always was, with the colors layered over each other, blending seamlessly. It was a magical moment made even better with my mate’s presence.

The only sounds were our breathing and the beating of our hearts.

The colors played over the sky, slowly disappearing into the horizon as night replaced dusk. The two moons of Vokira shone overhead, one big and orange, the other small and white. I buried my face into Clara's hair, inhaling her scent, trying to commit it to my memory. Her breathing had slowed, and I realized she'd nodded off to sleep in my arms. She must feel safe with me, and that made me happier than I'd ever thought possible.

Once, a younger version of me had believed that my joy could only come from climbing the ranks of the Kadri military. How wrong I'd been. No number of war medals or conquests could have prepared me for what I felt now.

I took a few deep breaths, letting the crisp mountain air dilute Clara's scent.

Younger Krxare would have been devastated at being exiled. It would have been the end of his life as he knew it. Not only would he have lost his entire nest—the one he'd built with so much hubris, filling it with useless trinkets bought only to impress—but he would have also lost his precious rank.

Rank meant so much in Kadri, and it had meant everything to me.

To think that I had to lose it all and come to a barely-civilized planet to find a shred of happiness. Life hadn't turned out the way I'd thought or wanted, but somehow, it was enough.

The sound of my laugh carried on the wind. In my arms, Clara stirred. She turned to look at me, her eyes not focusing well in the dark.

"Let's get back inside." I gathered her into my arms and started back to my quarters.

Chapter 12: Clara

“I know you want to be independent and all, but we’re family. I have enough in my savings and could’ve helped until your contract was up. Then you could’ve moved in with Mark and me.” Chris’s voice sounded calmer than I’d thought it would over the phone. “Next time, come to me for help.”

I sighed. He was right. I should’ve spoken up.

I’d known Chris had money saved in his account, but I also knew he was saving it for a good reason, which was why he and Mark shared a teeny tiny bachelor pad. For their privacy, they’d carved out two closet-sized rooms, just big enough for their beds. Adding one more person in would be extremely cramped. The only other space left was the kitchen area. I’d need to sleep on the kitchen floor under the table.

But, as he said, we were family.

“And brat?” Chris continued.

“What?” I’d gotten used to the endearment over the years. He hadn’t stopped calling me that since we were kids.

“When you get home, whatever debt they put onto your account, I’ll help you with it. Call me again right before you come back. I’ll meet you at the processing center. You can stay with Mark and me indefinitely.”

“But—”

“No buts. If you’re worried about Mark being upset, he’s right here nodding his head.”

In the background, Mark’s voice called out, “Hey, brat!”

I cracked a smile. “Hey, loser.”

“No contact is showing from this call,” Chris said. “That’s strange.”

“I’m calling from a Kadrixan device. It’s supposed to leave no trace.”

“How do I contact you?”

I glanced quickly over at Krxare, who waited for me by the door. “I don’t think you can.”

“Then just call me again before you return to the colony, okay?”

“Okay, deal.”

“I gotta go. I’m going to be late for work at this rate.”

“Go then. I love you, asshole.”

“I love you too, brat.”

We hung up, and I turned to face a confused-looking Krxare. His brow was furrowed all the way to the spot where his horns sprouted from his head, and his head was tilted quizzically. It looked almost adorable.

“Why do you call each other mean names?”

“They’re endearments, nicknames. We used to fight a lot over silly things as kids. It wasn’t until we got older that we realized how much we cared for each other. It’s a sibling thing.”

Now that I’d finally gotten hold of my brother, I felt a weight lifted off my shoulders.

I hadn’t been lying when I’d told Chris I was happy here. I’d told him we were well fed and the women got to call the shots, and that all the Kadrixans were real gentlemen.

He hadn’t seemed shocked that I’d made the decision to come here. In fact, he’d told me he would have done the same. He had even less trust than I did about the Utopia Project. The project had stolen his girlfriend from him.

They’d been young, and at the colony adulthood and independence weren’t determined by age but by financial status. As long as Ella was financially dependent on her parents, she was still a minor. They hadn’t liked Chris and had sent her to Utopia to break them up. That had backfired when they’d realized a few months later that they’d never get their daughter back.

Chris had been on a mission to get Ella back ever since. That was why he’d been saving up. He knew better than to join her there. His mission had him

working hard for a degree in communications and a job at the colony's comm tower. He was sure his access there would find him a way to get her out. None of us had the heart to tell him she was probably gone for good.

Krxare and I walked down to the Great Hall together as we'd done the previous days, except this time, we weren't just holding hands because we were supposed to. I had my arm hooked into his elbow and I didn't want to let go. Maybe it was the pheromones, but I wanted to spend more time with him. I was happy and calm when I was around him in a way that I hadn't felt for a long time.

I didn't want to come off clingy though. He probably had important things to do and didn't need me hanging around.

Julie greeted me with a wave and I waved back.

"Lessons are cancelled today," she said, like a kid who'd just found out there was a snow day and school was out. "We're supposed to start finding our hobbies instead."

Today's lessons were supposed to be on Kadrixan culture and were taught by a lady who used to be a librarian. Penelope had warned us how boring they were and how useless, since these Kadrixan warriors followed their traditions as much as we followed Earth's. Everything was bastardized and they made things up as they went, especially with the human females here now.

"Hobbies? I haven't had time or money for those since—" *Since Mom and Dad were still around.*

"Yeah, imagine me; living like a kept woman." She grinned.

Free time to do whatever I wanted? I had no idea what to do.

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

Krxare, who I realized I was still hanging onto, cleared his throat. "You can come with me today. I am meeting with the leader of the Vokiren clan in the area to trade for the fabric they weave."

"The Vokiren?" I asked. "You trade with them?"

"They make the dark sheer fabrics you see around the stronghold as well as the soft colorful ones you are wearing right now."

I exchanged a look with Julie, then looked down at my clothes. I was in the galaxy's softest tunic and leggings today. The natives had made these gorgeous fabrics? We'd been told they were savages: cannibals who attacked everything. There used to be several tribes around the colony, but our military had since driven them away.

"I had no idea," Julie said. "Go have fun with your mate." She stressed the last word. "You'll have all year to figure out what you want to do."

She was already acting as if I planned on staying. It must be so much easier with nothing and no one holding her back. Even if Chris told me to stay here, I'd feel guilty for leaving him behind. If anything happened to him, I knew I'd be back there in a heartbeat. He was all I had left.

I'd expected Krxare to bring me to a shuttle, but instead, he took me out to the front of the stronghold where a pair of his men waited. He looked down at my fabric shoes. "I will carry you if needed."

"Wait. Are we going on foot?"

"The forest the tribe lives in is thick and hard to land in. We also do not wish to disturb the wildlife with our shuttles. We have an amphibious vehicle to take us past the swamps and close to their village, but we will trek the rest of the way on foot." He waved to one of the warriors. I recognized him as the one who'd sat next to us during the first evening's meal. He'd joined the masses of unmated males last night. "This is Vostak."

I smiled and waved, not sure how to properly greet a warrior. He nodded and seemed to accept my wave.

"I wanted to introduce myself, but you were so tired that first night. You look much more rested now."

"Thank you. I was exhausted."

"And this is Trsak." Krxare gestured to the other male. "He is my comms specialist and the reason we are able to contact those in your colony in secret."

I nodded and grinned at him too. He grunted and barely met my gaze. Oh, he was shy. That was kind of cute.

The amphibious vehicle was one of the strangest things I'd ever ridden in.

It looked like an old-school race car from Earth, very sleek and aerodynamic, except that it was on huge wheels with giant tread. Like everything else Kadrixan, it had a future-goth feel, and was matte black with reflective, glowing neon green details.

The doors opened gull-wing style and we stepped into a space that was much more spacious than it looked on the outside. There were several crates in the back which must be what they were trading for the fabrics. In front of the crates were several Kadrixan-sized bucket-style seats. I plopped down into one and was basically swallowed whole with how large it was.

Krxare took the one next to me, and the other two warriors took the ones up front. Then we were off.

To my surprise, a window that hadn't been there just moments ago opened up on the side and ceiling, showing the world outside. Despite living on this planet my entire life, I hadn't seen much of it, and those idiots had knocked us out on the trip here. I strained to look out the window, but the bucket seat made it nearly impossible unless I stood.

Strong arms wrapped around me, then Krxare hauled me out of my seat and into his lap. "You can see now, and I can hold you safely. There is rough terrain ahead." He locked his arms around my hips like a seat belt.

The mountains were breathtakingly gorgeous, so unlike the completely flat area Nova Vita was built on. The vehicle traveled along the bank of a stream as it wound its way down the mountain to join the larger river below. On either side, the mountains towered over us, their slopes partially covered with a forest of enormous trees and partially with barren rock. Some of the peaks were covered in ice and snow.

"Wow. It's gorgeous."

Krxare bent to nuzzle at my neck, and for a moment I thought he was going to reuse his line from yesterday about me being more beautiful, but instead, he just hummed in agreement.

The scene overlooking the valley from the peak yesterday had been beautiful, but this; this was humbling. Next to these towering giants, I felt so tiny, so insignificant. My life and my struggles were nothing but specks of dust to these majestic peaks that had stood the test of time.

I leaned into Krxare's embrace, tilting my head to meet his gaze. The fires in his eyes were warm and welcoming today; I felt a connection with him I couldn't explain. He was big and strong, permanent and unmovable like the mountains, and I very much wanted to be sheltered in his arms.

The original plan had been to return to the colony once this was all over, but now...I wasn't so sure. How could I give all this up?

Chapter 13: Krxare

The angry Vokiren male rushed toward my female, snarling.

Clara gasped, and the spike of her fear filled my lungs, igniting in me the urge to protect. I pushed my little human behind me, keeping her protected with my massive body. Whoever wanted her would have to get through me first, and I was an excellent fighter.

I snarled right back at her attacker. “Touch her and die.”

Our visit to the Vokiren had been going swimmingly—the tribe was delighted at seeing Clara wearing their fabrics—until they’d introduced some of their newest members to us.

“Tolan, stand down,” demanded their matriarch, Azala.

“She is one of them. They killed our people and stole our land,” the male hissed.

“Not this one,” Azala said. “Look. She even wears our fabric with pride.”

“I do not care! They took my mate from me, so I claim this female as a replacement.” The Vokiren took a step toward us, and behind me, Clara whimpered.

“If you attack our guests, Tolan, you will find yourself homeless again. Do not make me regret the decision to take you in.” The matriarch was old and weak, but she was firm and demanded respect. “This human is with the Kadrixans, our allies. She is not your enemy.”

Tolan did not look as if he was going to back down, but that was fine by me. The Vokiren were strong fighters and vicious in their battle forms, but I could take him easily, especially when anger colored his vision and blinded him.

The angry male turned on the matriarch. “You are not my matriarch, and this—” he gestured to the tree-top village around us “—is not my true home. My people live in longhouses. Longhouses her people burned to the ground.” He pointed through me to Clara, who trembled behind me. “If taking this female to replace the one I lost means I’m no longer welcomed here, then so be it.”

He rounded on me as his body grew. Light brown hair sprouted from his shoulders as his face morphed into a snout. Claws extended from his hands and feet. By the time he stood in his battle form, he was taller than me: a beast with deadly claws and a slavering mouth full of sharp teeth.

“I challenge you for the female,” he rasped.

Clara gasped, peeking out from behind my body. She stumbled back a few steps.

“Do not fear, little treasure. I will protect you.”

“But-but he’s huge,” Clara squeaked, gripping my bicep. “And he just turned into a monster.”

My mate had nothing to fear. My warriors had battled the natives in their battle forms before. This very tribe had approached us, ready to fight, when we’d first arrived. Word had reached them about what had happened to their counterparts on the other continent, and they’d been worried we were here for their land. After we’d bested them and suppressed them without casualties, a difficult feat, we’d suggested trade instead and explained that we did not plan to expand into their territories.

I exchanged a look with Vostak and Trsak. They were both standing at the ready but knew not to interfere unless there was no other option. Vostak moved to stand in front of the matriarch, protecting her in case the enraged male turned on her. Trsak would be ready to protect anyone else who might get hurt during the challenge. The young male Vokirens did the same, forming a ring around us to protect everyone else.

The Vokiren male lunged, claws extended. He moved fast, slashing his deadly paws across the front of my face, but I was quicker. I dodged out of the way, pulling Clara with me. She rolled to her feet and ran to the edge of the circle. She was smart to look for safety, but the Vokirens did not let her

out of the circle. She was the object we were fighting for, and as per their customs, she must stay in the ring.

“I want her. She is mine,” the enraged male growled.

The words filled me with wrath. Clara was mine and mine alone.

I made the next move, crouching low to trip the angry male as he charged for me again. There were two ways to win this fight. The first was to immobilize him; then he could no longer fight. If that was impossible, I'd have to kill him, though I wanted to avoid that.

We were on a trade mission, exchanging the colored ores from our mountains the Vokiren used to dye their fabrics. I needed to remain diplomatic, even though every cell in my body screamed for me to tear his head from his shoulders for daring to claim my female.

The male didn't fall. Instead, he leaped over me as if already expecting my move. He wasn't charging for me. He was aiming for Clara.

Fuck! I'd made a mistake in judgment. This male wasn't interested in fighting me for the female as per their custom. He planned on simply stealing her. Even now, he was on her, scooping her into his arms.

The Vokirens watching gasped. He wasn't supposed to touch the female until after he'd bested his opponent. They didn't realize Tolan had no plans to fight, and one look at my warriors told me they didn't realize it either.

I rushed toward the male, but he leaped into the foliage which surrounded us, reaching up to grab a branch with the hand that was not holding my female to his body. He swung himself out of the fighting circle, landing on a platform built into the massive trees these people lived in. Then he ran, swinging up and across the canopy, with Clara in his arms.

I roared and unfolded my wings, but I didn't have room to extend my full wingspan to lift off.

The Vokiren spectators were shocked at what had transpired. I shoved my way through the crowd until I was at the edge of the clearing. Here I was able to extend my wings and leap into the air. I scanned the dense canopy, looking for signs of movement. The foliage hid them well, but every time he swung on a branch, the leaves in that area moved, giving him away.

Eventually, he stopped in a large tree. I landed on the forest floor nearby and approached on foot, careful not to give myself away.

“Stop, please.” It was Clara’s voice. “I know you’re angry, and I’m sorry you lost your girlfriend. But I had nothing to do with that. People living in the colony have no say about what our leaders do. Most of us didn’t want the attack on your people.”

I listened as I climbed up the tree, my claws digging into the bark.

“You lived there. You had a say,” was the growled reply.

“No, that’s not true. The people have no say, and if we go against our rulers, we get punished. I’m sorry you lost her during the winter attack.”

“I was supposed to mate Eleta. Now I have no one.” The sad words were tinged with anger.

“They tried to protest the attack. The government deployed a shockwave that disabled everyone’s chip in the area. You see this scar? There’s a chip inside our arm with all our information and all our money. Without it, we can’t survive in the colony. Everyone in the area had their chips disabled. Then they disappeared.”

I frowned. The more I got to know about this colony my mate lived in, the less I liked it. It was starting to bear more similarities to the corruption that had my warriors and I standing up against the Empress. Clara was not going back to that life. She’d live a life of happiness and freedom with me instead.

“I do not care. I lost what was mine, and you will replace her. You are not ugly, and humans are compatible with my people. You will replace the future family I lost. You will hate me now, but over time, you will learn to love me.”

I’d heard enough. I pulled myself over the edge of the shallow, moss-filled central bowl that was the defining characteristic of the trees in this forest.

“Let my female go, and I will spare your life.” I stood to my full height.

The male was still in battle mode, though his claws had retracted. He growled and pushed Clara behind him when he saw me.

“Wait!” Clara cried. “Please, don’t fight.”

She put a hand on his arm and jealousy flared, telling me to rip his arm off.

“Let me handle this, Krxare. He’s mourning and upset. I would be, too. Fighting won’t solve this.” She released his arm and stepped between us. “Tolan, you don’t want a mate who hates you. I promise, if you take me by force, I will hate you for the rest of my life.”

“You will learn. I can be very convincing.”

I hissed. “She is mine.” I grabbed Clara, putting her behind me again. Enough talking.

I lunged for the male, tackling him to the moss-covered floor. We wrestled until sharp teeth snapped in my face, and I rolled as claws sprung out from his paws. I jumped to my feet but didn’t move away fast enough. He head-butted me, catching me at the front where my horns didn’t protect. The world spun but I ignored it.

I lashed out with my feet, and the male was thrown backward into a large branch, shaking loose a few twigs and leaves, which showered down on us. Recovering quickly, he kicked back, trying to nail me in the stomach, but I dodged and threw a kick of my own. He snarled as two of my claws caught him in the face.

My claws didn’t go deep, having just skimmed his face. The red liquid streamed into his eyes, and he dashed it away, baring his teeth at me. He charged at me with a war cry, then we rolled, exchanging a series of punches.

“Stop them!” It was Clara, but she wasn’t alone. Some of the Vokiren had arrived.

“The fight ends when one concedes you to the other, or one dies,” the matriarch’s voice was firm.

“What? No! That’s barbaric.”

“That is our way. Your Kadrixan has not yet begun to fight. He is holding back.”

The matriarch was right. The edge of the rut teased at me, and I worried the violence would bring it on this very instant, in the middle of the trade

mission. I worried I'd ruin relations with this native tribe.

Tolan slashed his claws at me, barely missing my face and I rolled, pinning him. Then my fists were flying. Punching him again and again as the hormones inside me surged and my vision filled with a red haze. The rut was coming, and soon I'd be unable to control myself as I turned into the beast they said we were.

Several hands pulled me off the male: Vostak and Trsak.

"We are not part of the tribe. We can intervene," Vostak said.

They turned me toward Clara, who watched with terror in her eyes.

"Your mate is frightened," Vostak murmured. He looked around the room created by the trees. "You cannot start your rut now with an unfinished nest. Do you not wish to impress your little human?" He gestured to Clara to come, and she did tentatively. He put her hand in mine. "Calm him, human. He will settle for you."

"I'm right here, Krxare." Clara rubbed my arm in small circles as the tide of rage receded, though the world remained tinted red.

I met her gaze, and those big brown eyes still looked scared and unsure. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her to me. "Do not be frightened of me. I'd never hurt you."

"I know," she said. "You were protecting me."

She hugged me back, and we stayed there until I calmed.

Chapter 14: Clara

The matriarch's voice broke into our little world. "Well, that was interesting. Tolan and his two brothers have decided to leave our tribe and live on their own."

I turned to her, still focusing most of my energy on calming the angry Kadrixan. As long as I touched him and focused on him, Krxare had control. It was almost as if I was the one in control; the one with the power to tame this mighty beast.

"I'm sorry this happened," I began.

But the matriarch simply waved her hand. "Nothing you could have done about it, and it is best that it happened. Those brothers still have much anger they must work through before they can live here."

"The colony sent people to burn down their homes. He has the right to be angry." Despite not having had a say, I felt guilty to have been part of the colony that had hurt him so much.

"You are not your leaders. Just as his attack on Krxare, is not a reflection on my tribe as a whole. Even in my small tribe, not all believe the same things. Krxare would say the same of his warriors."

Krxare grunted in agreement next to me.

She gestured for us to follow, and I did, guiding my now-tamed beast along.

"Violence was once a large part of our culture, female of Krxare. It was essential to carve out our land and secure our way of life." She turned to me, offering a toothy grin as we walked across the hanging bridge to the next tree. "Did you know, when the Kadrixans first arrived, I sent a war party to greet them? They subdued us and asked for trade instead."

“I hadn't known.” That was why the matriarch had known Krxare wasn't fighting at his best.

“This Vokiren tribe is much impressed with the Kadrixan's strength and power, as well as with their mercy and willingness to work with us. They make strong enemies but even stronger allies.”

We reached a gap between the trees, and the matriarch leaped into the air, swinging from branch to branch to get across. I balked. I couldn't do that, not this far off the ground. We were at least thirty feet from the forest floor. Even if the thick leaf litter broke my fall, I'd break an arm or a leg.

I'd been shocked the male Vokiren had so easily swung me from tree to tree with just one arm. They had evolved to live here.

“I will carry you,” Krxare declared, lifting me up. “Wrap around me.”

I did, holding on as tightly as I could with my arms and legs. Krxare wouldn't be able to hold me while he monkey-barred across.

Krxare swung from branch to branch, following the old but still extremely agile leader. As he did, our bodies pressed together, bumping and rubbing. I groaned. What a horrible time and place to get turned on. It was having an effect on Krxare too. Something hard and rigid bumped against my open crotch with every swing.

I buried my face into his neck and inhaled. The sweat and blood from the fight were still on him, but behind that was the promise of the ultimate man. He smelled so sexy, and I wanted to lick him up. I couldn't stop myself. I licked him.

Mmm. He was yummy. So masculine and virile.

I'd been frightened when he was fighting, but now that the danger was over, I liked the fact that he'd come to my protection. It had made me feel things when he'd called me his. And I loved that only I, a tiny, insignificant human, could calm his rage. Was that so wrong?

“Naughty little mate,” he growled into my ear.

The low rumble of his voice had me wet in an instant, and I worried I'd leave a mark right through my legging onto him. Luckily, we landed in the final tree, back where the matriarch had received us before the fight.

Krxare let me down slowly, his cock pressing against my clit as our bodies slid together. He grinned at me as the contact had me inhaling sharply. When I pushed away, his cock was still hard and unmistakably outlined against the front of his pants, but he didn't seem to care.

We took a seat on the nearest mound of moss, next to Vostak and Trsak, who shared a similar seat.

Then, as if the fight never happened at all, it was back to business as usual, as the matriarch and the Kadrixans discussed the criteria for the next trade. The Vokiren now had plenty of the mineral pigments the Kadrixans had been offering, but the sky warriors—as the matriarch called them—still needed more fabrics for the growing number of human females joining them.

Krxare listed several ores they could trade, but none seemed to interest the Vokiren leader. I slowly lost interest in the talk and surveyed the room instead, if you could even call it a room.

When Krxare had told me the Vokiren lived in treehouses, this wasn't what I'd expected. I'd expected artificial structures built into trees for shelter. Instead, the trees themselves were the shelters. They were huge. So large, a small shuttle could drive right into the cracks formed between the ground and the raised roots and disappear under them.

Each tree had a flat-floored, shallow bowl at the center, covered in bark and moss, where the Vokiren people lived. Some of the trees had platforms built over the moss. They were protected from the weather overhead by the thick foliage. It was right out of a fairytale.

The Vokiren tribe here differed physically from the ones on our colony's continent, and they lived differently as well, even though they were clearly the same species. Tolan had been right at home here in the trees, despite living his whole life in longhouses. Perhaps at one point, our continent had been covered in forests, too.

I hadn't known they morphed into beasts when they fought. Surely, if the colony's officials had known, they'd have broadcast it to the whole colony to frighten the populace.

All it took to start a war was for a loud minority of sheltered, rich colonists

living in the center to get the idea that by attacking the Vokiren they'd be protecting the less fortunate folk who lived at the edge of the colony. Those at the top always talked about finding ways to help the less fortunate, but much of what they did had the opposite effect.

If we started a war with the Vokiren, it would be those on the outer edges who'd be drafted to fight.

The natives were not the bloodthirsty savages intent on war that the colony insisted they were, but they were also not the peaceful, loving race some of the other groups proclaimed them to be. Those activist groups littered the ground of public places with their untraceable, hand-stamped propaganda flyers. The truth was somewhere in between.

The name of the planet, Vokira, was a native word, and Vokiren simply denoted those who lived on the planet. Originally, the colony had called the planet some name made up by Earth officials, but the native name stuck in colloquial use, and we'd been using it since.

Krxare's hand tightened on my thigh, and I realized the meeting was over.

"Then it is decided. We will continue trade, for the technology which allows us to communicate over long distances." Azala looked pleased, as did the Kadrixans.

"It will make communicating between our people easier as well," Krxare agreed.

"We will meet again the day after the next full moon." Azala looked to me. "Please bring your delightful mate along again."

Why did everyone assume I planned on staying? No matter. I took her hand politely and repeated the formal greeting I'd learned when I first arrived, which they used to say goodbye as well.

Chapter 15: Krxare

I'd left my Clara with the other females when we'd returned, so I could finish putting the final touches on my nest. My rut was starting, having been triggered by the fight with the Vokiren male, and I felt hot and frustrated.

I needed to dunk myself into an icy river and cool off, but I didn't have the time. Not if I wanted to have my nest ready for Clara. The furs from yesterday were ready, but that wasn't enough. Aside from the soft, stretchy fabrics we used to clothe the females, we'd also traded for the cool-feeling satiny ones to use as sheets for our mating beds.

I scratched at the back of my neck and huffed at the discomfort of feeling like I was too large to fit into my own skin and was therefore suffocating. I'd experienced this every year since I'd become old enough, and yet every time, it was just as unbearable as the last. I hated it.

Of course, once I had a female in my arms, the torture eased, but only temporarily. It gave me reprieve only long enough for the female to leave and for me to find another. To prevent themselves from being affected by our pheromones too strongly, females on Kadri left once we were sated, keeping things transactional unless they wished to try for a mating bond.

Some females had tried to stay beside me beyond their welcome, wanting to hook themselves one of Kadri's Champions, but I'd asked them to leave. I'd never spent longer than I must with a female.

Even with the human females here, they were warned about our pheromones. They caused the body to produce oxytocin, a hormone common to many species in our galaxy, and it could be easily mistaken for love.

This would be my first time sharing my entire rut with one female. Clara.

The only female who would matter from now until the day I ceased to live. It would also be the first rut I'd spent in a nest.

I turned on the small construction lights and set the power so that they lit my den dimly. The females had called them *fairy lights* when we'd used them to decorate for the holiday they called Christmas. The others seemed to enjoy them very much, and I hoped Clara would too.

There was a small kitchen area so I could cook for my mate. During a rut, my body no longer felt hunger. We did not eat and could only sleep for an hour or so after our lust was sated, but our females still needed sustenance. The cold box was stocked with enough easy-to-make food to last Clara until the end of the rut.

There was an area for our personal business, and if we wanted to go for a dip in the hot springs to clean up, there was one just around the corner from the cave entrance. It was one of the reasons I'd chosen this location.

In the middle of our nest was the mating bed, piled high with pillows and furs. The new sheets were satiny and fresh and felt luxurious on the skin. Just touching them cooled the urgent heat for a second.

Sheer fabric with threads of silver and gold woven into it hung from the cave walls, softening the hard look of rock and metal. Piles of gems from the nearby deposit decorated the room; the largest gems were the size of my fists. Smaller stones were strung up around the lights, which reflected off them in many beautiful colors.

The gems were the only things of true value here. Any female on Kadri would take one look at this nest and scoff. But Clara wasn't from Kadri. Perhaps this, combined with my prowess at pleasing her, would be enough.

There was one thing missing: the food replicator, in case we didn't want to cook—and for her precious coffee. I'd learned already that my Clara did not function well before her morning cup.

I had wanted to bring my weapons as well, as those had high value, but the mated males had convinced me not to. They'd assured me that adding my weapons to the nest would not help me to woo my female, despite their worth.

I jumped down off the ledge into the air, spreading my wings as I fell. I

scanned the area, looking for something, but what? A fight? The rut was closer than I'd thought. My skin crawled with the inexplicable need, and I couldn't think straight at all.

Landing in front of my stronghold, I pushed through the guards in front and stomped toward my quarters, but before I could get there, I smelled Clara in the air.

Fuck the replicator. I needed her now. The nest would have to do.

I went in search of my mate, my skin crawling with need and a scowl on my face. I hoped she didn't frighten easily. I bet I looked terrifying right now, but I couldn't calm down, no matter how hard I tried.

I stalked through the hallways of the complex, first checking the female living quarters and recreational room. Not seeing her there, I headed over to the common areas. I finally found her outside in the valley with a group of other females.

They sat on benches as they watched a group of my soldiers training. One of the females had a display pad open with a language lesson. I knew many of the females were trying to learn our written language. The devices they'd been given on their way here only provided verbal translations of our and the Vokiren languages, and many of the females wanted to learn and read from our ship's archives.

We were lucky enough to have brought along much of our culture. We might never see Kadri again, but we had the vast knowledge of many who had come before us hidden away in our ships and ready to be displayed to anyone willing to learn.

Several of the females watched my soldiers intently, practically drooling over their perfect movements and physiques. Clara spoke to her friend, a radiant smile on her face. She looked truly relaxed and content. It was the first time I'd seen her like this, and my heart filled with joy at the thought that she was happy here.

This was my mate. This smiling, happy female sitting with her friends in the middle of my stronghold, protected by my army, was my mate. How had I gotten so lucky?

The joy didn't last. The irritation returned moments later when one of my

males, Drnak, joined the group. Drnak had always been aggressive with the females, both back home on Kadri and ever since we'd welcomed the humans into our stronghold. Unlike some of us, he claimed he wasn't looking for a mate but rather more females to warm his bed and add to his ever-growing list. I wondered if that was just a front so he wouldn't be disappointed when the females left afterward.

He sat down right next to my mate, then red filled my vision as he reached his arm up in an exaggerated motion and wrapped it around Clara's shoulders.

I let out a low growl and stomped toward the group sitting on the other side of the training field.

"I'm not interested," Clara said, leaning away from him. "I'm supposed to be already mated."

"I don't recognize you. You must be new here. That means whoever claimed you as his mate never brought you up to his aerie. By the rules, you're still fair game. Maybe you'd like to see what other Kadrixan males have to offer before you tie yourself down to just one." He flexed the bicep that wasn't resting on my Clara's shoulder.

Clara looked around anxiously, still leaning away from him. Our eyes met, and I saw relief in them until she realized my state.

Drnak leaned a little bit closer, not noticing as I crossed the much-too-long field. Then, his gaze changed, looking more feral and needy. I knew what was happening; his rut was starting. "You do smell exquisite," he growled at her.

Clara stood, pushing him away ineffectively. "I said I'm not interested."

The females around her were on alert now. The few who had spent ruts with us before looked ready to step in, while the others were frightened and confused.

"Maybe you're the one," the warrior said, not hearing her words or even noticing the tension around them. He had one thought now, and it was directed toward Clara.

My Clara.

With a growl, I leaped into the group, pulling Drnak away from my female.

"I saw her first," he growled. He head-butted me and wrestled out of my grip. The warriors here all respected me, but when the rut started there was no such thing as rank.

Around us, the females gasped and sprang away, including my Clara.

"Clara is mine," I growled through gritted teeth. "I dropped to my knees for her."

"Then why have you not taken her to your aerie? She is fair game as long as she is here." His fist shot out, but I expertly dodged out of his way.

Heat and frustration filled my head, which was too hot to form a proper answer; my scalp tingled, and my skin itched. I snarled and lashed out at him.

"What's going on?" I barely heard Clara's words. "We need to stop them. They're really fighting."

"It's the rut. The heat is on them already. I thought we had a few more days."

I didn't know who spoke, nor did I care. I had one target. I sent another punch in his direction, landing it squarely on his shoulder.

"...see a lot more fights..."

Drnak kicked and I rolled out of the way, just barely. The tips of his claws caught the side of my arm, and four thin lines appeared, seeping blood. I roared and lunged at the male, claws extended.

"...separate them and..."

In the back of my head, I knew that this was a friend, a fellow soldier, but the heat in my brain refused to let me think. I needed something.

The females were still speaking, but I no longer understood the words.

Several pairs of hands pulled me back from my opponent, holding me in place. I snapped at them, trying to break out of their hold.

"*Krxare.*" That single word broke through the red haze and made me pause.

She was here. My mate.

The violence that controlled my body changed, morphing into something else: a need. A hunger.

I whipped around to face the voice as the hands holding me back released me.

Clara stood feet from me, her hands outstretched. Fear from the fight she'd witnessed still filled her eyes, and she shook as if terrified.

Chapter 16: Clara

This was the rut, and it turned gentlemen into monsters. I'd caught a glimpse of it back at the Vokiren tree village, but Krxare had been partially in control then. He had none now; that was clear from the untamed fire burning in his eyes.

"The others can break them up and hold them back, but not for long. And soon, every Kadrixan will be in the rut. You have to lure him away. It's our job to stop them from killing each other."

Kill. They had explained this to me. All of a sudden, I realized how much these Kadrixan warriors really needed us. I remembered an old documentary I saw once about how some animals on Earth fought to the death during mating season. That was what was happening here. We were literally keeping them from killing each other.

Krxare was terrifying. He was every bit the beast I'd imagined when I first arrived.

Penelope took my hands and looked me right in the eye. "I'll take the other guy, and you take your mate."

I remembered the feeling of power as Krxare had calmed under my hands earlier, but he'd still been in control then. The monster in front of me? I wasn't even sure he knew his own name with how far gone he looked.

I peered over Penelope's shoulder at the snarling and feral red beast. I could barely recognize him, and he hadn't even shifted like the Vokiren.

The Kadrixan males who'd been sparring in the ring had finally noticed the fight. They jumped in between the two and pulled them apart. How none of them got scratched or punched in the process was impressive. They'd clearly had experience breaking up fights.

Penelope was right. The other warriors were able to pull them apart, but the two males did not calm. Even now, they fought against the very people who were trying to save their lives.

“They aren’t human, Clara. Don’t judge them as if they are. This is natural to them, so they can’t help it.”

It was the truth. I could see it in the tortured way Krxare fought the warriors trying to separate them.

“He won’t hurt you. They don’t fight with females. Trust me. It’s the last thing they want to do to us, if you catch my drift.”

Oh, I caught her drift, alright. That feral beast wanted to mount me and fuck me.

Penelope acted first, bravely reaching for the stranger. The moment she touched him, he calmed and his eyes cleared as if finally seeing the world around him. His eyes focused on her, and something in them changed.

“Let me take care of you,” Penelope said fearlessly.

Those were the only words I heard before the huge warrior picked her up and carried her toward the stronghold. Everyone bounced out of their way, giving them ample room to pass.

That left only Krxare. A very angry and snarling Krxare.

I swallowed hard and glanced around. Everyone was waiting for me to act. One of the guys holding Krxare growled as if trying to hold himself back from starting a fight of his own. The warrior next to him tensed.

Shit. We were about to have another problem if I didn’t act now. These rutting Kadrixans were like dominos: set one off, and they all fall down. Every second counted.

I had to do this.

I reached out my hand, unable to dredge up the courage to step in and touch Krxare as I had earlier. “*Krxare.*”

Krxare changed immediately. His eyes cleared for just a second as he searched for me. Then, the violence and anger boiling in them turned into something else. Lust. Lust for me.

He turned to me and the others let him.

One step.

Two steps.

His next step had him right in front of me and scooping me up into his arms.

“MINE.”

Then, for the first time, I watched as his wings unfurled behind him completely. He was magnificent and terrifying all at once. One moment we were in the valley, and the next, we were airborne.

I gasped and clung to him.

“I will not drop you, little treasure.”

We rose higher in the air with every beat of his powerful wings, then he headed toward one of the tallest peaks.

Oh god! I'd never had a problem with heights, but this was something else. It made the potential fall from the canopy of the trees earlier look like nothing. I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Wrap your arms and legs around me,” he demanded, maneuvering my body easily.

I wrapped my legs around him. My arms were already wrapped so tightly around his neck I wondered if he could even breathe.

“Relax, my mate. I will never drop you. You are mine to protect.”

The position brought back the same sensations as it had earlier when we'd been swinging from tree to tree. Except this time, we rubbed against each other with every wing beat, and his hands were free. I knew this because they were gripping my ass and pressing us together, rolling my hips against his.

“Oh.” The sound escaped from my lips as my entire body lit up with need.

I turned my head, searching for his lips. He tilted his head to meet me halfway, and just as every time before, his touch turned my knees to jelly. Luckily, I was already in the air and had no need to stand.

His forked tongue moved deftly in my mouth, claiming all it touched. Suddenly, all I could think of was what that tongue could do elsewhere.

I was drowning in lust. Krxare never just kissed me; he consumed me. He filled me with so much want and desire I didn't know what to do. There was only one thing to do. I ground against the hard bar at the front of his pants and moaned into his mouth. His cock pressed hard against the leather between us and I bumped up against it with each movement of my hips.

Maybe it was his rut rubbing off on me, but I needed him. I needed him now.

"Please," I whimpered. I wasn't beyond begging now.

It felt as if every moment we'd been together had been foreplay for this, for now, for the rut. I was ready. So ready, I was dry humping him high up in the air.

Krxare's tail wrapped around my leg, the flat, triangular tip teasing at my inner thigh. I still wore my leggings, but the soft material barely dampened the sensation as I felt the vibrations right through them.

I barely registered him landing high on a ledge near the top of a snowy peak. A few steps later, he threw me into the middle of a round bed. I landed with a gasp, but the bed was soft and the sheets were made of the luxurious satiny material they'd traded for earlier.

He looked at me and frowned. Rough hands gripped my leggings by the waist and tore them off, taking my underwear with them. Then, he did the same to the tunic. He looked down at me again, admiring his handiwork.

"There. Much better." He licked his lips, his tongue darting past his sharp teeth.

His pants came off next. I'd caught glimpses of his cock erect before, but never this hard and this huge. I licked my lips. I wasn't sure if I could take all of him, but I was willing to try. His cock was massive, with a thick, flared head. The shaft had vertical ribs that twisted around in a spiral. I'd noticed those spirals before, but now that he was rock-hard, they were extremely pronounced.

I reached for him, taking him into my hands to admire what a beautiful

cock it was. There was a drop of precum at the tip beckoning to me. I licked it, and his delicious musky flavor exploded on my tongue. I loved it, just like everything else his body made me feel.

“Enough,” he growled. “Explore later. My need for you is too great.”

He pushed me back down onto the bed firmly with one giant clawed hand. Then, lifting me by the knees, he dragged me to the edge of the bed. Before he was on me like a man starved. He started at my throat, lavishing it with nibbles and kisses.

My fingers danced over the mass of muscles covering his shoulders and slipped under his folded wings to his back. I loved the feel of him. I loved how every muscle moved and rippled.

He lowered his attention to my breasts. One hand cupped a breast, his claws digging possessively into my flesh, hard enough to sting but not enough to break the skin. The sensation, the bite of pain, added an extra layer to what he was doing with his mouth.

His talented tongue circled my nipple before pinching it, each side of the bifurcation moving on its own. I moaned and dragged my nails up his scalp until I reached the perfect handlebars that were his horns.

I wrapped my fingers around them as he hissed. I loved how he reacted to my touch. To think, I had all this control even though he was more than twice my mass. I gave his horns a tug like I was jerking them off, and his whole body stiffened, his claws tightening on my skin.

He lifted his head. Then, taking both my wrists into one of his massive hands, he held them to the mattress above my head.

“I need control,” he rasped. “I’m needy. Wild. I want you too much.”

With my hands pinned, he focused on my body again. This time with his tail. He started at my belly and worked his way down between my legs. I bucked my hips, urging him to move faster, every nerve ending eager for his touch.

I moaned and closed my eyes when he finally covered my clit with the flat tip.

“Open your eyes,” he demanded. “I want to watch you come for me.”

My eyes popped open and were met by his fiery orbs. They glowed with a preternatural flame, and I was instantly lost in their swirling depths. He released my wrists and dragged his claws lightly down my body. All the while, the tip of his tail rolled and vibrated against me.

With his eyes still on me, he lowered his head as his tail slid over the seam of my pussy. It parted my folds and thrust in, the tip rolling up to slide into me. I cried out and tossed my head back.

Then his mouth was there, replacing his tail on my clit. He licked me expertly, swirled around, and applied pressure on both sides with his forked tongue. My fingers tangled in the sheets, gripping them tightly as the pressure built.

Then, just when I thought it couldn't get any better, his tail found a spot inside me that shook my entire world. I tossed my head from side to side as if trying to avoid the inevitable tumble down the cliff I was climbing. My whole body hummed with pleasure.

Then I was there, at the precipice. I cried out, sobbing his name into our nest.

Krxare repositioned me higher on the bed easily, lifting me as if I were as light as a feather. Then he was on me, surrounding me, as he replaced his tail with his cock.

Oh god! Even dripping with how wet he'd made me, he felt impossibly large. What had I done?

Chapter 17: Krxare

“Relax, little treasure.” I strained to maintain control, to go slow and let her get used to me.

She was tiny and tight. I’d felt it with how hard she’d squeezed my tail, but she was soaking wet, and I knew if I went slow she could take me. Fate would never be so cruel as to give us mates we could not enter.

I covered her with my body, keeping as much contact as I could. I would produce the right pheromones to help her relax and take me. When I pushed in a little more, her pussy relaxed to take a few more inches of me.

“Good girl.”

Once more, I pulled out slightly before pushing again. Again, she took more of me.

Our ridges were built to give females pleasure, and as they rubbed against her insides, she moaned. She let go of the sheets and reached for me, clawing her dull nails into my back. I grunted and thrust into her again, this time a little harder. She cried out, a mixed look of pleasure and pain on her face. Her fingers tightened on me, making me want to drive into her hard, but I resisted, giving her time to get used to me.

“I’m good. I promise,” she whispered.

“I do not want to hurt you.” Some pain with pleasure was good, but not if I injured her.

“You won’t. You feel so good. Please.”

I growled at her words and started to move, thrusting into her slowly at first, then, as her body accepted me, faster. She was so hot and tight; it was everything I could do to keep moving. She was perfect. Every squeeze of her

silken channel threatened to be my undoing.

She moved her hands, sliding them up to my horns to squeeze and stroke them. She knew how good that felt for me and used it to her advantage.

It was too much. Everything was too much: the sound of her cries, the feel of her nails scratching lightly at my horns, the squeeze of her cunt. I let the beast take over.

I rutted into her, thrusting and pushing deep with every movement. She cried out again and again, but I didn't let up. I continued pounding into her, claiming her, until she was sobbing under me.

I gritted my teeth when her channel milked me, the muscles clenching repeatedly. The sensation pulled me over the edge and I came, pouring my seed into her. The world around me ceased to exist, and for a moment there was only her, my beautiful mate.

The sounds of our cries and roars echoed in the nest and faded into nothing as I held myself over her, careful not to crush her under my weight. She was still shaking when I rolled to my side and arranged her in my arms.

We stayed there together as spring mountain air cooled our bodies.

Clarity finally returned to my brain, but I knew these moments would be rare and fleeting, so if I wanted to sleep, now was the time. I had a short window, a few hours at most, before the heat returned, demanding me to rut again. By tomorrow, I'd become the way I was earlier: angry, horny, and looking for a fight.

While our own release helped with the rut a bit, it had to be in conjunction with the female's orgasm. Without that, the heat returned almost immediately. The rut was, after all, entirely about the continuation of our species, and Kadrixan females could not conceive without peaking.

I pulled Clara into my body. She was already half-asleep, and her eyelids fluttered open slowly.

"Hi," she said, smiling lazily back at me.

"Hello, little treasure." I stroked her hair as she closed her eyes again. "Rest. You will need it."

She yawned. "Does that mean you promise to do that again when we

wake up?”

“I promise to do that whenever you want. I enjoy you writhing under me and shouting my name.” The sexy sounds she made would be forever inked into my brain. I wanted to hear them every day of my life.

She chuckled and cuddled back into my body, her form fitting perfectly into mine. Soon, with my arms around her, her breathing slowed and she slept.

Clara had yet to comment on the nest, probably because she hadn't had the chance to look it over. That was a common occurrence. The rut demanded to be calmed before it gave either participant a chance to breathe and enjoy the scenery.

It gave those with less-impressive nests a chance to show their worth as bed partners, though many females back home only cared about how well we'd stocked our bowers. According to the lucky warriors who had already found mates, these human females cared less about how we decorated our nests and more about how we treated them.

I hope my violent outburst earlier hadn't discouraged Clara. I had very little control over it. The only way to prevent fighting between males during the rut was to make sure we were separated. That was how we'd tried to survive the first year away from home: by locking ourselves in our chambers on our ships.

We'd programmed the ships to keep all doors closed for ten days once the first of our members entered the rut. It had worked until near the end. The things we'd brought to keep us entertained had been useless, and we'd spent days breaking down our doors instead.

We'd made sure to remove all weapons from our rooms, then stored them locked in the armory. Without weapons, breaking down the doors had been difficult but not impossible, especially with the single-minded determination of a male in rut.

The Stars must have taken pity on us, because by the time most of us had broken from our confines, the rut was nearly over. We'd lost a few warriors to fighting and there were many injuries, but most of us had survived. With the rut waning, the crews were able to stop all but the deadliest of the

fight.

My claws had been worn down to the quick from mindlessly scratching the walls and doors, and some of my males had cracked their horns. It was worth it, especially since the Stars had guided us to the human settlement. With human females just a hop of a shuttle-ride away, the choice had been clear.

I glanced down at the tiny female in my arms. Clara was a gift from the Stars, and now it was my job to do everything in my power to keep her. Their colony had added the stipulation that if any females decided not to stay at the end of the rut, we had no right to them. Agreeing to that had been a mistake.

The thought of losing my Clara now was unbearable. Perhaps it was time to renegotiate the contract, having the females live with us for the entire year before deciding.

The first time new females had witnessed our behavior, they'd cringed and shied away from us, as if we'd finally shown the monsters we were. Men in their culture were supposed to be meek and gentlemanly. We were violent, rutting beasts.

That first year, however, when they'd realized that they were ultimately the ones with all the power, things had changed. Not every female recognized their power at first, but some did. They had the power to either let us die fighting among ourselves or to save us.

Many had chosen the latter. What could have been a massacre had ended better than we'd thought possible.

Some of the females, however, never came around. A few had chosen to return to their colony—to their civilized males—despite having nothing to their names. Others stayed here with us because there was food and a place to live, but they hid during the rut. I hoped those females would eventually come around, though.

I looked up at the lights strung overhead. Dimmed from their usual brightness, they did remind me of stars in the night sky. I stretched, pushing off the fur covering my legs and letting the cool mountain air refresh me.

Then, with the heat of the rut calmed and my mate in my arms, I closed

my eyes.

I woke to Clara climbing out of bed. It was late in the evening, and our nest was only lit by the tiny lights. We'd missed dinner, though my body felt no hunger except for hunger for her.

"It's chilly." She rubbed at her arms. "Where can I use the bathroom?"

The translator told me that she wasn't looking for a place to bathe but rather a place to do her natural business. I led her around the corner to the separate room.

"When you're done, we can clean up in the hot spring," I offered. The spring evening air was cool, and a dip in the hot mineral-rich waters would be ideal.

"Hot spring?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"There is one nearby. I'll need to fly us there."

"Great! I've never been in one before."

A few minutes later, we were ready to go. I lifted her, still naked, into my arms and leaped from the ledge, careful to control the initial drop so it wasn't as severe. She clung to me and squeaked. The hot spring was just on the other face of the peak, and we arrived shortly. I landed and walked into the water with Clara still in my arms.

"Oooh." The look on her face as the water, heated to just the right temperature, hit her skin was worth flying many more miles to get here. "It's wonderful."

I found a ledge and sat down, bringing her into my lap. The mineral-rich water was buoyant, and she floated back up to the surface with a laugh. She turned her body to face me and planted a loud kiss on my lips.

"Thanks for bringing me here. It's wonderful. This whole mountain is full of wonders. I can't believe I could've spent my entire life not experiencing it."

I collected her floating body back into my lap and locked her in place with my arms. “Stay with me after the rut, and I will show you many more wondrous things and places.”

She looked up at me through dark lashes. “When I first decided to come here, I was sure I’d leave at the end of the rut, but now I’m not so sure.”

I recalled her talk with her brother. I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but my hearing was good, and despite her speaking into the device for privacy, I’d heard every word. Her brother had offered her a place to stay when she returned to the colony.

“Surely what I can offer you here is much better than the colony. You do not enjoy your life there.” I failed to mention what I’d seen in her file; she had less than nothing to her name.

She blew out a breath, her face halfway under the water so that bubbles rose to the surface. “It is better here. And you’re right. I don’t like the way the colony is run.” She didn’t say any more, leaving the possibility of her leaving open-ended.

Not wanting to push her, I focused on the here and now. With her naked body so close to me, I was ready to fuck her again. Clara must have had the same idea, because her hands were all over me.

I stood from the ledge I’d been sitting on and guided her to it. “Get on your knees here.”

She did, wiggling her hips, with her hands on the green moss padding the edge of the spring. I pushed her chest down onto the soft moss, and the sight of her ass up in the air was enough for the heat to return full force.

I gripped a rounded cheek, giving it a squeeze. “This is mine.” I reached around her body to cup her pussy, careful to press with the pads of my fingers and not my claws. “And this is mine too. All mine.”

“Yes,” Clara hissed.

She might not want to stay with me forever now, but by the time I was done with her, she’d never want to leave.

Chapter 18: Clara

The smell of food cooking filled our tiny nest, and my stomach growled. Krxare was making me dinner in the makeshift kitchen, and I couldn't wait to dig in. I was ravenous.

Whoever denied that sex was a form of exercise had clearly never taken part in a Kadrixan rut. With some of the positions we'd been in, I was surprised I hadn't pulled any muscles. Not every time was an athletic affair; some of our lovemaking was slow and sensual. Krxare was an attentive lover and made sure I was thoroughly satisfied each and every time.

Despite his exertion, Krxare barely ate. I worried about him, but he assured me it was normal. During the rut, his body focused on nothing other than sex and fighting. He had no appetite, though he did get down a few pieces of meat when I fed him.

It wasn't just sex between us either. We talked a lot too.

I learned about how his warriors had been exiled for failing to follow the Empress's orders. The Empress's mother had been known as the Usurper Queen and had garnered much hatred from some of the regions she'd conquered. When the current Empress had taken the throne after her mother's death, she'd sent her armies to quell the dissension.

Krxare had arrived at a tiny moon expecting to face guerrilla fighters. Instead, they'd found angry farmers and their starving families, their soil and flocks poisoned for refusing to give up their land. There were minerals to be mined on the moon. If the Usurper Queen's loyalty had been bought by the corporate credits, then her daughter had been spoon-fed them from birth.

"There were children with their horns still coming in fighting alongside their families. We could not in good conscience mow them down as we'd

been told to do.” Krxare’s face had gone dark as he told the story. “It was my decision, but they punished my entire force.”

“Your warriors respect you still,” I’d said. “You made the right decision.”

He’d asked about the colony and my life there. I told him about the happy moments when my parents were still alive but avoided the last few years. The wounds were still too fresh.

Then, there were the moments when we did nothing at all, like the night we’d spent on the ledge outside the nest staring at the stars. I’d never in my lifetime thought I’d be lying feet from the edge of a cliff and totally relaxed, but I knew I was safe with Krxare.

The eighth day—I wasn’t counting, but I was sure it was eight—with Krxare had been total bliss, and I dreaded going back to life at the colony. I didn’t know what I wanted anymore. I was starting to really care about, and dare I say, love Krxare.

People left their old families behind to start new ones all the time. My grandparents had left everything and everyone back on Earth to start a new life here. It wouldn’t be any different than that, and the stronghold was on the same planet. I could call Chris anytime I wanted.

I thought of the happy faces I’d seen on the women living here on my first day. I’d been suspicious at the time, but now I understood. Life really was better here. The ones who’d gone back to the colony simply hadn’t given it a chance. Without an open mind, even paradise would seem like a jail cell.

Krxare returned with a platter of food. It smelled delicious and looked like porridge with breadsticks on the side. The breadstick-like items were some sort of fried dough with a meat paste inside. Very tasty. I’d had those before a few days ago, but the noodles were new and looked nothing like the ones I’d had the first day. And, there was something sprinkled on top of it and... they were moving!

I gawked at the moving pieces. “I think they’re still alive.”

Krxare was quiet for a moment, then exploded into a throaty laugh. “The flakes are pieces of shaved, cured meat. The meat is salty and strong-tasting, so we shave it finely and add it on top of our food. The steam from the food makes it curl and move.” He pushed the platter closer to me. “I assure you;

it is not alive.”

Thank goodness! I wasn't sure I could eat something that was still moving.

The porridge wasn't sweet, as I'd expected, but savory. It was filled with a variety of meats. And the moving flakes? They were good too. A bit salty, but that added depth to the dish. I'd realized shortly after coming here that Kadrixan cuisine was mostly meat-based. It made sense, considering they were built like predators and had a lot of lean muscles to maintain.

That didn't mean they were total carnivores though. They always had a sweet component to every meal. This time it was the small trio of sticky, syrup-covered spheres. Surprisingly, the Kadrixans typically ate the sweets between salty courses instead of eating them last as we did for dessert. It helped to increase their appetites.

The food was filling, and I only managed to eat half of it before I was stuffed. I offered some to Krxare, but again he refused.

He guided me to our super-comfy bed and pulled me into his lap. He had that look in his eyes again, like he was hot and bothered and couldn't think straight. But the thing that really gave it away was his cock, which rose hot and hard between our bodies.

Ruts must not be much fun for the males of his species; he barely got time to rest. I was glad I was here to help him, but the body could only handle so much, and right now, every muscle in my body hurt as if it were the day after leg day, but all over.

Something must have given away my soreness.

“You are in pain.” Concern filled his face. “Tell me where it hurts.”

“Everywhere?” I laughed. “But you didn't hurt me or anything. I'm just very sore.” I put my hands up. “I'm not complaining, I swear. I've been enjoying it, but I'm kind of new to the whole days-long-sex-marathon thing. I'm out of shape.”

His look of concern turned to one of understanding. “Ruts can be very hard on the body.” He gestured to the bed. “Lie down. I will get the salve and give you a massage.”

“Ooh. A massage sounds perfect.” I worried about how that would work

with his claws, but I trusted he had a technique.

I lay down on the bed on my stomach, and Krxare soon joined me, straddling my hips. He started by smoothing an herbal-smelling salve on my skin. The salve started to work immediately, relaxing my muscles.

He squeezed and kneaded at the sore muscles on my neck and shoulders with the pads of his fingers. I felt the indent of his claws on my skin, but it wasn't painful. In fact, it felt very good, and I couldn't stop the moan that escaped my lips.

He moved down to my back, and there, he used his rounded knuckles, which were also extremely effective. Soon I was as limp as a rag doll and floating on cloud nine. I suspected it wasn't just the salve but also the pheromones and hormones transferring from his hands to me.

And there lay one of the problems plaguing me. If his pheromones dictated how I felt, how did I know that this budding love for him was real? What if it was fake, brought on by a bunch of chemicals?

I knew it affected him as well. He'd dropped to his knees at the first touch of me that first day. What if that, too, was a trick of chemicals—a trick so convincing that he'd fallen for it hook, line, and sinker? I worried that one day he would come to his senses and realize there was nothing special about me at all.

What if I decided to stay here with him, and the pheromones stopped working, and we both woke up from this wonderful dream and realized we'd been tricked by our biology?

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You are tense again."

I decided to be honest. "Something's been bothering me. This whole pheromone thing. How do we know what we feel for each other is real and not just the result of some chemicals trying to get you to make little Kadrixan babies?"

"Do you want babies?"

I paused, shocked at his question. Was that even an option between us? We were different species. "I had no idea we could. Wait. Does that mean—" I tried to push myself up, but Krxare was still straddling me.

“All warriors in the Kadri army have their fertility turned off until they earn the right to reproduce. The rut makes it a necessity.”

“Oh,” I said, relieved.

Or was I? I imagined a little boy who looked like Krxare; any kid of his must be adorable but most likely a lot of trouble. I forced my head out of that line of thinking to focus back on my first question.

“I didn’t mean that, though. I’m talking about what I feel for you now, the connection, the closeness. How do I know it’s real and not just the pheromones faking it?”

“You can never tell completely, especially during a rut, but the pheromones only work if there is something there to work with. It can’t turn a female who hates me into one who loves me. It helps carve the path for a bond but cannot force one that isn’t there.” His hands started moving again, staying on my shoulders, where I kept all my stress.

So what I felt for Krxare was only enhanced by the pheromones, not created by them, and the same was true about how he felt about me. That was good.

I thought of my life back at the colony. The other women were right. There wasn’t much to go back to. I had Chris, but if he was doing well for himself and I was allowed to contact him anytime I wanted, then maybe staying here was the best choice after all.

Going back, I’d be a burden on my brother. I wouldn’t be able to find work, and while I didn’t eat that much, he’d have to take care of me.

I also didn’t have any friends left. Well, I’d never had close friends to begin with, and when I’d gotten fired, all my work buddies had stopped talking to me. Here, I had the start of some potentially lifelong friendships.

Yes. Staying here was the best choice. Once we were out of the rut, I’d give Chris a call and explain everything to him. He’d understand. He’d always been very open-minded.

I rolled over onto my back and reached my arms out to Krxare, who came down over my body immediately for a kiss.

It felt good to have finally made a decision, and I wanted to celebrate with

my super sexy mate.

Chapter 19: Krxare

Clara gazed up at the fairy lights as she lay on our mating bed. The last handful of days we'd shared together had been magical, and she had already started to imprint on me as my mate, even though she'd yet to agree to stay.

I still worried that Clara did not approve of the nest I'd made for her. No female from Kadri in her right mind would accept so little. She'd been here for days but had yet to make any comments that would give away her thoughts on it.

Unable to wait quietly any longer, I blurted out, "What do you think of our nest?"

She turned to me, looking amused. Then she glanced around the nest as if she hadn't already been living in it for days.

"It's comfy and clean, and I like the lights. They give it a homey feel."

It wasn't what I'd been looking for, though I had no idea what exactly I was looking for, having never taken a female to a nest before. I knew my nest wasn't particularly impressive, considering I'd had so little time to prepare. I just knew that I wanted her to stay.

Frustrated, I sat down on the bed next to her. A Kadrixan female would understand the question. How did I explain to her what I was really asking?

Clara sat up next to me. "I talked to Tasha a bit. She told me that in your culture, the nest is a big thing. Something significant, but I didn't have time to ask more about it. That first day, you told me about a male flying his mate up to the nest and keeping her until she agrees to stay with him. I know you've been working hard to furnish this place before the rut, but that is all I know."

I frowned, realizing that, to Clara, this was just another pretty place I'd taken her to. She didn't understand the significance because I hadn't told her.

"The nest is supposed to be like a proposal. This is why we only bring those we wish to spend the rest of our lives with. On Kadri, females expect an aerie filled with treasures, artifacts, and gems we've collected over our lifetimes. It is a promise that we have enough material wealth to care for her and our future family. It is the first and most important criteria of whether she stays or not."

I looked around my meager nest. Perhaps it had been for the best that she hadn't known. What would she think of this place now?

"So it's like showing your date the amount of money in your identity chip. Except a lot more elaborate and with more steps." She laughed. "And this works with your females?"

"It is expected. I had a beautiful nest in Kadri." My face fell, realizing there was no point in telling her of a nest I no longer owned.

She pulled me down onto the bed next to her. "And what are the other criteria your females look for?"

"There is our ability to support and care for them emotionally. Do our pheromones work on them properly? Are we a good match genetically? And finally, are we good at pleasing them sexually and therefore capable of producing heirs?"

Her hands, which had been rubbing my scalp, stopped. "Back up. How does pleasing them sexually have anything to do with producing heirs?"

"Female Kadrixans cannot conceive without orgasms." I'd been surprised to find out it was uncommon among other species. "Males are taught many skills to achieve this."

"Well, that explains a lot." Her hands started massaging my head again. "When you asked me what I thought about the nest, you were asking if I wanted to stay."

"Affirmative." I wanted to be nervous for her answer, but her fingers didn't let me as they moved closer to the base of my horns. It was as if she

had full control of me with just a few flicks of her fingers.

“I like it here,” she said, leaning over to give my horns a kiss. “No, not just like. I love it here. Not because of how much your nest is worth, but because you did everything you could to pull it together in a few days. How well you can care for me goes beyond your nest; the entire stronghold is a testament to your ability to provide.” She cupped my face with her palms and looked me in the eyes. “I have no doubts about your ability to care for me.”

I wanted to roar in triumph, but she had not yet said she would stay.

“And the other criteria?” I asked.

“Pass and pass. Your pheromones are most definitely working. They calm me when I’m scared or worried and make me want to jump your bones whenever I can. Whenever I’m around you, I feel a sense that I’m cared for, loved even.” She looked away, almost shy.

“I do love you,” I said. “I know it is hard for females to understand since you do not feel the bond as males do, but I’ve loved you since the moment we met, and I will love you until the stars stop shining.”

She threw herself at me, hugging me, and I hugged her back.

“I’m staying, Krxare. I decided it yesterday already, but now I know for sure.” Her voice cracked, and the last words were said through happy tears. “I’m happy here with you, and I’m staying.”

This time, I roared aloud in triumph. Clara was mine, and today was officially the happiest day of my life.

She hadn’t said she loved me yet, but that took time, even with Kadrixan females. She was staying. That was all that mattered. Now I had the rest of our lives to earn her love.

Chapter 20: Clara

The phone rang four times before someone picked up, but instead of Chris's familiar voice, a strange female answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Um. I'm looking for Chris."

"Oh." The woman on the other line paused for a moment before continuing. "I'm sorry, honey. This isn't his number anymore. This is the number for my new baby boy. I'm so, so sorry."

No. This couldn't be. Residents of the colony didn't just change their contact numbers. Our contact numbers were ours to keep for life. They were linked to the chips installed into our arms as children; our contact number was a part of us. The only time it was given to someone else was when—I didn't allow myself to finish the thought.

"No." My voice sounded strange and distant. "There must be a mistake. My brother's not dead."

"He was your brother," the other woman replied awkwardly on the other end. Then, after another long silence, "I'm sorry for your loss." Then she hung up.

Something wasn't right. There was no way Chris was dead. He had no illnesses that I knew of, and his finances were stable. I refused to believe that I was alone in the world now.

"Clara, are you OK?" Tasha watched me with concern. "You're just standing there shaking your head." Then she noticed the phone in my hand. "What happened?"

"My-my brother. He was fine when I talked to him before the rut. The lady

just told me it's not his number anymore." My head kept shaking as if I were a bobblehead. "I don't believe it."

"Was he upset when you talked to him?"

"No. He told me I could stay with him when I got back and to call him before I left. I was calling to tell him I was staying here. He told me to call him." The last few words were nearly a shout, and the other women and warriors in the room turned to look at us.

Tasha put an arm around me. "Okay, this *is* a little suspicious. Especially if he had no illnesses or financial problems. It's not like on Earth, where people died in traffic accidents. Does he have any friends you can call?"

Why hadn't I thought of that? "Yeah. He lived with a roommate. They were pretty close. They went to school together."

I dialed Mark's number and he picked up almost immediately.

"Mark. It's Clara."

"Shit. I...I...um...I'm really busy right now and *can't talk on the phone*. Why don't we meet up?"

"Um. I can't come to you. I'm—" I hesitated before I said, "I'm somewhere far away."

"I know. I was there, remember? Come and visit me whenever you can. *We need to talk.*"

"Okay, but—"

"Maybe when you come by, you can pick something up for the *potluck*." He stressed the last word.

I froze. Potluck. Chris had told Mark about our secret pet years later, and I knew they still used it as some sort of code.

I turned to Tasha. "I need to get back to the colony; something is up for sure, but Mark insisted he couldn't talk on the phone and that I needed to go see him, and he said we needed to talk, and it sounded like he meant it." The words tumbled out of my mouth in one long run-on sentence.

"If he thinks you can't talk on the phone, it must mean he believes he's being watched. But why? What could your brother have done?"

“Nothing!” I exclaimed. “He has his thoughts about the colony, but don't we all? He wouldn't have done anything. He's not the type to.” But I wasn't sure about that. He'd always been adamant he'd do anything to get Ella back.

“I didn't mean to suggest he did anything wrong.”

“I'm sorry, Tasha. I'm just really stressed right now.”

I needed to get back to the colony and find out what had happened to my brother. But what about Krxare? And our mate bond? I wanted to stay so badly, but not at the cost of never seeing my brother again.

I'd told Krxare I wanted to stay with him here. I was sure that if he found out about this mystery with my brother, he would insist on returning to the colony with me. Stepping foot into the colony would void the delicately-kept treaty between our people. Anyone living long enough in the colony knew there were nukes ready for the instant the alien monsters broke the truce. They were waiting for the moment the Kadrixans faltered to press that big, red button.

“I was going to stay here,” I said to no one in particular. “With Krxare.”

I didn't expect Tasha to reply, but she did. “You can always come back. Just request to return for the next rut. Or you can ask Krxare for help.”

I shook my head. “If Krxare knew about this, do you think he'd let me go back to find my brother?”

“No way. My mate would never let me back there, even if there wasn't anything fishy going on. This business with your brother? That's some surströmming-level of fishiness right there. Krxare would probably insist on heading to the colony himself to find out.”

“He'd get himself shot.” Panic rose as I imagined Krxare gunned down by a guard. “You know how those guys feel about the Kadrixans. And it would void the treaty.”

“Shit.” Her face turned pale. “I didn't think about that. Do you think it's true they have nukes pointed here waiting for the moment the Kadrixans mess up? I'd completely forgotten about those.”

“I don't want to be the reason we find out. I can't put you, Krxare, and

everyone else here in danger. Krxare can't know about this. This is my problem, and I have to fix it myself." As I said the words, I knew them to be true.

I had to find out what had happened to my brother, and I had to do it myself. These people here meant something to me now. I cared more about the stronghold than I did the colony, and I couldn't let anything endanger the people here.

"Then you'd better read that contract well. I think there's only one way for us to return to the colony. You need to say the right words when the representative gets here. I made sure to look it up, just in case, but we all know how that worked out."

She'd stayed and never looked back.

"You can do what Jenna did," she continued. "She went back to take care of her ailing mother, then she came back the next year for good."

I nodded. I could do that. "Then I will see you again next year."

She grinned. "I'm taking that as a promise. You better be back here, or else!"

Krxare would have to believe I was genuinely leaving him for the representative to take me back, but I wasn't going to leave him in the dark for the entire year. That would be cruel. I needed him to understand that I would return for him next year— sooner if I found another way back—and to wait for me. I left to find a pen and paper, or the Kadrixan equivalent, a much harder task than I'd thought, considering everyone used devices to communicate.

I doubted I would ever find anyone like him again, and I sure hoped that I was just as special to him.

Chapter 21: Krxare

I stood with my arms around my mate as we waited in front of the stronghold for the human representative to arrive.

My mate was nervous and quieter than normal. I imagined it was difficult to tell a representative of your people that you'd rather stay with aliens they considered monsters than return home. Especially since the representatives from their colony always made their society out to be a perfect utopia.

I knew better. None of the females sent to us had been happy there.

That was the determining factor in their returning to the colony. Once the representative arrived, all the females had to do to return with them on their shuttle was to say that they were not happy here.

Clara was happy here. She'd told me as much, and I'd seen it in her smile and heard it in her laughter. My Clara would say the other words instead. Three simple ones: I will stay.

"Krxare?" Clara looked up at me with an indecipherable look.

"Yes, little treasure?"

"Will you always be my mate?"

I frowned. Where was this question coming from? "Of course. I will, and you will always be mine."

"No matter what happens?"

"Nothing can break our bond." I was sure of it.

"That's good to know. My time here was the happiest I've had in a long time, and I want more than anything to stay here with you."

Something about the way she said it, with sadness in her voice, had an

uneasy lump starting in my throat. I tilted her chin to face me, but she pulled away before burrowing into my chest and giving me a big hug. Her words were everything I wanted to hear, but shouldn't she be happy to say these things, and not sad?

The colony shuttle arrived, and the representative stepped out. It was a new male, someone I hadn't met before. He looked around, trying to find a leader to communicate with. I sighed and stepped forward as Clara joined the group of females in line. This system had been set up by the females themselves in the first year. They wanted the representative at our stronghold for as short a time as possible, so they'd made it super-efficient for them to process who was staying and who was leaving.

Before long, we had the process going smoothly, with each female stepping up to the representative who held out a recorder as he brought up their file. One by one, the females made their choices.

I frowned again when I noticed that Clara was at the end of the line. So far, only one female had requested to return to her old life, despite having nothing to her name.

I held my breath as Clara stepped up to the human male. Her words repeated in my head. She was happier here, and she wanted nothing more than to stay.

"I am not happy here."

The words didn't make sense at first. When I finally understood, I snarled and stomped over to her, completely forgetting that we had many eyes on us. "You said you were staying. You told me you were happy."

She refused to meet my eyes, but she did reply, her voice monotone. "Remember every word I've said to you."

"You can't leave! You are my mate. You are—"

"The female has spoken," the representative cut in with a shaky voice.

I growled at him and he gasped, scrambling back to put space between us. Behind him, the four armed guards readied their weapons and exchanged glances, not knowing what to do.

Safely away from me, the representative spoke again. "Th-these are the

rules; y-you agreed to them. Th-th-the treaty.”

Vostak moved up beside me, but instead of standing there with me, he pulled me back. “Calm,” he whispered just loud enough for me. “Your female is distressed.”

I looked to Clara, and her face was no longer neutral. She had unshed tears in her eyes, and she shook. It hit me like a blaster shot to the chest and I stumbled back. When I approached her, she did not shy from me. I knelt at her feet, not caring how it looked to the colony representative. The other humans might as well not exist at this moment.

“Just remember my words to you,” she repeated, this time meeting my eyes. She looked in pain, as if forced by some invisible hand to make her choice.

I didn’t understand.

Her words to me. They were not the same as the ones she spoke now. What did I believe? She claimed she wanted to stay here more than anything else, but now that she was given the choice, she was leaving.

I considered picking her up and carrying her back to our nest and keeping her there until the colony shuttle left, but that would be considered a breach of the treaty. I wasn’t worried about the weapons they had aimed in our direction destroying us; we had shields they couldn’t penetrate. We wouldn’t come to harm, but the same couldn’t be said about the life around us. We would also lose access to more females for our next rut.

Then, tearfully, Clara stepped around me, and my heart sank as I watched her disappear into the shuttle.

Chapter 22: Clara

I was surprised when I found out the Kadrixans had paid for all of my debts in the form of extra ore. There was enough money in my account to live well for the entire year.

Krxare. Krxare had done this for me, even while believing I had left him. I hated what I'd done to him. Seeing him so distraught made me absolutely miserable. My only hope now was that he would find the note I'd left for him in his quarters soon.

Moments before we lifted off, one of the guards had shown up with my backpack. He'd grabbed my arm roughly and held my identity chip over some kind of lock holding my pack closed. He pulled hard at the fastening, but it didn't budge.

"Stupid fucking lock," he swore. He held a lie detector in front of me. "Do you know how to open this?"

"No," I said softly.

He swore again when the detector didn't beep and tossed the locked backpack at me angrily. I eyed the new lock, though I didn't dare try to open it until I was alone.

The flight went by faster than I'd expected, and they processed me and Priya, the only other woman who'd decided to come back, out of the facility hastily. We soon found ourselves standing alone on the curb.

"I thought they'd give us back our phones, at least." Priya looked ready to cry. "How am I supposed to call my mom or go home? I have nothing left." Her mother must be the reason why she'd chosen to come back.

"I have some money in my account. Let me transfer you enough to get home," I offered.

We took a seat on the bench as we waited for the public rail to arrive. It was the middle of the night, and we'd just missed the last one, which meant it would be a long wait.

We held our wrists close together, and soon, she had enough to get to her mom's place and pick up some groceries if she needed. Then, I held up my pack to figure out how to get inside. It was Priya who suggested pressing my thumb to a separate patch on the bag that I hadn't noticed before. It didn't look like a sensor, at least not the ones we had here at the colony, but the lock popped open when I did.

Inside were my clothes—my ridiculously soft Vokiren-made clothes—a few portable food bars, a bottle of water, and—

We both gasped at what we saw lining the bottom of the bag. Gems from our nest. There were several smaller ones, but one was at least an inch across. I closed my bag hastily and looked around to make sure no one else but Priya and I saw. There was no one around.

I angled my body to block the nearby camera. I reached into my bag and brought out several of the precious gems, and shoved the large one into Priya's hand.

"For you and your mom."

"How would we even use it?"

"In the colony? I don't know. But I heard the Vokiren valued these highly."

Anyone in the colony who would trade for something so precious would just as likely rob us, though, if I really needed, I could try to use them to fund my search for Chris.

The rail shuttle arrived, and I locked up my pack again before boarding. We didn't dare speak any more of the gems we carried.

My stop came first, and I gave Priya a hug before stepping out into the street outside Mark's place. Perhaps one day I'd see her again, hopefully at the stronghold and not at Utopia. I walked up the four flights of stairs to Mark's place, hating that I wasn't able to give him advance notice.

"Who the fuck is knocking at one in the fucking morning? I have work in the morning." Mark pulled open the door angrily.

“Me?” I sent him an apologetic look.

“Shit, Clara.” He pulled me into the tiny apartment and closed the door behind me. “I didn't know you were coming, brat. You should have called. I could've had some food or something ready for you.” He held me out at arm's length. “At least they fed you.”

“Did you just call me fat? Ugh. Well, at least I'm not a geek.” I punched him playfully. Insulting each other was something we always did as a greeting. Then I got serious. “I don't have a phone anymore. I was lucky the Kadrixans paid my debt and gave me some money.” I trusted Mark but didn't mention the gems because I didn't trust the devices around him. I sat down in one of the worn-out dining room chairs.

Mark passed me a soft drink from the fridge. “This is all I have right now. I didn't buy groceries.”

Wanting to get straight to the point, I asked, “So what happened with—”

Mark cut me off, shaking his head. “Give me any devices you have.”

“I don't have any.”

He took his phone and laptop and tossed them into a heavy-duty-looking box before sealing it shut.

“It's safe to talk now.”

I'd always thought I was the paranoid one, always believing the colony was listening to our conversations or following us through our embedded chips. The general and publicly-accepted belief was that “they” had better things to do than watch the innocent, and if we had nothing to hide, then it didn't matter anyway.

I frowned and pointed to my arm.

“Tracking only.”

“What about smart home dev—”

“We never had those.”

Oh. Clearly, I wasn't the only paranoid one here. Something had happened to make Mark behave like this.

“The day before you called, officers came here looking for Chris.” Mark

jumped right into the story. “They told him you had gone to Utopia and asked if he wanted to take your place instead. We both knew you were with the Kadrixans. He said no without giving anything away, and after some questioning, they left.”

“Then what happened?” I took a sip of my soda. “His number is now linked to a newborn.”

“Yeah, I know. I tried.” Mark pulled out the chair across from me and sat down. “They came back the next day looking for him. They said he had no funds in his account and that he’d gone into the negatives and had to go into the Utopia Project.”

“That’s not possible!” I exploded, and Mark held out a hand and shushed me. Right. The neighbors. The walls were thin in these cheaply-made buildings. “He had plenty saved up. He told me.”

Had I left the stronghold just to find out that my brother had been dragged away to the Utopia Project for something that wasn't true? Was it because they were pissed off at me for choosing the rut?

“They don't have him,” Mark said. “Chris left the night before and never returned. I don't know where he is. He never told me, but he gave me a long hug before he left and told me to mention Potluck if you called. It was odd.”

Mark put something down on the table. It took me a moment to realize it was a phone, Chris’s phone. It had a strange, oversized case on it that reminded me of the box Mark had put his devices in.

They didn't have him! But they could find him wherever he was by the chip in his arm. The government claimed it had no tracking capabilities and even had professionals put out videos explaining why it was impossible.

“The chips are too small!”

“The technology isn't there yet!”

“There's no reason for us to track you!”

But none of it made sense. If the tiny chips in our phones were able to track us, then why not the large identity chip? Also, hadn’t they boasted about finding some missing child through the chip? It was one or the other; it couldn't be both.

“Won’t they be tracking him now though his identity chip?” I asked.

I glanced down at my arm. The females who had chosen to stay at the stronghold were probably getting theirs removed right now. All of a sudden, I didn't want the foreign object in my arm anymore. I wanted it out.

Mark opened his mysterious box and retrieved his devices. Then in a louder voice, he said, “I'm sorry what happened to your brother, Clara. They said he jumped.” He turned and looked me in the eyes. “They said the body was so mangled from the shuttle no one was allowed to see it.” He glanced down at his own arm.

So they’d found Chris’s chip, but not him. No one was allowed to see the body because it didn't exist. There was no body. Chris had left that evening, suspicious because he’d known I wasn’t in the Utopia project. He must have removed his chip and tossed it into the tracks.

I shook my head, not believing what was happening. Were we being paranoid? Were we making up a story in our heads of our friend and brother outsmarting and outwitting an all-powerful government? I didn't even know why they wanted one of us in Utopia so badly.

“If you don't have any place to stay,” Mark continued. “You can stay in Chris’s old room.”

“Thank you.”

“You can take Chris’s key and his phone.” Mark pointed to the card on the table next to the door. “We’ll start getting things for the Potluck first thing tomorrow.”

He was offering to help me find Chris.

“I thought you had work in the morning.”

“I’m sick.” Mark faked a cough and winked. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight and thanks for—” I didn't know what I was thanking him for, letting me know what happened or letting me stay “—everything.”

Chris’s bedroom was exactly as I'd seen it last. It was just big enough for his twin bed and didn’t have any place even to stand. All his clothes were tossed up into baskets hanging from the ceiling. The foldout wall desk was teeny tiny and had his latest project piled onto it. I put his, *my*, phone down

next to the model spaceship he'd been working on. I turned off the lights and crawled into the still-messy blanket.

I'd never felt so all alone in my life. I'd left the stronghold hoping against all odds to find my brother, but now, as I stared at the peeling paint on the ceiling, I realized this was beyond my abilities. Even with the decent sum of credit Krxare had added to my account, I had no way of finding Chris. The public rail system only took me so far.

I doubted my brother would stay in the colony if he took the effort to dig out his chip. The facial recognition software in every camera would pick him up.

I was in the colony while he was out, and, if I left to find him, they would surely follow my chip.

The light from the orange moon slanted in through the narrow window, reminding me of how the twin moons looked from our vantage point up in Krxare's aerie. I wondered how he was doing now.

Was he pissed off at me for leaving? Did he understand what I'd meant by remembering my words, that my words to him were the truth and I had to lie to get back into the colony? Suddenly, I worried that he would realize and come looking for me anyway, breaking the treaty and endangering all the new friends I'd made.

I sat up and picked up the phone again, then looked through the history. Nothing. The device hadn't logged our conversation at all. I didn't know what I'd expected to see. Krxare's contact number? He wasn't on our network. Even if there'd been a code or number for me to call, I doubted I'd be able to reach him.

I flopped back down onto the mattress. I had no idea what I was going to do next, and a part of me doubted I'd be allowed back into the rut, even though others had done it before. And even if they did, it was an entire year away. A year had never felt this long.

What if I got back and Krxare no longer wanted me? He might have said we'd be mates forever, but that was before I'd left, lying through my teeth. The look on his face when I said those words; I clutched at my chest and the ache in my heart. There was a chance Krxare wouldn't forgive me.

All I wanted now was for someone to hold me and tell me everything would be okay, but I was all alone.

Chapter 23: Krxare

I spent the next few days hiding in our aerie feeling sorry for myself. It was customary for a male to dismantle the nest after a failed courtship, unless he intended to try again with the same female the next year.

I did not intend to tear down this aerie. I had traded enough ore to ensure enough of their credits were on Clara's chip for her to live comfortably until the next rut. There were females who had returned the second year after spending time back in their colony. Even if it took her many years to return, this nest would always be here waiting for her, as would I.

I'd also packed her a bag with her clothes, some food, and a handful of gems for good measure. I wasn't sure she'd be able to use the gems in her colony, but should she decide to ask the Vokiren for safe passage to our stronghold, the gems would come in handy, as would the clothes made with their fabrics.

I hoped they would recognize her as a friend instead of greeting her as a foe, as that male had done.

If she did not return next spring for the mating heat, I planned on reinforcing my quarter's door and locking myself inside for the duration. The idea of spending the rut with any other female was abhorrent. Clara was the only female I wanted.

I didn't know how I would survive until she returned.

I held the pillow that had cushioned her head to my face again and inhaled. Eventually, her scent would fade from this aerie, and I would be completely alone. Even now, the scent was fainter than it had been just yesterday.

My stomach growled, but I ignored it. I'd barely eaten through the rut,

and pangs of hunger stabbed at my belly, but how could I eat at a time like this?

Motion from the entrance caught my attention, and I turned to see Vostak on the ledge, folding his wings.

“So you are alive after all.”

“Go away.” I was not in the mood for his antics.

“Not happening. You are our leader, and we need you to lead.”

“I never asked to be leader. The moment we left Kadri, we ceased to be military. I have no rank over you. Go lead yourself.” I rolled on the bed, turning my back to him.

“Why? So you can mope in here by yourself for a year until your mate returns?”

“If she returns.”

“I guess you never got her note.”

Note. What note? That had me turning back to face him. “What are you talking about?”

Vostak ducked under a string of lights and stepped into my nest. He leaned against the rock wall. “Cozy. The construction lights set on low really do add some atmosphere. We’ll need to get more made. I don’t think we have enough lights for everyone to keep them in their nests.”

“Are you going to tell me about the note, or are you here to critique my decorating skills?”

Vostak chuckled, and I resisted the temptation to go punch him. “I don’t know the contents of the note, only that it exists. Rrak’s mate talked to Clara before she left. She promised Tasha she’d be back next year.”

“She was unhappy here.”

Vostak erupted in laughter, and this time I almost got out of the cocoon I’d made for myself to show his face my fist. “Do you really believe that?”

I didn’t want to. I wanted to believe her other words, the ones said to me while cuddling in our nest.

“Also, our females seem to be worried about certain weapons pointed at the stronghold. It seems Clara mentioned them before she left. Maybe we should do something to ease their fears. You know we have nothing to worry about, and I know, but they are needlessly concerned.”

Those weapons. The colony officials wouldn't use them unless they wanted to destroy the entire continent out of spite. Our treaty prevented them from hunting and mining here. They were greedy, however, and if they used the weapons, they'd forfeit the very bounty they sought.

However, if our females were worried, we should attempt to neutralize the threat. I sighed. Was that why she'd left? Because of the weapons aimed at us? No. That didn't make sense.

“Send a team to investigate and see if there is a way for us to remove the danger without exposing ourselves.”

It was time for us to neutralize the threat on this planet and put our females at ease. We knew the warheads were not kept anywhere near their colony. They weren't even on their continent. They had a secret base on an island off the coast.

“I'll get right on that,” Vostak said, with that annoying grin. Then he stepped off the ledge and disappeared, dropping down the cliff face.

I pushed myself out of our mating bed and stomped over to the ledge, dropping down after him in search of this note he'd spoken of.

I found it on the bed of my quarters inside the stronghold. If I'd gone there instead of to mope in our nest, I'd have found it the first night after she'd left. It was written in her language, so I scanned the letter to have it translated.

The letter started out with the words she'd asked me to remember. The words that had sounded so perfect to my ears. The ones that told me how happy she was and how much she wanted to stay.

Then came her reason for leaving. Her brother was missing—dead, according to the fact that his id number, and therefore his contact number, had been given to a newborn. But a call to his friend had assured her he was still alive. She'd gone back to the colony to solve the mystery and find her brother.

Lying to the representative had been the only way to ensure she got back into the colony. She worried I wouldn't allow her to leave to uncover the truth about her brother, and she was correct. I'd never have let her go back if it weren't for the contract with the human colony.

She also worried I'd look for him in her stead, putting the delicate treaty between our people at risk. She mentioned the weapons pointed at our stronghold and how she worried for the friends she'd made here, and for me.

She ended by begging me not to do anything that might put myself or her friends at risk and promising that she'd make her way back to me as soon as she could.

Silly mate; did she not know that I was a Kadrixan Warrior? I was unafraid of the bullets in their guns. I was going after her, treaty or not.

I opened my wardrobe and pulled out the specially-fitted body armor that hadn't seen much action as of late. Then, with my armor and weapons on, I headed to our shuttles.

"Where are you going?" Trsak shouted as I passed.

"To find my mate."

Chapter 24: Clara

I brought the pillow over my head and cursed the incessant knocking at the door. The sun was barely up, and I'd gotten next to no sleep last night. I was exhausted, and the last thing I needed was someone knocking at six in the fucking morning.

Mark had called in sick for two days to help me find Chris. Much of his searching had been done from the comfort of his tiny apartment, and he'd assured me that even if his boss checked, he'd see Mark never left home.

I'd always known there were ways to block the colony from monitoring searches and calls but had always thought they were in the realm of criminals and hackers, not my brother and his geeky friend. While Mark contacted others who might know of Chris's whereabouts, it looked to anyone watching like I'd been on his computer looking for a job.

We'd stayed up late last night working on a lead and found evidence that Chris had spent much of his money on tech before disappearing. He'd also asked about trading with the Vokiren, on a secret message board. That exciting development, combined with my constant thoughts of Krxare and how much I missed him, had made it hard to sleep.

So, when the knocking started at six in the fucking morning, I was not impressed.

Mark swore from his room, the thin walls not helping to muffle his words. I crawled out from the sheets. I was still fully-dressed, not having taken my clothing off last night. I didn't have any sleeping clothes unless I raided my brother's old stuff, and the soft Vokiren-made fabric was great to sleep in.

"I know you're in there," shouted a strangely-familiar voice from outside the door. "We know you got back from the rut."

I was instantly alert. The only other people who knew I'd chosen the rut were the two officers who had taken me in. I opened the door to my room the tiniest crack and peeked outside to the hall. Mark stood behind the closed front door, looking at the spy screen. On it were the two officers.

Shit. What the hell did they want now?

I glanced down at my arm at my identity chip. Couldn't track anything, my ass. I bet this was how they knew I was here. And to think my old co-workers had called me paranoid for even suggesting it. I could still see their smug faces in my head.

We exchanged a look, then I shook my head. There was no way I was going out there. Not when we were so close to finding out where Chris had gone.

"They're looking for me," I whispered as quietly as I could. "I can sneak out the fire escape."

"I'll come along," he whispered back. "Chris is my best friend, and I'm too far into this now. Also, you need me to find him."

The two officers were now threatening to break down the door.

Mark grabbed a duffel, and as he packed, I ran back into my room and returned with my pack. I had yet to use any of the emergency nutrition bars Krxare had packed for me and still had a full bottle of water.

Then, just as they were starting to ram down the door, we slipped out the window, climbed over to the fire escape, and were gone.

"I don't think we should take the public rail," I said as we hurried through the side streets connecting the poorly-maintained low-rises in this area.

I'd seen pictures of this part of town from my grandparents' time. It had looked clean and new then, promising a better life to all the colonists.

"I agree," Mark said. "They're clearly tracking one or both of us, and if they knew we were inside, they'd just stop the train, lock the doors, and we'd be sitting ducks." He slowed. "Have you been on a bike?"

I hadn't even seen one on the street since I was a kid. Sometime, when I was still very little, they had banned electronic bike production after a few accidents. If you had one, you could still use it, but there hadn't been any

new bikes produced since. Electronic bikes and scooters were practically antiques.

Now, the only way to get around was on foot or by public rail. That was, unless you were rich enough to have your own transport or a hover bike. That type of money was only available to those living at the center of the colony.

I had quite a bit of money available to me now, but not enough for a transport. And renting one was just as dangerous as public rail; they could stop and lock those at any time.

“A bike?”

“No, not a bicycle. I mean a hover bike.”

“No,” I said. “Where did you plan on getting one of those?”

“I know a guy, a trusted friend, who runs a second-hand shop. I've been helping him fix one up. It's an old beat-up one, but I got it working.”

“I didn't know you had a second job.”

“It's not really a job. It's more like a hobby.”

The rundown second-hand shop where this friend of his worked was nearby, and we caught the older, scruffy man just as he got into work. He was shocked to see us and equally shocked when we offered to buy the old hover bike.

When Mark had said it was old and rundown, he hadn't been exaggerating.

“I wasn't going to sell it, but you did work on it to get it working again, and I'm too old to ride one of those things. I guess I can part with it.” The shopkeeper looked us up and down. “I'm just not sure you two youngsters can afford it. You know, they no longer allow resale of old hover bikes in these parts—safety reasons and all. I had to travel to the inside for that one. But, since you come here so often to keep an old man like myself company, I'll give it to you for the price I bought it for.”

He listed a price that was at least several months' salary for someone like Mark. He didn't look shocked, however; it seemed he was ready for that price.

The trouble started when he tried to transfer the credits over.

“This isn't right,” Mark said, shaking his head. “It's saying there have been too many suspicious purchases under my name in the last day, and they're blocking my account for my protection.”

“You haven't bought anything in the last day. You've been at home.”

We exchanged a glance. The officers had gone to his house to look for me. They must have done something to deactivate his account.

Shit. What if they'd done the same to mine? All the money Krxare had transferred over would be useless.

“Let me try,” I offered, holding out my arm. I held my breath as I waited.

Please work!

The money transferred without a problem. I was now the proud owner of a refurbished hover bike I couldn't ride.

“You better go get that chip looked at,” said the shopkeeper. “A few years ago, mine started saying I was dead. I had to go down to that goddamn office five times to show them I was alive.”

I doubted going down to the office was a good thing to do for Mark at the moment, but I kept that to myself. Mark assured him he'd get it checked out and climbed on the hoverbike. He motioned me to get on as the shopkeeper handed me a pair of helmets that looked homemade.

I eyed them suspiciously. Better strange-looking homemade helmets than none at all. Shrugging, I handed one to Mark and put the smaller one on, tightening the strap under my chin. I climbed onto the back, and we were off. I breathed a sigh of relief to know that we were putting distance between us and the officers.

Our first stop was a small diner at the edge of the colony. We needed a place to sit down and continue our search, though we knew they'd find us there eventually and we'd need to run again. We followed the same lead that had gotten us the information yesterday, and this time, we located the general area of the Vokirens Chris might be trading with.

That was progress.

Just in time too. A black transport pulled up out front; the officers had found us. Luckily, I'd prepaid our bill. We were out the back door and on our way to the wilds before they even got out of their vehicle.

We got to the Vokiren village just as they were about to roast Chris over the flames, quite literally. So maybe the part about them being cannibals was true after all, but only for those considered enemies.

From what I gathered, this tribe had lost a lot of people due to the actions of the human colony. They'd immediately assumed Chris was a spy or someone sent to poison their water, which apparently had happened once before.

Without a translator, Chris hadn't been able to understand a single thing the chief—this tribe didn't have a matriarch—had said.

With my implant, I understood everything the chief said, but I wasn't able to communicate what I needed. Fortunately, they recognized the fabrics I wore as those made from another Vokiren tribe. The colors were different, unique to that particular group, but the weaving and knitting techniques were the same.

The clothing, combined with the formal greeting I'd learned from Azala, meant they were much more open to listening to me. The chief turned downright friendly after I pulled out a few glittering gems from my bag, especially since his very-pregnant mate had expressed her desire for a gem for every kit she carried.

Apparently, *push presents* were a thing for the Vokiren.

"What the hell, Clara!" Mark exclaimed, earning him several spears pointed his way. He put his hands up to show surrender, then said softer, "You've been carrying those around the whole time? Those are worth a fortune."

"I've been saving them for just such an occasion. You never know when you'll have to trade precious gems for your brother's life."

Three gems and some creative sign language later, I finally got them to release Chris from the not-yet-burning pyre. Then the three of us got out of their land as quickly as we could, before the chief could change his mind.

“Holy shit, Clara. I thought that was the end,” Chris said, climbing off his own hover bike. He patted himself as if making sure he was still whole. Then he gave me a huge hug, lifting me off my feet. “You came just in time, brat. If you hadn’t shown up when you did, I’d already be dead.”

Any doubts I’d had about coming back to find him faded away. Chris was my brother, and his life was worth it.

Chris released me and exchanged an old-fashioned fist bump with Mark. The two were such geeks; no one gave cringey fist bumps anymore. “How’d you two find me, anyway?”

“You might be good with technology, but I know a lot of people,” Mark said. “You left just in time; they came looking for you the next day, and I don’t think those officers were going to take no for an answer.”

“Those officers are after us right now,” I reminded them, waving my chipped arm in the air.

I glanced over at Chris's arm, which was bandaged up. He looked back at mine with disgust.

“Fuck! You didn’t get those removed first? We need to take care of that *now*, before they find us.”

“Too late for that,” Mark said, his eyes on the black transport stopping just in front of us.

No! We were so close to freedom.

The door of the transport opened, and out stepped the two officers who’d taken me in that very first day. The tall, skinny one pointed a weapon at me.

“Why, if it isn’t our alien whore and her dipshit brother? It looks like we’re going to make our Utopia quota after all.”

As they marched us toward the transport, guns to our heads, the only thing I could think of was that I’d never be able to tell Krxare that I loved him back.

Chapter 25: Krxare

Finding Clara should've been an easy task, considering she still had that wretched tracker in her arm, but in the time it took for us to cross the ocean separating our continents, she'd left her colony and was traveling fast into the wild. Another human traveled with her, a male.

I gritted my teeth at the thought that she'd trusted this male to help her find her brother and not me. Who was this male to her?

We tracked her as she entered the territory of a particularly ornery Vokiren tribe. According to my intelligence, this tribe had been dealing with underhanded attacks from the colony. They were unlikely to help humans in the area, though if she were wearing her Vokiren fabrics, she might be safe.

If she thought her brother was there, she'd be disappointed. We didn't detect any other trackers in the area.

While some of the females came to us knowing, or at least suspecting, the chip's tracking capabilities, some had insisted it was a *conspiracy theory*—a concept they'd had to explain to us—until we'd confirmed that there were indeed trackers in their arms.

It confused us why the humans would track all their citizens. On Kadri, we only put trackers in the rulers, governors, and other important people who might go missing. The technology was cheap, though, so it was an economical way to collect data.

The only reason we'd let the females into our stronghold was because our own technology blocked the signals. If the colony officials had attempted to map the inside of our base through the females' chips, they had been extremely disappointed.

I'd never met a human who'd removed their tracker before joining our

stronghold.

Now that we were on their continent, we had to travel by ground to avoid detection. Our shuttles could hide from their radar, but in the triangle connecting their colony, the island base, and the smaller settlement, it was dangerous to fly. The colony were constantly upgrading their technology, and it wasn't worth the risk.

With our cloak on, we made our way to the tribe's location by land.

"Champion?"

I turned to Trsak and grimaced. I hated being called that now that we were no longer a part of Kadri's military.

"Sorry. It's a habit. Krxare," he corrected. "Her tracking signal has disappeared right outside the Vokiren territory, along with her companion's."

"Disappeared?"

"It just stopped," Trsak said. "My guess is that they're using something to block the signal. I suggest we go to her last known location and track her by other means."

He meant the old-fashioned way, by scent and sight.

Fuck. That would make this mission much harder. And to think that we needed to find her brother, as well.

Finding Clara's brother turned out to be much easier than expected. We were surprised when we got to her last location to find an injured human male. He pointed a firearm at our shuttle when it uncloaked but lowered it when we stepped out.

"They took her," were his first words. "I managed to grab one of their weapons and started shooting back, but they took off with Mark and Clara. They're on their way to Utopia."

Chris was small for a male, thinner even than the colony representatives who brought the females in and out each year. He had a large pack on his back and a few days' worth of beard growth. There was a bandage around his chipped arm, where he'd removed his chip. No wonder we couldn't detect him. He'd shown up the same as any of the natives.

He had the same eyes as Clara: brown with golden flecks, bright, and full of intelligence. Just seeing them had me missing my little mate even more.

“Do you not fear the Kadrixan?” I asked, surprised at the male’s lack of fear. Usually, humans were terrified of us at first sight, especially the males, since our calming pheromones did not work on them.

He shrugged. “If you’re here, then you must be looking for Clara. Clara is with one of you guys, someone important, I think. You won’t waste me because if you do, you’ll have to face her. She’s terrifying when she’s angry. I should know. I’ve spent most of my life annoying her.”

I did not want an angry mate; I’d heard from my warriors that angry human females were indeed terrifying.

Chris narrowed his eyes at me. “You must be Krxare.”

“I am.”

We welcomed Clara’s brother into the shuttle and got some healing salve on his twisted ankle.

“Why are they so intent on you and Clara?” I asked.

“I don’t think they need me or Clara in particular. They just need one more person to meet their quota. Clara and I are prime targets because we have no other family and are not part of any special unions or clubs.” He made a wry face. “There’s no one to look for us. No one to look for Mark either, for that matter.”

Mark must be the human Clara had been traveling with. Jealousy prompted me to ask, “Who is Mark? And what is he to Clara?”

Chris looked surprised then dissolved into laughter. “Mark’s my roommate. We’ve been best friends since school. He’s like another brother to Clara.” He looked me up and down, trying to control his mirth. “Don’t worry. You don’t have competition.” He reined in his laughter and turned serious. “Now, are we going to rescue them or what? We need to stop them before they get to Utopia.”

“That is the human base in the desert.”

“That’s right, and I’m pretty sure it’s heavily guarded.”

There was only one road that led to the settlement, and I had Trsak send an automated drone to observe the river crossing. The cloaked machine was small and quick enough to be mistaken for a computer error in case of detection. If there was any activity there, we'd know immediately. The supersonic drone shot out from our shuttle and headed to its destination.

We'd need to ambush the transport before it reached the open plains leading to the desert. The river crossing was the ideal location, with large trees that would hide our activity. No amount of cloaking would convince the colony officials that the attack hadn't been made by Kadrixans, otherwise.

My warriors and I hadn't had the chance to research what went on in that facility, having deemed the secret island base as the larger threat. Now I wished I'd at least sent a team. I didn't even have reports of how it was guarded. If people had difficulty leaving, then surely there were guards.

Chris took a device out of his bag. It looked like one of their phones but had a heavy case around it. "Once we get a lock on the transport, I can track it with this. You won't be able to track her chip while she's inside. I'm good when it comes to comms. If they sent it in a message or said it in a call, or even said it while their phones were active, I can find it. That's how I learned about the Utopia Project bonus."

"There's a shuttle turning onto the road now," said Trsak, as he watched the feed from the drone, "but I can't see inside the shuttle."

"Tell the drone to monitor it and report any activity to us." I called up a map of the area and placed a marker on the screen. "After dropping Clara's brother at a safe spot, we'll wait by the river crossing for the transport to arrive. Hopefully, we will know if she's inside by then."

"I'll come with you." Chris put weight on his ankle, looking surprised at how quickly the salve acted.

"Clara will want you safe." I couldn't imagine her ire if I found her sole kin only to lose him afterward. I had faced many dangers, but Clara's anger was one I did not want to stir.

"Clara is my sister. She got herself into this because she came looking for me. She rescued me from certain death. I owe her." He turned to me. "And

besides, you'll need me to get that transport to drive itself off the monitored road and turn off all the cameras. That road and transport are technically part of the colony, and, according to a certain treaty, you're not supposed to be anywhere near them."

I huffed. Clara would be angry if I broke the treaty, and it was best not to until we had the weapons on the island neutralized.

I looked back at the human male, who stood firm on his convictions. Perhaps it would be a good thing for Clara to see her brother when we rescued her, provided she was actually in that transport.

"You may come along. Do not die. My Clara would never forgive me."

Chris guffawed and pulled his pack onto his lap. It looked heavy.

"What's in there?" I asked.

"I emptied my account and bought as much useful tech, condensed meals, and survival gear as I could. I removed all the tracking I know of." He placed the weapon on the ledge in front of him. "Except for this. This belonged to the officer. They can track us with it."

At the mention of useful tech, Trsak, who had been focused on the screen, perked up. He'd love to get his hands on more human tech. "I can scan it in case you missed anything. If you did, they won't be able to track it as long as the items are inside our shuttle. We are safe."

"That would be great."

As our shuttle drove itself to the ambush location, I looked out the window and thought of Clara. I recalled when she'd taken the trip to the Vokiren tribe in the amphibious vehicle. Every scene had been a wondrous, new experience for her, and I couldn't wait to show her many more.

Those officers better not have harmed a single hair on her body. If they did, they'd feel my wrath. I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. All we could do now was wait, and I hated waiting.

Chapter 26: Clara

“Don’t touch him!” I screamed, ramming my body as hard as I could into Tall and Skinny. He’d had his arm raised to hit Mark again but missed as I slammed into his body.

The equipment in the transport had started malfunctioning just as we’d arrived at the river crossing. At first, it was the map that blinked in and out; then, the entire transport had borked. It drove itself off the road, through the thicket lining the forest, and into the trees.

Even if the alarm and lights on the dash hadn't started going off and flashing, it was clear we'd gone off course. We’d already crossed the bridge by then and were just on the other side of the river. The forest here was denser and the road less traveled.

While the transport had a driver's seat, they weren't technically driven by anyone. The driver simply input the destination, and the vehicle did the rest. The officers had been just as surprised as we were as we traversed the bumpy terrain.

“What did you do?” he’d snarled, turning from the window to glare at Mark.

He’d thought this was Mark’s doing. Mark and I had exchanged a glance. He had no clue what was going on, either.

Tall and Skinny wasn’t convinced, however. He’d been sure this was Mark's doing, and when the shuttle had finally stopped, he'd stepped back into the cargo area to interrogate him.

Mark was already knocked out, but the asshole had lost it. He continued hitting him, and even his partner looked in shock at his behavior. With my hands cuffed at the front, I’d done the only thing I could and charged at him.

I'd knocked him back with my body-slam, but he recovered quickly.

"You bitch!" His hand shot out and closed around my neck.

I clawed at his fingers, trying to pry them from my throat, but it was no use. He shoved me hard against the transport wall. My head hit the metal with a thud, and stars exploded in my vision. Instead of fading, the stars spun and blinked as he tightened his grip.

I kicked him as hard as I could, aiming for his balls. It was a cheap move, but I didn't care.

He screamed and finally let me go to grab his crotch.

I gasped in a breath as color returned to my vision. I ran to the other side of the long transport, my eyes on the fire extinguisher at the back, but before I could get there, the transport side door opened and the late morning sun streamed in.

"What the fuck?" Short and Squat turned to face the door.

A familiar form stepped in.

Chris! How did he get here? Back where they'd caught up with us, he'd gotten hold of Short and Squat's gun. Instead of fighting him, the officers had decided to drive away with Mark and me.

The larger back door slammed open, and something huge stepped into the space, blocking all the light.

Krxare! I'd recognize that shape anywhere.

I stumbled the few steps toward him and flung myself into Krxare's arms.

"Clara." He held me to his chest.

"Krxare, you came for me, and with Chris, too. How?"

"I will always come for you. Always. You are mine."

"I love you, Krxare. I thought I'd never be able to tell you that."

"You can tell it to me every day when we get back to the stronghold." He held me out at arm's length to check me over. His look turned dark and dangerous when he saw my neck. "Who did this?"

I reached up with my still-cuffed hands and fingered the tender skin there.

Krxare put me protectively behind him and stepped into the transport, his eyes intent on the man holding his crotch. There was no need to tell him who'd put the handprints on me; he'd figured it out himself.

He was on my attacker in an instant, lifting him by the neck with one hand and grabbing the wrist holding his firearm with the other.

"You hurt my female." The deeply growled words made my skin tingle. This beast, this *monster*, was mine, all mine, and I'd never been happier.

Tall and Skinny's eyes looked ready to pop out of his head. "It was an accident. I swear. I'm just doing my job."

"Fucking liar," said Chris, as he knocked a new weapon out of Short and Squat's hands. Two-for-two, he was on a roll. "He knew what he was doing."

Krxare slammed my attacker against the side of the transport, then twisted until his wrist made a sickening crunch. The idiot screamed as his weapon clattered to the metal floor. Then Krxare smashed him against the wall again and again, leaving a large skull-shaped indent in the metal.

Behind him, Chris fought the other officer. Both of them were trying to reach the gun when another Kadrixan stepped in through the side door. He and Chris subdued Short and Squat in seconds and trussed him up like a ham.

The tall, skinny asshole was limp now and unresponsive, but Krxare continued pummeling him, punching him in the face over and over. That face was crumpled in, but Krxare didn't notice. He looked crazed and seemed to be stuck in a loop of red-blooded anger.

"Krxare, he's dead," said the other Kadrixan.

Off to the side, Mark was just waking and pulling himself to his feet and wiping the blood from his face.

Krxare didn't reply or react. He just continued to pummel the already-crushed skull. Chris and the Kadrixan exchanged a look.

"It happens when we are protecting a mate. He's stuck in a rage. It's like the rut, but different." The warrior turned to me. "Only his mate can calm him."

I'd calmed him before, though the last time, he wasn't crushing

someone's skull into smithereens. I could do this.

"Krxare." I stepped timidly toward him. This was my mate. He wouldn't hurt me. "Krxare, *stop*. He's dead."

My monster froze mid-pummel. It looked as if he was trying hard to regain control of his arms. He shoved the body to the corner of the transport and then turned to me.

"Clara." He looked at his bloodied fists, then at the body. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's okay. You were protecting me. I know you'll never hurt me."

"Never," he agreed. Then he noticed my wrists. "You are still cuffed." He searched the body for the keys and released my wrists before rubbing the red and bruising skin. "We will go home now. You will be safe."

Then, before I could reply, he scooped me into his arms and carried me out of the transport.

"What are we going to do with him?" Chris nudged the tied-up officer with his steel-toed boot. The man was passed out cold but still very much alive.

Krxare turned around with me in his arms. "Question him when he wakes, Trsak. He may have information we need."

Trsak rubbed his hands together, looking every bit like the demon they said these aliens were. "Gladly."

"Ask him everything he knows about Utopia," I suggested. "I bet you there's plenty of people he's forced into the project who want out." I was glad to be rescued but felt a need to help those who hadn't been so lucky.

"Done." He turned to Chris and Mark. "Any other requests?"

"We're staying for the questioning," Chris said. "There are some answers I'm looking for."

This was about Ella, I knew. He'd never gotten over her, never dated again. He'd also never trusted a word from the colony again, though he'd hidden his feelings very well.

They continued talking, but I heard no more as Krxare carried me toward

the river.

“Where are we going?” I leaned my cheek against his chest, letting the skin contact soothe me. I didn’t know how his body knew what type of hormones to make, sexy time ones or calming ones, but I appreciated it.

“You reek of the two males, and it makes me want to kill something. You must wash it off. I do not wish to fight my allies on the shuttle ride home.”

I looked down at my shirt. It was splattered with blood and the neckline was torn. The top was garbage. My leggings weren’t much better. I bet I reeked, too. Maybe I did need a wash.

He stepped into the river with his clawed feet, the water going up to his inhuman calves. He let me down gently, and I hissed at the feel of cold water through my sandals.

“It’s freezing!” It was still just mid-spring. “I can’t bathe in that.”

“Humans are weak to the elements, but I will warm you after so you do not get sick. I will not let you get sick, my mate.”

Weak? Did he just call me weak? I narrowed my eyes at him and pulled the soiled shirt over my head.

“I will help,” he growled, taking my shirt from me and tossing it over to the bank.

He washed me thoroughly in the river, the heat from his hands contrasting against the cold of the water. I closed my eyes, trying to numb myself to the chill by focusing on his heat instead, and soon we had me thoroughly cleansed. I stood in just my undies in the river.

A sound behind us had Krxare unfolding his wings. He wrapped them around me, blocking my body from whoever stood at the riverbank. He turned his head to check who it was, then relaxed. Cocooned in his wings and surrounded by the heat of his body, I squeezed the last bit of water out of my hair.

When he unwrapped his wings from my body, whoever had been at the riverbank was gone. In his place was a thin, folded blanket. I headed toward it immediately, the chill finally getting under my skin.

The absorbent fabric dried my body quickly, though my hair still remained

damp. Krxare wrapped the blanket around me sarong-style, carefully tying the knots in place. Then he pulled me into his body and rubbed his palms on my arms to keep me warm. The touch did its job effectively, but it had another effect.

I suddenly wanted more than anything to feel more of his body on me. Touching me. Warming me. I reached for him and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling his mouth to mine.

He groaned as he devoured me. Strong fingers tangled in my damp hair, and lust exploded where it had been just a suggestion moments ago. I moaned as I darted my tongue into his mouth, tasting my big, strong warrior.

To my disappointment, he started to pull away. Desperate, I caught his lip between my teeth and he hissed. His fingers tightened in my hair until I released him.

“My naughty mate,” he rumbled, his lips still touching the corner of my mouth. “I will claim you once we’re safely back inside our stronghold.”

I pouted. Now it was Krxare’s turn to nibble on my lip, careful not to nick me with his sharp teeth. Then he released me and kissed the top of my head chastely, despite the erection pressing against the front of his pants.

He guided us back into the woods but not toward the colony transport. I found myself standing in front of a Kadrixan shuttle instead. I’d never been inside one, though I’d seen images of them before. It was even more intimidating than it looked in photos, the sleek matte-black surface adsorbing the light like a black hole.

It looked menacing. No wonder the Kadrixans had the reputation of being hell-bound monsters; everything about their designs had a future-goth feel to them. If I didn’t already know that these warriors treated women like gold, I’d have been afraid to enter the shuttle. It looked like it belonged to an evil alien empire.

I caught English words on the wind as I entered the ship. My brother and his friend were right here. I’d forgotten about them when my mate’s pheromones had turned my senses inside out. Waiting until we got back to the privacy of his quarters was a good idea, after all.

Chapter 27: Krxare

We never made it back to my quarters. The feel of her in my arms and the scent of her on the air as she sat in my lap was torture, and when we landed at the stronghold, I managed only three steps before I unfurled my wings. Leaping into the air with her in my arms, I flew straight for our aerie.

Clara gasped in my embrace and threw her arms around my neck.

Every beat of my wings brought us closer together, her delicious body cradled against me. I curled my body around her to breathe in her tempting scent. As my breath played over her throat, she closed her eyes and a flush of lust enveloped us.

My lips sought hers, pulling her tongue into my mouth as I claimed her thoroughly. She kissed me back, her lips moving against mine. My cock hardened so much I felt lightheaded and had to break our kiss to focus on flying. I inhaled the cool mountain air in giant gulps, letting it clear my head.

She buried her face into my neck as we rose higher, aiming toward the opening near the peak, her pink tongue darting out to lick at my throat. I rumbled, the sound needy and urgent, and my tail snaked around her thigh, seeking the warmth between her legs.

The tip of it slid under the thin scrap of fabric she wore covering her sex, the only article of clothing salvaged at the stream. I threaded the end through the covering and pulled until the thin fabric tore; she whimpered against my neck as the cool air touched her sex. The arrow of my tail stroked through her folds; she was already wet for me.

I rolled the flat triangular tip into a point and dipped it into her honey, pressing into her to get her ready for my cock.

“Fuck!” she hissed, her dull fingernails digging into my back.

This female would be the death of me. The opening to our nest was in sight, but I couldn't even wait until we were inside. If my bulging cock weren't trapped inside my pants and my arms weren't needed to hold my mate safely to me, I'd have undone my pants and fucked her right in the air.

As I pumped her pussy with my tail, I pumped the air with my wings, closing the gap between the nest and us. My claws touched solid ground and I stumbled toward our mating bed. I had her on her back and naked in an instant, tearing the blanket from her.

"I can't wait," I groaned. "I need—" I wanted to taste her and drive my tongue into her depths first, but the need to be inside her was too much.

"Please, fuck me. I need you now."

"My mate. My beautiful, hungry, demanding mate. How could I deny you anything you want?" Especially when she was begging to be filled by my cock.

I withdrew my tail from her soaking pussy and covered her clit with the tip as it vibrated with my excitement. Then I was pushing into her warm, wet channel as she trembled under me.

"Yes!" She pulled me to her hungrily, needing me just as much as I needed her. She rolled her hips and I groaned.

"Slow," I warned, digging my claws lightly into her fleshy bottom. "I'm the one fucking you. I get to choose our speed."

She stilled, returning control to me.

I dragged the ridged twists of my thick cock through her depths, taking it slow, enjoying the velvety feel of her wet cunt. She cried out at every outstroke, her channel twitching. But my demanding wench couldn't stop herself from taking control. Her hips rolled and rocked, trying to get me to go faster.

I growled, "I. Said. Slow."

Then I pulled out completely, and she let out a small, whimpered, "No."

I flipped her over onto her stomach, maneuvering her body easily and pulling her ass up into the air.

“Beautiful.” I palmed one rounded cheek, giving it a squeeze.

My dark red cock looked menacingly huge as it rested on her ass, with a pale, rounded cheek on either side.

She turned to look back at me, her eyes pleading.

I pushed her chest-down on the mattress before passing an arm under her belly to pull her up to match my height. Lining us up, I thrust in. She cried out, her scream half-muffled by the mattress.

In this position, her knees hovered over the mattress, while I held her up by the hips; I had all the control. I no longer wanted to go slow, however. I wanted to fuck my mate hard and fast. So I did. I pounded into her relentlessly, pulling her hips into my body with every thrust.

She clawed her fingers into our sheets and screamed in rhythm to my movements until her whole body shook as she was sobbing into the mattress.

“Does my mate like it when I fuck her?” I asked roughly.

She made a small sound into the pillow she’d managed to grab hold of.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes,” was the tiny, whispered word.

“Say it again. I didn’t hear it.”

“Yes.” This one was louder and followed immediately by a sob as my tail slid forward to cover her clit, vibrating as it did when I was aroused.

Her body tensed and she quivered as if trying to hold closed the floodgates against an approaching tsunami. Her channel tightened around me, so I had to fight to move inside her despite how wet she was. Holding her by her hips, I leaned back and watched my thick shaft pull out, covered in her wetness. Then I thrust in again, disappearing inside her body.

I increased my rhythm again until I was pounding into her ferally, every semblance of civility lost to pleasure. I threw my head up and snarled at the ceiling of our little cave.

Clara was crying now, and not just the occasional sob between breaths. She was wailing, shaking, and sobbing into the mattress as she mindlessly

begged me to fuck her. Her words barely made any sense. I could only make out the random “please” and “yes,” but I understood her thoroughly.

She was perfect. Everything I’d ever wanted in a mate. How had I ever lived without her?

Her channel fluttered and tightened around me so hard it was almost painful. A gush of new wetness drenched us, and it was too much. I roared, my hips jerking as I came.

As the world around us filtered back into reality, I lay down next to my mate, pulling her into my arms.

“Never leave my side again, little treasure.”

“Mmm,” Clara agreed, cuddling into my arms.

I buried my face in her hair and closed my eyes. Both extremely satisfied and exhausted, we rested, wrapped up safe and warm in each other’s arms.

Chapter 28: Clara

“Now, my mate, we must talk about what you did. Don’t think you got away with lying to me.”

Oh shit, here it comes. I’d known this moment was coming. We’d taken a short nap after the mind-blowing sex, and I was hoping Krxare’d just let it go, but I wasn’t so lucky.

I’d known Krxare would be upset. Who wouldn’t be? While I hated having lied to do it, I’d never regret my decision to look for my brother. I’d gotten there just in time to save Chris’s life, and that, to me, was worth it.

“I’m sorry.” And I was. I hated that Krxare had been hurt; I’d seen it in his eyes. “Technically, I only lied to the colony rep. I told you the truth.”

My words were met with a menacing growl. “Clara, you know what I mean. You left me to do something on your own when you could have asked for help.” He held up a hand before I could tell him I’d gotten there moments before they’d lit the cooking fires. “You did a good job rescuing your kin. It was impressive. But even the best warriors do better with backup.”

“Oh.” That wasn’t what I’d expected to hear, and I didn’t know how to react.

“From now on, we take care of family matters together.”

My heart swelled at the thought. Family. It was true. Being mates was like being married; we were family.

Then I remembered the treaty. “Oh fuck! You attacked a transport today. What if they—”

I couldn’t even form words as the image of nukes dropping onto the

stronghold filled my brain. No. This was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid. All these people could be in danger because of me.

"Calm, my mate." Krxare rubbed small circles on my back. "We are not in danger. I know you care very much about the people here, and it fills my heart with happiness. The treaty stated no Kadrixan may step foot into the colony and the surrounding areas, including the small settlement you call Utopia as well as any vehicle or road owned by the colony. The only instance I broke the rules was when I stepped into the transport, which they do not have proof of."

I frowned. "Everything is recorded inside the vehicles. Even after it malfunctioned, the officers each had their phones, which I'm sure recorded everything."

"Your brother turned off all recording and transmission from the transport. According to the transport's history, someone inside the vehicle overrode the programming and took over manually, then drove into the wilderness before everything went black."

That was convenient. The colony would suspect one of the officers. I'd never known Chris had the knowledge to do that, but, then again, he'd been working most of his adult life to gain the upper hand.

"Anyone arriving at the location will find the transport destroyed by wild animals. There was a pack of fanged wild kintars in the area when we left. There will be nothing left to suggest it was our doing," Krxare continued. "Some of the officials may be suspicious, but they're always suspicious. They will not have enough evidence to void the treaty and start a war, especially if it means soiling the very resources they have their eyes on."

I relaxed. Krxare was right. The colony was greedy and wouldn't go scorched-Earth, spoiling the land and its resources, unless they were losing a war already. The leaders and officials were a proud bunch.

"You worry about bringing trouble back to the stronghold. That was why you left on your own. Why you lied about being unhappy here." He held me away at arm's length.

Suddenly feeling like a kid who got caught stealing sweets, I looked down at my hands. "I thought I could handle things. I was going to come back. I

wasn't leaving you. I just didn't want anything to come back to the stronghold." I twisted the sheets. "They boast about the nukes they have on you guys to keep you from attacking the colony."

"We know about the weapons and their secret island. They won't destroy an entire continent as long as they have their eyes on the ore inside the mountains, the fresh water from our springs, and the fertility in our soil. But even if they let the weapons loose, there would be no losses here. We are well-shielded. While we would need to find another home, there should be no casualties."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"Now you do. From now on, you and I are a team. Your problems are my problems, and you will bring them to me. We find solutions together, as mates do." His hands tightened in my hair, pulling my head back so I couldn't hide my eyes from him anymore. "You need to trust me. Do you understand?"

"Yes." I was more than happy to say it.

I was still shocked that I'd actually saved my brother. I'd never done anything like that before; I wasn't hero material. I'd always followed the rules the best I could, until very recently, and had never understood why my parents sometimes did things that were wrong. Like Potluck. I was glad to have had her, but I'd never understood why they'd put themselves and us at risk for a toffer. I understood now. They'd done it for us, so we could experience life the way it was meant to be.

Living in the colony, it was hard to trust anyone. Your neighbors could rat you out. Like in my case, when a co-worker had reported my choice words about the colony's decision to route much-needed food to the rich. In spite of that, it was time I learned to trust.

He grinned, showing his sexy fangs. "Good. Now, how about a soak in the hot spring?"

That sounded perfect to me.

Chapter 29: Krxare

It had taken the two human males only several days to convince nearly every female in our stronghold that rescuing those stuck in the facility they called Utopia was a good idea. I understood that many of the females here had chosen to join us for our rut instead of going to the settlement. What I hadn't realized was that many of them had lost family and friends to that facility.

After losing contact with their loved ones for years, many had thought them lost forever. But the information the two had gotten from the prisoner before leaving him for the wild beasts had proven that those people were still alive. Beaten down and mentally downtrodden, but still alive.

The most important thing to my warriors was that we keep these females happy. So, we took the matter to heart and started a plan to infiltrate the facility and find its weaknesses.

“If those humans are unhappy at the facility, freeing them will help us as well,” Vostak said from across the table in our war room. “If life at the facility is really that bad, then there will be many females there willing to join with us.”

He was correct. Some of the females we might free could very well be our future mates. This had gotten many of our warriors invested.

We wouldn't be able to take in all the survivors, nor would we want to. We needed to keep the stronghold safe for the females who chose to live with us. This was why Chris and Mark planned on starting a new settlement nearby—close enough to trade and visit but far enough to have their own independence.

Instead of trading with the colony and their corrupt officials, we would

trade with the settlement, provided we were successful in freeing the indentured colonists.

“We would be making enemies of the existing colony. They have the capability to wipe out the entire planet.” I wanted to help these humans if only to make my Clara happy, but I had to bring up and analyze all the risks, as it was my duty to keep my people safe. I hadn't chosen to be the leader, but protecting my people came naturally.

“We already know where the weapons would launch from,” said Trsak. “We can take it out before they have the chance to use them.”

This had Chris perking up from the end of the table. “I've always wanted to hack into a military base. Can you get me on the island? Wait. It's on an island, isn't it?”

“Affirmative. And we can get you on the island,” Trsak said.

“Trsak, you take a small team to the island and do what you need.” I turned to Vostak. “There's a female here who helped design the Utopia facility. She didn't know it at the time, but she's sure of it now. Her name is Penelope. Work with her to find weaknesses we can exploit.” I stood from my seat, signaling the end of the meeting.

I was eager to get back to my mate. I'd promised her a back rub and wanted to fulfill the promise as soon as I could. She was getting that chip of hers removed today, and she was nervous despite it being a simple procedure.

I found her outside in our training area, her head down, in a circle with her friends. Several kukees lounged among them, enjoying being petted and the occasional treat.

When I approached, Clara lifted her head as if sensing my nearness and grinned. There was a blueprint in front of her and everyone seemed to be focused on it.

“What is that for?” I asked.

“It's a swimming pond design. It uses aquatic plants and beneficial algae to clean the water.” Clara continued talking about the plans, excitedly pointing to each section and explaining how it worked.

She'd told me she used to design water features for the rich in the colony. This must be one of her designs. I glanced down at it.

"I've designed so many but never came close to affording one myself." She pointed to an area in the valley. "I saw this area here and started getting ideas. And Dana here," she informed me, tilting her head to the redhead next to her, "was in landscaping. We kind of let the idea run, and here it is."

"I never got to enjoy the places I created either," Dana said.

I took a closer look at the design. It would provide habitat for the local wildlife as well as increase biodiversity. It did, however, require some heavy lifting, and we'd need to bring in large rocks and source all the equipment. "I could spare a few warriors to help with the project."

All the females' eyes lit up, including Clara's, and I knew I'd made the right decision.

"Dana is going to manage the project. She's the one with more experience in the field," Clara said.

"Then I will send you two warriors to help. Just let them know what is needed."

"Thank you!" Clara stood to give me a hug.

I guided her away from her friends, who were all still talking animatedly about the plans. They'd had her for hours, and now it was my turn.

"Thank you for that. At the colony, only the rich could enjoy things like ponds and pools." She looked around our valley. "I'm glad I'm here."

I was glad she was here, too.

"How is your arm?" I asked, noticing it.

She held her arm up, grinning. "I barely felt it, and the cut is already closed. I'm so glad that chip is gone."

That was one way they'd never be able to track her again.

"What about your search for a new hobby?"

Clara had expressed concerns that she had no hobbies or ways to be productive, though I begged to differ now that I'd seen her plans for the swimming pond. I'd assured her that her happiness was enough, and she'd

insisted that being productive would make her happy. She was on the hunt for something new that would help out the stronghold or produce something useful.

“I think I might just focus on the swimming pond for now and let the new hobby thing come naturally. I tried my hand at pottery today.” She made an adorable face. “I don’t think it’s my jam, unless there is a demand for extremely lopsided pots and dishes.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

She sent me a look that said that it was indeed that bad. “What if I’m not good at anything other than what I went to school for?”

I frowned. “You are very good at being my mate. And it is something you enjoy doing.”

She laughed. “Yes. I enjoy doing *you* very much.”

“Stars, I love you.”

“I love you too.” Then, craftily, she added, “But practice makes perfect.”

Clara was already perfect to me, but if she wanted more practice, who was I to stop her?

“Then let’s get started right now. I am always up for practice.” I bent, slipping my arms around her back and knees. With a leap, I was airborne and on my way to making my mate deliriously happy for the rest of our lives.

Epilogue: Krxare

A few years later...

I pulled Clara's petite body back into my muscular chest and abs and closed my eyes, breathing in her heady perfume. I enjoyed being her chair, especially when we were in the hot spring by our nest. My arms were locked around her, stopping her from floating.

The combination of the bubbling mineral water and the cool spring air reminded me of the first time we'd soaked in this hot spring. It always did, every year. It had been our first rut together, but definitely not our last. And if it were up to me, I'd spend every rut here for the rest of my life with my little mate.

This rut, however, was special. It was special because, this past winter, I'd had my fertility recovered, which meant there was a high chance we'd start our family soon. It wasn't guaranteed, of course. Nothing in life ever was, unless you counted my love for her. That was already guaranteed.

"How many?" Clara asked from between my arms.

"How many what?"

"Babies. How many do you want?"

"Two? Maybe three?"

"Not all at once though, right?"

Rrak and Tasha had been blessed by the Stars two years ago with twins. The two little boys were hell raisers, running their poor parents ragged and causing mischief all over the stronghold. They'd struggled to keep them out of trouble since the moment they could crawl. I had no clue how they'd fare when the two youngsters started growing their wings.

Kadrixan fathers took great pride in helping raise our young. We had to, especially if they were boys, since our females couldn't fly. This was why most males on Kadri had to earn the right to produce offspring. Most retired after fatherhood to care for their families. This meant the bulk of their treasures must be hoarded beforehand.

As much as I wanted a smaller version of me, I secretly hoped that our first would be a girl. A single girl. One I could spoil as much as I did her mother. Not to mention, Clara and I needed practice with parenting before dealing with boys. But after such a long wait, I'd be happy with anything we got.

"Not all at once," I agreed.

I relaxed again in the water, glad to have this moment of reprieve from the heat of rut. I knew in hours, I'd be on my mate again, fucking her until she screamed. But for now, I just wanted to hold her.

Above us, the twin moons were out. I looked up at the Stars.

"What are you thinking of?" Clara asked, turning in the water to face me.

"I'm looking for Kadri," I said, scanning the sky.

"Do you miss it?" she asked.

Did I? No. I could say that with certainty. "I do not. I have everything I need right here."

I tore my eyes from the Stars and met her gaze. "And your colony? Do you miss that?"

"I miss my parents, but they were lost before we met. The colony? No, I don't." She leaned in and planted a soft kiss on my lips. "I was born here on Vokira, but I never found home until you."

I gathered her into my arms, happiness flowing through every corner of my soul. "You are home to me too."

And I could not wait to start our family. Here, sheltered in our stronghold, I'd finally found my ultimate treasure.

THE END

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I scurried along the overgrown hedge, moving as quickly and quietly as I could. At the street, I looked both ways, not for traffic but for signs of bug activity or roving gangs of bad men. All clear. I ran across and dove for the cover of the convenience store's fallen awning.

I'd brought the awning down across the front of the store on purpose. The more dilapidated the place looked, the less likely other foragers would try to get in. No one wanted to spend more time in the town than absolutely necessary, and if the place looked thoroughly ransacked, most people left it alone. I reached behind the large planter, found the key I'd hidden there, opened the door, and stepped in.

Safety! Or relative safety anyway. Safety was mostly an illusion now, something I convinced myself I had so I could sleep at night. Even in the abandoned hardware store that I now called home, it wasn't truly safe.

The store looked exactly as I had left it. I went behind the counter, searched the cabinet, and found the cans of luncheon meat and tuna I'd hidden there behind a pile of old magazines and record books. I stuffed as many as I could into my backpack and zipped it up.

Damn! Cans were heavy!

I picked up the last bottle of pain reliever and crammed it into the front zip. There were no perfume or scented sprays at this location, but my pack was getting heavy, and I needed to be able to run. This was an easy forage at a shop I'd already secured, but tomorrow, I'd need to find a new source of supplies. That was always difficult. Especially now that Natalie was injured, and I needed to forage on my own.

Natalie was my little cousin. She'd been visiting when the bugs arrived in town. Being the older, wiser one, I was supposed to be taking care of her while she scouted out her future job in the next city over. But when the bugs arrived, it was Nat who took care of me. I'd freaked the fuck out, and became a useless mess. She was the reason why I kept going. When the shit hit the fan, it was Nat, with her ever-present optimism and never-erring voice of reason, who pushed us to survive. She was the fearless one. But she

was injured now, and it was time I did my part to keep us safe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sure, and I was a monkey's uncle. I wasn't stupid. Not trusting the alien, I

gripped my crowbar tighter and brandished it in front of me. The alien frowned, and the effect was downright terrifying, drawing attention to his elongated canines.

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

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

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

“Take. Hungry.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Kaj’k.”

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

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