

The Saviors of Trem-NA

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CHAPTER 1

Trem-NA: a once thriving and peaceful culture, filled with history and wisdom. The Naanans lived in harmony keeping the joy of the arts alive. Many were scholars, scientists, and historians. Artists and musicians worked side by side as the air carried sweet lullabies and brushes scraping across canvas. The Naanans goal was to have their planet rich with life and homes alive with laughter. Fields white with Na-fee flower, their spiked petals swaying in the breeze. Tan hides of Na-romans grazed the fields, their tusks scraping the earth. Towns overflowed with trading markets and thriving cities filled with celebration and light.

The fields where cattle and crops grew was a quiet Eden, away from the bustle of city life. Domes of houses hid in the rolling hillsides, their interiors smelling of freshly baked Na-rye bread and earth. The quaint homes gave way to an open door, filling the small kitchen and beds with light. The real pleasure of the Naanan farmer was to be one with the land. They spent their days herding the Na-romans through the dark green grass of reeds, collecting the Na-rye stalks as they walked. Families would come together to strip and grind the day's harvest, feeding the leftovers to the Na-romans. As they helped the land, the land provided. There was no use for fences. Many farmers woke in the morning to the sounds of Na-roman young in their homes, awaiting to start the day's journey. As the annual harvest time approached, all Naanan farmers worked together to gather in livestock and crops to take into the city. Loading up the large wagons, they gathered their families and rode to the towns.

Small towns outlined the cities, gradually moving from rural to urban life. The towns kept the cities supplied most of the year, awaiting the annual Trem-NA farming trek which came with the months of changing weather. The town's gradient texture surrounding the buildings shaped into columns. Each house was fit

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for a large family with room to spare. The many levels of the home gave different perspectives; to seeing the vast land before them and the great cities behind. Circular windows brought in the colors of the sunshine and glow of the moons. Each house catered to the simplicity of the land and the advancement of technology. Small Na-fee gardens circled the homes while inside parents taught from holographic pads. Children studied the ways of living on the land while grasping an understanding of how far society had come. The towns were truly the best place to fully understand Trem-NA culture.

As the towns gave way to the cities, the column houses reached the skies. The larger buildings gave home to science and art for many scholars. Technology buzzed in the air from the solar powered orb lamps to the quiet hovering of small carts. Several Naanans prospered in the cities, teaching and expanding their horizons. Schools and libraries abounded with knowledge. Political officials kept a close eye from the largest building in the middle of the city. They watched their people prosper from the open balcony above, welcoming the sounds of the city below. The cities rarely slept, even as the night wore on. The warm lights could be seen from the farmlands, as a sign they were not alone.

As the three classes worked together, there was little poverty and crime. Naanans strived to be peaceful in all circumstances and allowed anyone and everyone to partake in the knowledge they all deserved. Some would say their harmony made them weak.

Now fields were barren. Small homes that used to cover the land were ripped from the earth. The towns deserted, the markets empty, the homes lacking in life. Cities destroyed, buildings crumbled, their knowledge burned to ash. The destruction conquered all. Many clung to the hope that one day they would be free. The Na-fee flowers would grow back, filling the fields again with their sweet aroma. Sprouts of growing Na-rye would encourage the Na-romans to rise from their extinction. Farmers would again return to help their beloved land recover. Towns would be alive with laughter of children. Cities would recover the

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loss of knowledge. Music would fill the air. Life and harmony would return threefold.

It had been two hundred years since the Xeno first arrived on their planet. Little was known about these parasites, as Trem-NA did not have any contact with other worlds. They soon learned the Xenos knew one thing: usurp and destroy all life.

Scientists on the northern continent were the first to report sightings of a large meteor shower that lasted over the course of several days. This was not uncommon, but the length of time and the glowing white orbs were cause for alarm. Many scientists from around Trem-NA poured over their machines to uncover this strange phenomenon. None could explain it. Groups of scientists made the trek to the northern continent, excited to explore this discovery.

The city closest to the impact was the first to notice signs of trouble. The Naanan farmers did not arrive on time for their bi-annual celebration. Many supposed the impact craters in the land made their journey a hardship. The towns searched, but to no avail. Scientists who left to research the meteors had not returned. Small parties were sent out as the cities concerns were sent to the capital. They patiently waited for an explanation. That city was the first to fall. As more white orbs began to land on every continent, it was too late.

Naanans who made first contact with the Xeno were found, but the hope for their safety was cut short. The Xeno orbs cracked open on impact, slowly seeping out attaching itself to any sentient being. Their eel-like state made it possible for them to move quickly and quietly through the grass as their green pulses searched for signs of life. Once sentient life was detected, they flattened themselves on the earth and jumped, attaching to the back of the neck exposing their serrated mouth. Engulfing the head from behind, this allowed the Xeno to usurp brain control while encasing the body in a white cocoon. Once overtaken, the Xeno burst forth, the host no longer in control. The long green jagged limbs and head was the Xeno's final form. Its eyes were slated white, void of life. Its shape made for more deadly attacks and the

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ability to quickly overrun any aggressor. This process was painful and how the Xeno picked off the weak. Many times, the sick and children did not survive.

As the Xeno built its host army, destruction began. Communications were cut from city to city. No one knew if their family or friends were safe. Refugees told stories of destruction the Xeno caused. Homes were leveled and many who fought back were killed. Many cried as they retold of their family becoming hosts as they tried to escape. Soon after refugees began pouring in, power shut down city to city. With the limited supplies brought on by the overpopulation and lack of farming, many began to go hungry and without proper medical care. Many talked about visiting their sacred moons for supplies, but there was not enough power to travel that great distance. The Xeno's needle ships covered the skies, making any escape attempt in search of help impossible. All the while more and more Naanans began to disappear.

The Naanan government tried their hardest to fight back against the enemy. Abandoning their home was not an option. Though they were a peaceful people, they were ready to defend their home by any means necessary. Drove of armies fought the Xeno head on, holding their ground long enough to aid others in escape. Several battles raged as each city was emptied to regroup around the capital. Many times, the soldiers sacrificed themselves to save the civilians. But the more the Xeno took, the more the odds grew lesser in their favor. They began to number in the thousands, as opposed to the millions that once inhabited their planet. Soon there was no choice but to hold one last stand before admitting defeat. Some would say it was in vain, but a fight against evil is a worthy fight.

Soon every Naanan was lost to the Xeno, but the destruction of their home did not end there. Once the planet was overrun, a show of dominance had to be made. Those who fought against the Xeno were killed as an example. Naanans who tried to resist were punished. For any act of defiance, they would be subjected to Xeno rehabilitation. The process was never successful, as it was meant to

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be. A Xeno would strap the host and accompanying Xeno to a chair and begin stabbing in small quick bursts. This made the host fight more, and as the process continued the Xeno worked faster and faster until the host died. The Xeno was given to the Queen to recover as the host body was left to decay in the chair. This display of torture was for all to see. The screaming and begging of the host echoed throughout the halls. Many times, Naanans were chosen at random for this process. The Xeno Queen always watched the crowd as the host was tortured. Her white hollow eyes scanned the crowd for signs of discomfort.

Those who survived these proceedings were forced to help the Xeno feed on their beautiful planet. The Xeno set up large dome hives across the three continents, littering the land. They forced their Naanan hosts to work endlessly to gather and dissect parts of their home. Every inch of the planet would be analyzed and processed; every strand of DNA carefully taken apart and reconstructed. The Xeno needed to understand all in order to adapt and use its new skills to conquer other planets. The Naanans beloved home of Trem-NA would never be the same if it survived this process.

Rajax could remember little of his life before. The process of becoming a host strips away at the memory, leaving nothing but fleeting images. All that was left of his mind was faces and moments he could not recognize. Did he have a wife? Or a lover? Did he have children, and if he did, where were they? Did they survive? Did anyone really survive? Rajax was the last Naanan to be taken, a witness to the destruction of his home. The screams of his fellow Naanans as they tried to escape the Xeno's grasp haunted him at every turn. The Naanans he tried to save were gone. He watched as the towns he grew up in were uprooted and turned to ash. The fields he played in as a boy were now barren. The cities he visited as he grew were empty shells. The people he had known so well from his life before were gone. Rajax tried countless times to put the faces to names, the names to people, the people to families, but the Xeno always fought his desperation for meaning.

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Rajax decided long ago that he would no longer be a slave. The Xeno Queen arrived soon after Trem-NA's destructive fate. After her arrival, she began to assign her hoard to the various tasks to mine and dissect the planet. Rajax's Xeno was assigned to the science lab where he would be experimented on. The Queen's scouts visited other promising worlds bringing back samples. His task was to help prepare their findings in order to evaluate what evolutions the Xeno would need to undergo in order to conquer the planet. His job was torture. He and his fellow Naanans that slaved along beside him were used as lab rats. Rajax spent every day in a test chamber subjected to different oxygen levels, atmospheric conditions, and terrain, in a hope that the Xeno could learn and adapt for successful domination. Each chamber simulated a different environment through holographic technology the Xeno had taken and perfected from the Naanans. Through this process Rajax developed the unique ability to shift his shape and size. With each condition, his body underwent tremendous stress that morphed him and his capture. His body created wings that stretched from his arms to his legs due to the perilous cliffs he was forced to scale. He developed gills after being submerged in a tube of hot water for three days. His body grew mountains of fur to combat the icy conditions when he was left on a glacier for a week.

At first, the Xeno was shocked by this anomaly. Then over time, as the other Naanan hosts began to undergo similar changes, it rejoiced. It found a way to survive anywhere. More and more Naanans were pulled into the testing chambers to study this phenomenon and evolution. The extreme stress Rajax and his people endured would, in time, be the key to his escape.

Rajax had to plan his escape without arousing suspicion. While the Xeno had control over his body and mind, it did not have control of his heart. In another lifetime Rajax knew he was a fighter. His fleeting memory showed many battles fought for the good of his people. He fought with every living breath. He killed many Xenos alongside his people before their downfall. This is why the Xeno kept him so close. Being the last of his race to fall made him a target. He could not understand why the Xeno Queen

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had let him live, or kept him so close, but he knew her reasons were dark. Rajax had to be careful with his planning. He could not let his people down. They would not die in vain.

His chance for escape was drawing near. Along with being subjected to the test chamber, Rajax's task was to prepare the scouts for departure from the Xeno Queen's hive. The scouts were former hosts from distant planets. The Queen Xeno altered their physiology to compensate for the different environments they would discover. The process was time consuming and made the Xeno Queen weak. The work Rajax and his fellow Naanans did in the lab helped speed up the process. The hive he worked in contained the largest departure bay in the region. One pod was placed into a long funnel, trajectory was established, and the pod shot out heading for the stars. For his plan to work, he would need to trick his Xeno long enough to make it believe that it was a scout.

Scouts along with the Xeno Queen's personal guard were highly respected throughout the collective. He knew his Xeno dreamed of being one of the Queen's most trusted. Although he worked with scouts, his Xeno was never permitted to leave the planet. With Rajax's lack of control over his own being, his task would not be easy. He had no way of knowing if he could contact the other Naanans. The only communication was the Xeno's clicking orders to each other. Rajax never knew if he was looking at a friend, a family member, or an enemy. No longer a voice; no longer individuality. Rajax would have to use all his strength to convince the Xeno of his deception, he needed to free his people. The task Rajax set before himself may cost him his life, but it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

CHAPTER 2

Black smoke dispersed as Rajax clung to the floor. The volcanic terrain around him began to flicker and fade. His hands held their coarse rigid state for a moment longer. As the door began to open cool air swept in. His body reverted back to the Xeno's shape. Rajax stood slowly and walked out of the test chamber. The Xeno's high pitched clicking echoed across the room as they studied the experiment. As if his Xeno had already perceived his plan, Rajax had spent the day in the chamber with no end in sight. He was subjected to unbearable amounts of heat, ferocious winds, and no oxygen. The arctic temperatures had hardened his exterior. He was forced through rigid mountains and sinking deserts of sand. The forests he trudged through was drenched from nonstop rain.

His hand moved onto the cool white wall of the Xeno cell where he worked as his Xeno allowed him to catch his breath. The walls pulsed and the floor glittered silver. All around him other Naanan hosts walked by glassy eyed, oblivious to their comrade in arms. Rajax's body slowly stood a little taller as he moved forward. His Xeno indicated they were to head to the scout tunnel to retrieve new samples. His body traveled mindlessly down the long hallway and towards the back of the hive facility. This was his chance; he could not delay any longer.

Rajax tried for years to make little adjustments to the Xeno's thinking without drawing too much suspicion. He began by making changes in the test chamber. Under the stress he would begin searching for a way to control his mind. The Xeno paid little attention to this detail. It had seen many times when a race would search for reassurance in its own mind. It did not realize that Rajax began to regain small amounts of control. He acquired enough to slip thoughts to his Xeno free of hostile intent. As his Xeno reached for one vial, Rajax would suggest grabbing another. As his

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Xeno prepared an environment, Rajax would suggest trying a different one. His Xeno, for fear of losing trust with the Queen, forced Rajax and himself into the test chamber for the disobedience. Rajax was forced to stay inside for days with little to no air.

Rajax would wait months before trying again. Steadily he began to gain his Xeno's trust. After a while, the Xeno would take his advice but carried the threat of death over his head. As they stood in the crowd watching rehabilitation, the Xeno made sure Rajax understood it would expose him at any time. Rajax was able to successfully get the Xeno to walk on the other side of the hall or grab a different vial than indicated. He convinced his Xeno he was trying to be more useful in completing its studies. Rajax showed great malevolence and would flatter the Xeno at any chance. His capture seemed to believe him, its own doubts slipping away. With luck on his side, Rajax would escape without detection.

His body reached the scout hangar and looked around to see very few Xeno drones at work, his fellow Naanans unaware of his plans. Rajax's body moved towards a pod that arrived and casually, but carefully, glanced at the launch pad for the coordinates. Each planet was saved into the Xeno mind to quickly navigate the next target. Rajax's Xeno click to the scout, acquiring about the samples. As Rajax's hands reached for the vials, he looked at the scout's eyes, searching for any sign of life before. He saw none.

The Xeno scout turned from them and his body moved to leave the hangar. Now was his chance. As his body moved forward, he panicked and suddenly stopped. Rajax noticed a few Xenos turned to look at him, feeling his heightened sense of emotion kick in. His Xeno slowly told him to keep moving forward, somewhat startled at the sudden and brief lack of control. Rajax knew he had to tread lightly.

This cannot be all the vials.

He was assured that yes, they all were there.

We should check the pod just in case.

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He was once again assured that everything was in order, his capture becoming suspicious and agitated. Rajax had to think fast.

Perhaps the scout brought some DNA samples when he encountered the other world. They might be useful in our studies.

Rajax's body went numb and he quietly waited, fearing the worst, as the Xeno was silent.

If we miss something, it could affect the next mission and the Queen will blame us. We would be punished despite your hard work.

Silent fear filled the Xeno as Rajax carefully checked the others near them. Most went back to work, while some lingered in the distance watching.

Very well, a quick look, but if you are lying you will be punished severely.

Rajax's body moved towards the pod and peaked inside. The pod was clean. His body turned around to leave. The Xeno's who lingered began to walk towards them.

We need to look closer; if there is any it would contaminate the next launch. The Queen would not be pleased.

The Xeno was quiet and turned its attention to the Xeno's approaching.

You are lying.

Rajax began to panic

They know. They know you are taking advice from me. If they find out, you will be punished. The Queen will kill us both, you must save yourself. Tell them the scout was to blame. I will never help you succeed again; you must blame the scout.

Rajax watched as the two hosts approached them.

What is the problem?

His Xeno was quiet for a moment.

Is your host defective?

The scout...the scout lied to me. He said he had given me all the vials, but he lied. There are more. I was uncertain how to deal with this failure.

The two Xenos looked at each other, then back to them.

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We will deal with this; you will come to the Queen for questioning.

Rajax and his Xeno were alarmed as they grabbed his arms tightly. They pulled him forward violently. Rajax knew this was it. With his adrenaline thumping he pushed both Xenos to the floor as he forced his body into the pod.

You are a scout.

With all his strength he threw his arm onto the launch pad and the pod closed around him. His Xeno began to panic as the others regained their control and began pounding on the pod. More Xenos began running towards them.

Stop!

No.

We will be killed!

I will take that chance.

Rajax fought for more control as he punched in the last coordinates.

You are a scout.

The pod slowly hummed as it came to life and turned to slide down the funnel. Rajax's head seized with pain as his Xeno's fears grew and fought for control. Perhaps the Xeno would finally kill him. Outside the other Xenos attempted to abort the launch. Rajax knew the fight with his parasite needed to be won. The pod stopped and for a moment Rajax panicked, fearing the others had succeeded. His Xeno's fear ebbed, beginning to feel confident. Before Rajax could give up hope, the pod shifted as he was launched out of the cell and into the sky.

You are a SCOUT.

The Xeno screamed in his head as they climbed higher into the sky. His attempt to convince the Xeno it was a scout was in vain. It pulsed and begged and attacked his mind as they climbed higher. As they reached the outer layer of the atmosphere, Rajax's head began to burn and pulse. He managed to grab his head and tried to let out a scream as the pulsing fire grew stronger. Rajax thought if he died now, what counter measures would be taken to fulfill revenge on his people.

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The pod began to glow as Rajax looked up to see the hull beginning to split apart. He tried to stand but the Xeno forced him to stay down, its screams of agony deafening his ears. His body began to tremble and spasm as the Xeno convulsed. The pod came to a stop as it hummed louder. The Xeno stopped and Rajax tried to steady his breath from shock. Suddenly, the hull split into a fanlike shape and began to move faster. His Xeno screamed louder and harder, trying to shatter his skull with all its might. There was a loud explosion from behind and Rajax was sent flying through space.

The Xeno made one final attempt to kill him before letting out a screech and groan. Rajax screamed as his body burned. His limbs ached as the Xeno screamed. His head burned, his eyes watered, the Xeno stabbing every nerve in his body. Rajax gripped his head tighter, feeling his fingers dig into his skull as if to pull the Xeno out himself. He opened his mouth screaming with the Xeno as it screeched. Rajax fell limp. He lay paralyzed as he flew towards the unknown, aware that the Xeno's presence was gone. Was this insubordination too much for the Xeno and it killed itself? Or had the Queen done away with him? There were so many questions he had, so many things he needed to understand.

All Rajax could do now was lay on the humming floor unable to keep his eyes open. His back seared with pain as a foul-smelling substance formed over his body. He blacked out before he could turn his head to look. Rajax had no idea how long he laid unconscious from the turmoil. He was awoken to small beeping sounds coming from the monitor. He opened his eyes and looked up, a planet coming into sight. Rajax managed to focus his eyes on the monitor and looked in horror realizing he was on a collision course.

Rjax tried to move his arms and legs into a position where he would not be killed on impact, but his body would not respond. He watched as the pod soared towards the dark side of the planet hitting the atmosphere. His skin peeled from the heat and he screamed, as if it would relieve his pain. The ground began to grow as Rajax watched unable to move. The monitors beeped louder.

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Rajax closed his eyes as the shuttle shook vigorously. The shield cracked throwing glass onto Rajax. The pod hit the ground with a thud and began to roll, his body flailing out of control inside. His body slammed into the view screen, glass sticking in his back. He was flung from the ship and tumbled along the ground until he slowly came to a stop. He laid unmoving, his body numb and broken. All he could do was slowly open his eyes.

Green grass was strewn around him mixed with dirt and roots. A small cloud of dust began to settle around him. He tried to lean up on his arms, but it was useless. He looked down at his legs, a bone jutting out of the skin under his knee. His shoulder was out of its socket and his hand was broken. He let out a painful groan surveying the state of his body. Rajax managed to turn his head enough to face the sky full of stars. Tears filled his eyes. The stars had been beyond his sight for many years, he almost forgot their beauty. His breath slowly returned to him as his body relaxed. He heard his broken bones beginning to crack, feeling strength return. Rajax moaned in pain at the process, trying to focus on the stars above. He looked at his body again searching for the foul smell. Green lines of ooze moved from his back and neck, encasing his body.

Rajax could not move his arms to wipe it away. The stress of his voyage was weighing on his body and mind. The stars slowly moved above him as he laid in a crumbled heap. If he gave up now, his people would perish. His urgency to find help would have to wait as his world became black.

CHAPTER 3

Austin turned the radio up as he drove through the rolling fields of western North Dakota. The wind speeding past his open window ruffled his brown hair. He sped past plains as grass waved in the wind. The night sky above him glittered with stars. He could hear the equipment in the back of the van banging around, some falling from their secured fastenings. As a box fell, he heard a grunt from his passenger.

“Do you have to go so fast?” Matthew asked pushing the box of cables off. His black mop of hair was askew.

“Where's your sense of adventure?” Austin asked with a sneer.

“If you go any faster, you'll break the satellite, the computer, or worse our radar,” Matthew huffed.

“Hey, do you want to get a good spot to view the sky, or do you want to get caught by the sheriff?”

Austin gunned the engine shredding grass and picking up speed. They had been trying for weeks, for years, to get a shot or even a glimpse of anything beyond their planet. The local's patience was beginning to run dry. They were teased and mocked at every turn. The rap sheets at the jail were filled with trespassing reports from local farmers who caught them in their fields. On several occasions their radar equipment was confiscated and returned on the empty promise they would stop. The sheriff had let them have their fun when they were teenagers, hoping it was a phase that would pass. As they grew older and their antics and tactics became bolder, the sheriff threatened the next time they were caught, it would be their last.

Austin Loughty had always dreamed about life beyond the stars. His parents supported his dream when he was younger. He spent many summer days as a child running around his backyard in a cardboard helmet, pretending he was on a distant planet. But

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after the police brought him home late one night for trespassing as a teenager, his parents tried to sway his interests. They encouraged him to do more sports and gain an athletic career. Austin agreed to a point, his real goal making himself agile enough to escape the cops. When his parents realized they could not change his dream, they tried to help him express it in a different way. They helped him search for local science clubs through the community and school to find others that shared his interest. That is where he met Matthew. After graduating high school Austin enrolled in the local college where he went to school part time. He kept in touch with his parents who had moved a few cities over to help with his aging grandparents.

Matthew Alcott's upbringing was not as pleasant as Austin's. Having a sharp mind and love for science at a young age, Matthew spent most of his summer days locked in his room, research filling his computer. His view on the world was a scientist's perspective, which his parents did not share. They worried about his social skills as he was bullied and teased as he grew. They tried to steer him away, but he did not back down. His broken relationship with his parents grew after he met Austin and they were busted for trespassing on farmland totaling the family's car. After being accepted into a highly established college, they hoped this break would help Matthew grow. A few semesters later Matthew dropped out due to harsh bullying and backlash from his peers and professors as he debated strongly his theories were right. His parents moved shortly after he returned home, and they had not spoken since.

Despite their different upbringings and support, Austin and Matthew shared many late nights looking up at the stars. Their love for the unknown fortified their friendship. Their connection did not waiver, even when their third companion left.

Whitney Blake and her mother moved into town when she was a teenager. She was strong minded and confident even then. She caught Austin and Matthew late one night running from the cops and showed them a better shortcut. They were close ever since. Whitney loved the stars and the thought of something more

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beyond their reach. She stood up for Austin and Matthew at every turn, her conviction for them surprising the locals. Soon after graduating her mother became ill and she put her college days on hold to help provide. Austin and Matthew worked together to help Whitney enroll in an online school, their gift to her. Late one afternoon when Austin and Matthew were discussing astronomical phenomenon, Whitney left to get takeout and never returned. Soon after they found she had been employed by Homeland Security. She left her days of UFO searching behind. Her mother moved to New York to stay with her sister as her illness increased.

Whitney had been gone for almost three years. The locals hoped after her disappearance, Austin and Matthew would follow. If anything, her leaving strengthened their beliefs.

Austin turned down the radio and slowed the van to a halt. He pushed it into park and turned off the engine. Sighing, he looked out onto the wide-open fields in front of him. The land was peaceful untouched by man. He watched the grass slowly sway as the wind blew around them. The stillness of the country was soothing. In the distance he could see small dots of cattle. Though the landscape was a tremendous sight, he would rather see what lay beyond it in the stars. Matthew switched on the radar and opened the van door to set up the satellite. Austin climbed out behind him and grab the binoculars.

“It's a good thing its clear tonight,” Matthew said sticking the satellite on top of the van. “We'll get a good reading if anything is irregular.”

“Let's hope we don't pick up a jet like last time,” Austin joked.

“In my defense it was going too fast to be commercial,” Matthew shot back, “and it was probably another prototype the Air Force is testing out that you won't hear about till ten years from now.”

Austin was hoping for something bigger. After his last class let out for the day, he drove back to the town house they rented. Matthew was hunched over his computer screens muttering to himself like a madman. After getting Matthew to calm down he

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excitedly explained something fast was headed towards earth, possibly heading right for them if they were lucky. Austin assumed it was another comet or meteor until he checked the data. This could be there chance.

He shook his anxiety away and faced the stars. Though he did not always trust what the government said, Matthew was more into conspiracies than he was. Matthew was always searching the web hacking into websites to find loopholes to see what people were hiding. He tried once to find out what department Whitney was working with shortly after she left. Matthew made it onto a private server and was close when the FBI showed up on their front door and confiscated every computer they had. After that incident Matthew tried to convince Austin Whitney had turned him in and was even more convinced there was something they were hiding. Austin was angrier at the fact they took away his school laptop with all his projects.

Austin kept scanning the stars as Matthew jumped down off the van behind him and checked on the radar. He heard Matthew adjusting the knobs on the main computer system, the radar slowly pinging. The back of a van was not an ideal headquarters, but after the FBI incident Matthew insisted on having a getaway vehicle. Austin stopped scanning the sky and squinted.

“See anything?”

Austin pulled the binoculars down for a moment, “Nothing yet, but come take a look at this.”

Matthew took the binoculars from him looking into the sky.

“I don't see anything,” he said.

Austin pushed Matthew's gaze farther to the right.

“There's something right there. I know we've charted these stars and that wasn't there before.”

Austin and Matthew watched the white blip shine bright in the sky.

“That could be it, but I don't understand why it's not showing up on radar,” Matthew muttered.

Austin watched as the tiny light off in the distance slowly became brighter. Suddenly the radar started beeping and

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screeching. Matthew dropped the binoculars and jumped in the van. Austin fumbled in after him. He watched the sky from inside one hand searching for the camera.

“How many are there?” he asked excitedly.

“It looks like three maybe four,” Matthew replied adjusting the radar. “They’re breaking up. I don’t understand how they didn’t show up until now. What do you see?”

Austin was not listening. He peered outside, the shock whitening his face. Matthew hopped out of the van beside him and gasped. Flying high above, four bright objects zoomed across the sky. Three flew into the distance as one broke formation and headed towards them. Austin and Matthew hit the ground as it flew past, debris in its wake.

“Come on,” Austin yelled jumping into the van.

Matthew clambered in after him attempting to shut the door as he took off. Austin leaned his head out the window, keeping an eye on the object.

“Get the camera ready, we've got something,” Austin yelled.

“Then give it to me,” Matthew shot back.

Austin tried to keep a level head but could not suppress his excitement. The formation the objects flew in was unlike any he had ever seen. He followed the fourth object closely as it flew spiraling towards the ground. It landed in a dusty heap.

“Where is it?” Matthew asked alarmed.

Smoke bellowed over the horizon blocking their view. Whatever object they were following was obscured under the smoke and debris. Austin slowed the van to a crawl as they approached the first signs of wreckage. Matthew faced the camera outside the window, capturing the trail of dirt and bits of metal leading to the top of the next hill. Austin stopped the van and looked at Matthew.

“Do we dare,” he gleamed.

“Might as well,” Matthew said opening his door.

Slowly they exited the van leaving the headlights on. They followed the dirt path up the hill, careful not to disturb the scene. Bits and pieces of metal plating laid all around charred from

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entering the atmosphere. Ahead they could see a heap of wreckage on the ground smoldering. Austin and Matthew stopped at the top of the hill examining the remaining pieces. Small electrical units sparked and buzzed. Charred remains of a seat sat in the middle. Austin searched for the controls careful not to get shocked while Matthew examined the outside hull for symbols. Carefully, Austin climbed inside the remains. He looked around for anything resembling a black box. The monitor sparked and he backed up. His hand touched something wet and he looked up at the windshield. Green ooze dripped onto the floor; an imprint of a hand plastered against the glass. Austin swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Austin, you better come out here and see this,” Matthew called from outside.

Austin climbed out and followed Matthew’s stare. From the light of the moon they spotted a large green figure sprawled on the grass down below. Its moans filled the silent night air. Austin let out a gasp and started to run, Matthew on his heels. Out of breath from excitement they stopped at the bottom of the hill heaving. In front of them lay a body, its limb’s twisting back into place. They watched as the green liquid slowly began to cover its body. Suddenly its chest gasped. Matthew and Austin jumped back falling over each other.

“It’s still alive,” Austin whispered.

Its chest caved back in, becoming limp again.

“What do we do?” Matthew asked bewildered.

“What do you mean ‘what do we do’,” Austin snapped.

“We knew what to do if we saw a craft! We never discussed what would happen when we actually found an alien,” Matthew hissed. “What are we going to do with it? Do we take it back home?”

“We can’t leave it here,” Austin protested.

“I know nothing about alien physiology! How do you know moving it won’t kill it?”

“I don’t! But its better if we take it now then have someone discover it later. If we don’t do something now it might die.”

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“It might die anyway!”

Austin stood his ground and Matthew let out a huff. Off in the distance faint sounds of vehicles and sirens echoed across the plains.

“Look we can argue about it later,” Austin hissed. “Right now, it’s best to get him in the van before whoever that is gets here. I am not going to jail!”

More lights shone in the distance. Matthew nodded grudgingly agreeing. Whoever it was, was headed here fast.

“I’ll go get the van.”

Austin sprinted back up the hill. He grabbed small pieces of the craft as he ran. The lights in the distance glowed brighter as Austin reached the van. He started the engine and drove past the debris. Matthew was hunched over the alien, the camera scanning its body. Austin jumped out and grabbed the alien’s torso as Matthew grabbed the legs.

“Man, this alien is heavy,” Austin huffed.

“Not to mention huge and smells,” Matthew panted. “How is he going to fit in the van?”

Austin threw open the back door and lifted with Matthew as they attempted to heave the alien inside. Matthew pushed his legs in as Austin tugged on his torso, shoving boxes out of the way. Once the alien was in Austin slammed the doors shut and ran to the front seat. Matthew tripped and fell into the passenger’s seat as Austin gunned the engine, flying across the countryside.

“What about the ship?” Matthew asked. “We’ll never get a good look at it now.”

Austin pointed under the seats, “I managed to grab some pieces before they were about to show up.”

Matthew slid farther down and peaked underneath.

“Who do you think those people are?” Austin asked checking the rearview mirror.

Matthew turned and looked out the back window. Checking his mirrors, Austin could see the vehicles stopped in the distance, flashlights scanning the area.

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“I don’t know,” Matthew sighed, “maybe the military. Or another branch of government. All I know is we need to come up with a cover story. I bet the sheriff will have no problem pointing them in our direction.”

They drove in silence across the plains before reaching the main road. Austin drove with the lights off taking shortcuts.

“This is crazy,” Austin kept repeating under his breath. “This is freaking crazy.”

CHAPTER 4

Matthew watched the street as they slowly approached the town house. Streetlights flickered high above them. Most of the houses were asleep, save a few college parties still going strong. Neighborhood dogs barked in the distance. Austin's parents had been kind enough to help pay for the town house on the condition Austin went to school. After Matthew dropped out and his parents moved away, Austin asked if Matthew could stay with him. They agreed. Matthew worked hard to pay his part of the rent. They were fortunate enough to get a town house on the edge of the cul-de-sac that came with a garage. Far from prying eyes, they were able to sneak in and out to hunt the skies.

Austin stopped the van and they jumped out. Matthew placed the van in neutral and pushed forward as Austin pulled the garage door up. Slowly the van came to a stop inside. Matthew parked the van while Austin shut the garage door behind them. He flipped on the lights which buzzed and flickered. Matthew opened the back doors and they both stood looking down at the creature.

"He's still unconscious," Austin said after a few minutes. "Where do we put him?"

Matthew and Austin both looked at the creature again as its chest slowly moved up and down. In the harsh florescent light, Matthew realized how frail it was. The lines of green liquid over its body were slowly seeping into every pour. Its ribcage was visible from under the skin. Bruises from the broken bones were blackened. The dark green skin that covered its body was beginning to peel. Its jagged limbs lay unmoving, the long fingers and toes slowly twitching. Its eyes the size of golf balls sealed together.

"What are we going to do?" Austin whispered scared. "What if it's dangerous?"

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“We should have thought of that before we put it in the van,” Matthew hissed.

In a calmer tone he steadied himself, “It doesn't matter now; from what I can tell it looks like it's hurt, so I don't think we're in any danger at the moment. We better take it inside carefully and put it in the basement. I've got an old cot laying around here somewhere we can use to move him.”

They separated and searched the garage. Matthew pushed back boxes filled with old Christmas decorations from when he was a child. After he left school and his parents decided to move, he went to help them pack. While there, they berated him about schooling and not sticking it out. He yelled at them for being pushy and never believing in him. After many heated debates and tears, Matthew left. A few hours later his parents showed up with boxes of stuff they thought Matthew would like to keep. The last time he saw them was watching their moving truck drive up the road and out of his life. He envied Austin's relationship with his parents; they tried to understand and be supportive. After he dropped out, they came through for Matthew when he needed it most. But now was not the time to relive hurt feelings.

“Here it is,” Austin huffed, “it was buried beneath these boxes of books.”

Matthew helped pull as Austin lifted the boxes part way. The cot slowly slid out and they laid it behind the van.

“Will he fit?” Matthew asked examining the alien. “He's pretty tall.”

“We'll make sure to get at least his torso on the cot,” Austin suggested as he slid into the van.

Carefully Austin lifted the alien's shoulders as Matthew grabbed the legs gently. Inching their way forward, the limp body moved onto the cot. Its legs hit the ground, the chest barely fit. Austin wiped his hands on his pants and gagged as the green liquid covered the van and concrete. Matthew held his breath as they lifted the cot and started for the door.

“Man, he's heavier than I realized,” Austin strained.

“Shut up and get moving,” Matthew huffed.

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Austin bumped the door open entering the dark. They both struggled under the creature's increasing weight. Matthew looked around for the light switch as his eyes adjusted in the dark. He ran his hand across the wall and hit the switch. The room filled with light and Matthew pushed on the basement door. Slowly they inched down the stairs in the dark. Once they reached the bottom Matthew hit a switch and the room came alive. An old computer sputtered and flickered on. A hanging light above them popped as they dodged the sparks. They moved the cot along the floor and set the alien down by the back wall. It barely twitched, its closed eyes slowly moving side to side.

"Do you think he'll survive?" Austin asked putting his hand gently on its head.

"I don't know," Matthew admitted, "we could have made his injuries worse by moving him. We really won't know anything till he wakes up."

Austin stepped back and slipped. Matthew looked down and saw a trail of green liquid leading up the stairs. He looked at the cot horrified and realized the green lines were spreading and seeping into the cot, the smell of rot filling the air.

"We have a problem," Matthew gagged.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Austin moaned. "This smells awful."

"We have cleaning supplies under the sink in the kitchen," Matthew said trying to breathe out his mouth, "and we'll need to change our clothes too."

He looked down at his shirt, chunks of green ripping the fabric.

Austin nodded heading to the stairs.

"Go get the camera too," Matthew said moving towards the computer, "I want to check something."

Austin groaned and tried to avoid the trail of liquid as he ran up the stairs. Matthew logged into the computer, quickly checking the security footage. Austin bought the old computer for security reasons only, so Matthew did not get overzealous about snooping on others again. The only footage was their van creeping back

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inside the garage. Matthew looked over at the alien who still laid motionless.

“Please don't ooze to death in the basement.”

Austin returned handing him the camera and a change of clothes. Matthew quickly changed and put the dirty clothes off to the side. Austin started to mop up the liquid while Matthew checked the camera over. He hooked it up to the computer and clicked on the play icon. The video crackled as he paused and unpaused the feed. Austin walked over and they both watched as the picture landed on the alien.

“Look,” Matthew said pausing the video, “see that?”

Austin looked closer, “The green lines weren't as distinct as they are now.”

Matthew hit fast forward and paused again. The image flickered of the alien in the van.

“See, they're getting bigger,” Matthew said looking at the image puzzled. “I saw the same green liquid outside the craft, so I wonder if he has some internal bleeding or a wound on his back. He's losing a lot of blood if that's the case.”

“I didn't feel any cuts on his back when we moved him. Maybe it's our atmosphere,” Austin suggested. “His skin is peeling too which can't be a good sign.”

“That's not the only weird thing,” Matthew said rewinding and pausing, “look at this.”

Austin leaned in closer as Matthew reversed the video. They watched the image of the creature as its limbs moved back into place.

“How the heck did it do that?”

“When you left to get the van,” Matthew explained, “I kept filming and hearing a popping noise. I could not figure out where it was coming from in the dark. Maybe he was healing himself.”

“Is that possible?” Austin asked.

“Maybe. Look at him,” Matthew gestured, “his body is intact. If something was broken, we would've noticed by now.”

“Where do you want to go from here?”

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Matthew rolled his chair over to the edge of the desk and rummaged through the box next to it.

“Here,” Matthew said handing Austin a couple of vials, “put the liquid in here for samples and bring it back to me. Try to get some from the van, stairs, and hallway. I want to see what we are dealing with before we clean it all up. In the meantime, I’ll see if I have any medical equipment leftover from school down here so I can run a few tests.”

Austin jumped back upstairs as Matthew stood up and looked around for his microscope and medical equipment. Through his brief years in college he had taken a few medical classes and found it fascinating. It was the only class he was not ridiculed in. He rummaged through more boxes, unaware that the alien's breath becoming stable. Matthew pulled out a big box and grabbed his microscope. Underneath he found his old medical books and instruments. Matthew blew away the dust and cleared off a table near him. He could hear Austin making his way back downstairs as he set up the instruments and turned on a few more lights.

“Here,” Austin said handing him four vials, “these two are from the van, this one is from the hall and the other from the stairs.”

“Take the thermometer and see if you can get his temperature,” Matthew instructed pointing to a small box next to him.

“Where am I supposed to take his temperature?” Austin asked unsure.

“His mouth, I’m not trying to traumatize you.”

Matthew slowly poured some of the liquid onto the microscope lens. He set it down and peered through.

“It doesn't seem to be alive,” Matthew mumbled, “it's either dormant or dead. There are some strange proteins. It almost... almost looks like some sort of cold virus. It's got enough qualities to be classified as a sickness...”

Matthew adjusted the lens and looked again, “Its structure is amazing... it looks very rigid, almost strategic, as if someone carefully designed it from scratch...”

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“Matthew...” Austin rasped.

“But the way it moves is violent. Like nothing I’ve ever seen before... That can’t be a good sign...”

“Matthew!”

“What,” Matthew snapped turning to Austin.

Austin’s gaze was set on the cot. His eyes were wide. Matthew followed his gaze and froze. The alien's jagged arm began to move up and across his torso. It breathed out a sigh and started to roll facing them. Matthew and Austin jerked back into the table making the microscope jolt.

“It's awake,” Austin gasped.

“I can see that! What do we do now?” Matthew hissed.

The creature slowly moaned and opened his eyes. Matthew grabbed Austin's arm as the alien moved its head facing away from them. Austin grabbed the table holding his breath. The creature turned its head slowly again. Its eyes big milky holes staring blankly. Slowly it looked around the room and it stopped; its eyes fixed on them.

CHAPTER 5

Rajax slowly blinked at the two life forms on the other side of the room. Where were the stars? How did he get here? Rajax looked around at the objects buzzing, squinting at the harsh lights scattering the room. He looked down at his body and lifted his hand slowly. Green liquid slid onto his stomach. Rajax shrieked and frantically started wiping the liquid away. The life forms jumped climbing onto the table behind them. Objects crashed to the floor. Rajax tried to sit up but fumbled out of bed. He looked at the liquid around him. His memory flashed of his body laying paralyzed on the floor of the pod, his back seeping. Was this the Xenos' dead form? He looked over at the beings watching him. They sat unmoving. He tried to pull himself upright, suddenly aware of how foreign he felt in his body. He slipped again, hitting his head on the hard floor.

“What... doing... think... okay...”

Rajax looked over at the beings, now hunched together whispering. They kept glancing over at him worried. Their language was unlike anything he ever heard. Slowly in his weakened state, he could pick out certain words and phrases. Rajax laid on the floor awaiting his fate. They seemed harmless, with no intent on hurting him. Rajax tried to lift his hand to them, signaling he came in peace, but they drew back.

“What do you think it's doing?” Austin whispered as the creature laid its head back.

“I'm not sure,” Matthew said quietly. “Did you see the way it freaked out when it saw the liquid? Maybe it's not blood and it caught something on the way here.”

“That stuff is dormant though right?” Austin said raising his voice.

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Matthew punched him as the creature rolled to face them, cocking its head to the side. Austin held his breath waiting for it to strike, but it closed its eyes.

“Maybe it is sick,” Matthew whispered to him, “it doesn't look like it's going to do any harm.”

“I don't think it has the strength,” Austin whispered back. “Look how he's been moving; he was hardly able to lift his head or even sit upright.”

Austin carefully slid off the table and started to creep towards the creature.

“Are you crazy?” Matthew hissed.

Austin ignored him and continued forward. He stood inches away when the alien opened its eyes. It stared blankly at him and Austin swallowed. He slowly knelt to the ground and put his hand on his chest.

“Austin,” he spoke clearly.

The alien blinked, startled.

“Austin,” he said a little softer.

The alien cocked its head and put its hand on its chest.

Austin smiled, “My name is Austin.”

“Nnn...” the alien began, its voice strained.

“My name is Austin,” he repeated slowly.

“He doesn't understand,” Matthew insisted.

Austin ignored him.

The creature looked at Matthew and back to him.

“My,” Austin started, “Name. Is. Austin.”

“Mm... myyy...” The alien sounded slowly, “nnaammee...”

Austin nodded encouragingly.

“Yes, name,” Austin said his excitement growing, “it's what I am called. My name is Austin.”

He pointed with his other hand to Matthew.

“His name is Matthew. What are you called?”

The alien looked at him to Matthew and back. It was silent for a few minutes.

“Na-Name...name...R-Ra... Rajax,” it said patting its chest.

Austin grinned from ear to ear.

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“Rajax. That is your name? That is what you are called?”

The alien nodded, "Name... Rajax."

He pointed a shaking finger at Austin and Matthew each in turn.

“Name... Austin... name... Matthew.”

“Unbelievable,” Matthew breathed behind him, “truly incredible.”

Austin smiled cheekily at Matthew. He rolled his eyes and slowly moved from the table to the computer.

“Where.... here?” Rajax asked looking around.

Austin turned to him, “This is our home. This is where we reside, where we sleep. This is where we live.”

“Home...” Rajax said wondering.

Suddenly he sat straight up gripping the cot, making Austin and Matthew jump.

“Home...” Rajax repeated longingly, “Need... home... help... home.”

He tried to stand. Austin moved forward lending his arm for support. Rajax stumbled and fell back to the floor, his body slamming onto the cold concrete.

“Home...” he groaned, “Need... help... home.”

Austin slowly bent down and grabbed Rajax’s arm. He tried not to break under the weight as he helped him stand. Green liquid slid down Rajax’s arm and onto the floor, beginning to harden. Austin helped Rajax steady himself against his chest.

“You're still weak from your crash,” Austin tried to explain, “you need rest.”

“Home,” Rajax yelled.

“I understand,” Austin huffed, the liquid beginning to harden around his grip, “I know. But you need to rest.”

Austin tried not to drop Rajax as he helped him sit down on the cot.

“Help...” Rajax begged.

“We will help you and your home. But first you need to rest.” Rajax shook his head frustrated.

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Matthew took a few steps forward, “Do you know what this green liquid is that’s making you sick?”

“I don't think he's up to answering that,” Austin grunted trying to rub it off his skin.

Matthew gestured to Rajax and the floor around him. The liquid was hardening and cracking the floor. Rajax was moving slowly under the weight.

“It's all over the house. I need to know what it is,” Matthew protested. “And all over you, me, and our friend here. The way it’s beginning to crack the foundation around us is not a good sign.”

Austin looked at Rajax, who tried to stand back up.

“Green...” Rajax said angrily, “Green... Backfra!”

He spat and shook the chunks off his hand splattering Austin.

“I don't think 'backfra' is a nice word where he comes from,” Austin whispered to Matthew. He tried to wipe his face beginning to feel feverish.

“Well whatever it means it’s causing more problems than we can handle.”

The stairs cracked behind them as the mass of liquid began to grow.

“What do we do?” Austin asked frantically.

Matthew shook his head speechless. Behind them Rajax moaned and slumped onto the cot. Austin placed his hand on Rajax’s forehead again.

“He’s burning up.”

“Okay here’s the plan,” Matthew told him, “you stay down here and try to move all this liquid and chunks into a pile where we can keep an eye on it. I’ll see what damage it has done to the house and try to—”

A knock sounded loudly from the front door. Austin and Matthew stood frozen. The knock sounded again, softer. They ran to the computer and pulled up the security feed. From the camera outside, three black vans sat facing their house, watching and waiting.

CHAPTER 6

Whitney brushed her light brown hair back and looked through the binoculars again. They had been sitting outside Austin and Matthew's house for almost an hour, with no movement from inside. She looked up at the roof as the first signs of dawn illuminated the sky. Their time was running out. Her memory traveled back to the times she tucked herself away in that house searching the skies, but never truly looking up. Now here she was again with a different crew in tow. After being approached by Director Parkson, the leader of a branch in Homeland Security, her life had never been the same. With such short notice she never got to say goodbye. She left behind her friends and mother for a chance of discovery. Becoming Parkson's second-in-command, she was able to expand her knowledge of the unknown.

Whitney shook away her guilt and tapped on the monitor again. After discovering pieces of a makeshift satellite and several accusations from the sheriff, they arrived at Austin and Matthew's house to set up recon. The technicians on her team were having trouble getting a look inside, measures Matthew set up for that purpose.

"If this goes on any longer, I'm calling the team in," a voice from the back growled.

Whitney turned around and glared at Parkson his impatience tiring. When their computers first picked up the crafts, they both jumped at the chance. They watched the radar as the objects headed for North Dakota. Whitney knew Austin and Matthew would beat them to it. Little to her surprise she was right. Parkson insisted she stay behind at the base, as to not compromise her professionalism. Whitney knew his ulterior motive. Her job as second-in-command was to serve as a humanitarian for all aliens Earth would encounter. The President had specifically requested her, despite Parkson's insistence he could fill the position himself.

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Whitney knew little of her successors that dated back to Roswell, but she knew enough to know none of them fought him on issues as much as she did. While she held steadfast to putting lives first, Parkson fought for the advancement in technology by any means necessary.

“Do you want to scare them?” she asked. “They’re inside with an alien lifeform. Do we want to muck up this extraction?”

“Well what do you suggest?” Parkson growled.

Whitney paused. She looked over at the house hesitating.

“Let me go in.”

Parkson laughed, “That’s not going to happen.”

Whitney glared at him, “Do you want a way in or not?”

“What I want we can get by sending teams in now to raid the house.”

“But what I can get you is cooperation and a live alien body. Or should I contact the morgue now?”

Parkson glared at her, “I know it needs to come with us alive.”

Whitney held her ground, “Then I ask again: Do you want a way in or not?”

She watched as Parkson scrunched his forehead in thought.

“Wear a wire,” he finally said. “Whatever came out of that wreckage is coming back with us whether they like it or not.”

Whitney nodded and the agent next to them began pulling equipment out of a box. She set the monitor and microphone to the same frequency. Parkson turned around as Whitney tucked the battery pack under her shirt. She slid the microphone into her suit jacket pocket and pulled her shirt down, adjusting herself.

“Keep the van close in case it’s hurt,” Whitney instructed. “Our equipment is better than anything they have in there. The code word will be ‘picnic’. That is when and only when it is safe to come in. I do not want any gunfire. Make it as orderly as possible, we can’t arouse the neighbors too much.”

Whitney opened her door, grabbing a bag next to her and stood outside the van. She sized up the house. It looked a lot smaller than she remembered. Closing the door behind her, she

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slowly walked across the street and onto the grass. Whitney stared at the door and paused. The house sat still. Muddy tire marks leading up to the garage showed they were home. Slowly, she lifted her hand and knocked firmly. Nothing stirred from inside. She gently knocked on the door again. The camera above the door turned slowly facing the street. It paused, Whitney imagining their shocked faces. It moved back to face the door and she waved shyly. Inside several thumps and bumps sounded from behind the door, increasing her anxiety. She had little time to prepare herself as the doorknob moved. A bewildered Matthew stood in the cracked doorway and she forced a smile. He looked her up and down.

“Whitney,” he said coldly.

Whitney breathed out a bit, “Matthew. It's good to see you.”

“Is it?” Matthew asked crossly. “You disappear for three years and now you take the time to show up? Do you know we helped move your ailing mother to New York without your help?”

Whitney's anger rose, “I know that, and she's passed away. Thanks for asking.”

His face reddened, “I'm sorry I—”

“—It's fine,” she interrupted, “I came to mend bridges. Can I come in?”

Matthew peeked around her.

“I see you brought guests.”

Whitney waved her hand dismissively, “It's just a couple of company friends. We are on a trip passing through. We needed a detour and getting a motel room for everyone in a small town isn't possible, so we're camping in the vans.”

Matthew stared at her, the lie showing through.

“May I come in?” she asked again, her tone serious.

Whitney watched Matthew's gaze as it shifted to the vans and back to her, the gears in his head turning wildly.

“All right...” Matthew hesitated, “but only for a little bit.”

Whitney smiled at him and stepped in as the door shut tightly behind her. She looked around at the dimly lit house silently reminiscing. Everything was the same. The large map of the

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country above the dinner table was filled with thumbtacks of UFO sightings. College textbooks littered the coffee table. She sniffed the air, a foul odor making her cough. Whitney noticed blankets and sheets littering the floor heading to the basement. From the darkness she heard muffled moans. Matthew leaned up against the wall trying to keep his cool.

“It's been awhile since I've been in town,” Whitney started slowly. “Not much has changed. I did see that the gas station down the street has a small pizza place connected to it. Have you tried—”

Matthew held up his hand stopping her, “Can you just get to the part of why you're really here? I hate small talk.”

Whitney composed herself.

“Last night,” she began, “objects entered our atmosphere. We were tracking their trajectory to the fields outside of town. When we arrived, we found strong evidence that suggests you beat us there. I believe you have something we are looking for.”

“How do you know it was us?” Matthew questioned trying to hide his fear. “Is it because the sheriff pointed his finger at us? Or are you trying to get us to keep quiet because this is a secret government plot?”

“No,” Whitney said steadily, “there were tire tracks by the site that match the van. We have satellite images of you and Austin there an hour before the landings. Also, as always when you guys run, you didn't tie down the satellite. I have the dish in the back of the van.”

Matthew shrugged, “It was probably from a different night.”

Whitney looked at him annoyed, “There are muddy tire tracks leading up to the garage.”

“So?”

She reached into her bag and pulled out their binoculars, “I believe these belong to you as well. The evidence is against you.”

Matthew's panicked eyes gave away his lie, “Those aren't ours.”

“How thick do you think I am?”

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Another moan sounded from below. Whitney eyed the basement as Matthew stood in front of it.

“Yes, we were there,” he admitted. “But we left before anything happened. We did not want to get caught again. You know, with the sheriff threatening us and all. We didn't see anything.”

“Look, Matthew...” Whitney started.

Footsteps thudded up from below as Austin slammed into Matthew. Whitney took a step back. His face was red and blistering, green plates covered his clothes.

“Hey, we got a problem with Ra—”

Austin collapsed on the floor coughing. Blood splattered the blankets.

“What the hell did you find?” Whitney asked panicking.

“Wait,” Matthew yelled as she pushed past him.

Matthew grabbed at her jacket as she jumped down the stairs. She reached the bottom and stopped gasping. An alien laid convulsing on the floor in a pool of green liquid. It bubbled and popped as it hardened on the skin. It looked around the room, its eyes glazing over as the plates travelled up its body. The floor around the creature began to erode and crack shaking the house. It reached out its hand to them and moaned.

“What is going on?” Whitney asked bewildered.

The front door slammed open as agents came flying down the stairs. Parkson followed them, his eyes widening at the scene. He came and stood by the creature.

“You were taking too long,” he shot at Whitney. Parkson looked at Matthew, “How long has it been like this?”

“Who—”

“—Answer the question Matthew,” Whitney snapped.

“I don't know,” Matthew said his fear rising. “It wasn't this bad earlier. At first it was just liquid, but it was increasing and starting to harden. Is Austin going to be okay?”

“We have our doctors helping him now,” Parkson said slipping on gloves. “Where is it coming from?”

“I don't know!”

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Whitney looked at Matthew, reality setting in his gaze. She jerked her head to an agent.

“Take him out of here and find a place for him to stay.”

Matthew pulled away from the agent.

“No way,” he spat trying to get closer to the alien, “We found him; you can't take him.”

“And I suppose you have proper medical experience to take care of him and your friend,” Parkson mocked.

Whitney looked from Parkson, to Matthew, then to the alien. She pulled on gloves and touched its forehead. Heat throbbed through the glove as the liquid hardened around her fingers. The alien's breath was short and fast. Its eyes were shut tightly in pain.

“We can help it and Austin properly back at the base,” she said with authority. “We have the proper equipment to help them. If you care about their lives, you will let us take them. If you want to see this through, get in the van.”

Parkson started to object but Whitney shot him a look. He stayed quiet. Matthew looked at the creature and to the upstairs. He nodded.

“Okay... but I don't like it,” Matthew agreed.

“Neither do I,” Parkson mumbled waving his hand.

Matthew followed Parkson up the stairs. A hazmat team climbed downstairs surrounding Whitney.

“Ma'am we need to move it now,” one said leaning down next to her.

She nodded and started to stand when the alien opened its eyes. It looked around terrified at the masks staring down.

“It's all right,” Whitney said gently, “We're here to help. Everything is going to be alright.”

Whitney watched as the alien turned its head and looked at her with big empty eyes. She could see a spark of curiosity, showing there was life still beating. It nodded slowly; its eyes fixed firmly on her. She was amazed at how well it understood.

“These men,” she pointed around her, “are going to put you on a stretcher and put you in a van. We are taking you to a place

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where we can properly help you. There is no need to be afraid. No harm will come to you.”

Whitney stood back as the others crowded around and helped the creature onto the stretcher. She climbed up the stairs first and watched as they maneuvered the stretcher up. It began to crack under the liquid’s acidic state. At the top they moved the alien into an isolation cart. Whitney pulled off her gloves and handed them to one of the hazmat team members.

“Make sure this gets analyzed,” she instructed. “We’re going to have to quarantine the house to make sure none escapes. Watch your step and recheck that the medical lab at the base is fully equipped to handle this. Come up with any cover story that seems appropriate. No one comes in or out without proper clearance.”

He nodded and Whitney peeked out the window. The street was slowly coming alive, curious eyes peering around the police tape. One van remained to ferry them back to base. Whitney hoped Matthew would be alright with Parkson until she returned. She feared for Austin, his blood covering the floor. Whitney grabbed a sheet off Austin’s bed and carried it over to the alien. A hazmat team member pulled over the shield cover, trapping it inside. With its limited mobility it began to bang on the shield cracking the glass. Whitney placed her hand on the shield; it stopped.

“You’ll be okay,” she reassured it. “This is a precaution we take as to not infect anyone else. I am going to have to place this sheet over you for a while. I promise, you will be safe.”

Its breath started to ease as it watched her. The alien placed its hand on the glass under her own. Whitney watched the creature as she covered its body, exhaustion overtaking it.

CHAPTER 7

“How are they doing?” Matthew asked as he paced the floor.

Two days passed since his arrival with Parkson. The drive was silent, Matthew’s brain exploding with questions. They arrived at an old airplane hangar in the middle of nowhere as the sun began to set. The vans pulled inside, and Matthew’s face was covered before they climbed out. His breath was shallow under the mask as they dragged him across the hangar. He was shoved into an elevator with Parkson and they descended. Matthew tried to pull the mask away but Parkson ordered it not to be removed. When they stopped, he could hear hushed voices as they walked into a cool hallway. Matthew began to feel lightheaded as he was dragged through the mysterious building. A short time later he collapsed unconscious.

He awoke sometime later in a hospital bed, Whitney and Parkson yelling. After almost suffocating, Whitney tore into Parkson that if he ever did that again he would have to go through her. Parkson held his ground, confident his actions were justified. As he put it, Matthew and Austin had no business being there to begin with. Matthew learned Austin was in Intensive Care along with the Alien. Austin was recovering well, the blisters on his face subsiding. The green liquid poisoned his skin and blood, trying to adapt itself to his biology. Austin’s recovery would be a breeze as opposed to Rajax. The green liquid formed a cocoon over his body and his heart rate slowed immensely. All they could do was study the process and try to keep him alive.

After spending the day in quarantine, Matthew was permitted to leave. The doctors cleared him as he showed no signs of infection. Whitney ordered he be taken to the conference room pending his questioning on the incident. His curiosity spike as he followed the agent out. The hall was filled with scientists and doctors hard at work, huddling together discussing plans. Locked

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doors lined the hallways, unearthly sounds coming from the other side. Matthew had so many questions to ask but the agent was silent as they walked. The conference room was empty when they arrived. Matthew tried to sit calmly but could not contain his anxiety any longer. The agent watched him from the door, tightening his jaw.

“They will be with you soon sir,” he said annoyed. “Sit down and you will be briefed shortly.”

“I’ve been waiting for hours,” Matthew protested.

“Sit. Down,” the agent said evenly.

Matthew slumped into a chair. The minutes ticked by as he waited. He started to close his eyes when the door clicked. Matthew shot up out of his chair and Austin entered the room. He looked pale, red spots covering his face. Matthew pulled out a chair and Austin sat down timidly. They waited for the agent to leave before whispering.

“How are you feeling?” Matthew asked.

Austin rubbed his forehead, “I feel sick to my stomach, but that could be all the drugs they gave me. I have been pumped with so many things to get these blisters clear I don’t know what’s working and what’s not. Good news is I’m not throwing up blood anymore.”

Matthew noticed how tired he looked, “Should we have left Rajax where we found him?”

Austin turned to him, “I may have almost died, but I don’t regret helping him. We made first contact with an alien, that counts for something.”

The door opened grabbing their attention. Whitney and Parkson walked in with two scientists and a doctor behind them. She smiled at them and sat down near the beginning of the table. Parkson sat on her right side, eyeing them, as the scientists and doctor took a seat on the left.

“Gentlemen this is Mr. Loughty and Mr. Alcott,” Parkson said pointing to them in turn. “These are the... men who found our patient. They are the UFO buffs Director Blake used to truck around with.”

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Whitney shot a glare at Parkson as he sneered. The scientists looked at them a little surprised. Austin nodded his head in greeting and Matthew let out a breath.

“Now to business,” Parkson said straightening up and looking with authority. “It seems that since Mr. Loughty and Alcott found the creature, the President has agreed they receive level two security clearance. That will restrict them to floors one through seven and limited access to the medical bay with an escort at all times.”

“Where are we anyway?” Matthew asked.

Parkson huffed and Whitney looked at him to answer.

“Hanger Alpha,” she explained, “in Wyoming. This Department of Homeland Security is called Chora. Here we work with members of NASA and other skilled scientists on communicating or preventing those outside our atmosphere from harming citizens. We work with other nations in Chora who have our same interests in mind. We make sure whatever technology acquired from space is utilized in a manner to help us progress. You will find we are well equipped to protect the planet by any means necessary.”

“How long has this been going on?” Austin asked.

Parkson cleared his throat and glared at them.

“If you do not mind, we’re terribly busy. Your questions will be answered along the way.”

Matthew was about to object but Whitney shot him a look and he stayed silent.

“Were you able to communicate with the alien?” a scientist asked.

Matthew nodded, “He was able to tell us his name is Rajax and his people are in danger.”

“What kind of danger?”

“We didn’t get that far,” Austin put in.

“Is he stable now Dr. Bishop?” Parkson asked ignoring them.

“Yes,” the doctor answered. “It appears that this green substance that has formed over his body is now dormant and therefore not a threat.”

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“What about the damage it did to me?” Austin asked.

“My best assumption is that by moving him in such an abrupt manner caused his cocooning process to disrupt. His natural fluids were not able to connect properly and therefore attached themselves to you, poisoning your skin and blood,” Dr. Bishop explained.

“It’s not part of him,” Matthew muttered.

Parkson glared at him, “Do you have something to add?”

“It’s not part of him,” Matthew repeated louder. “When Rajax was conscious, he was afraid of the substance. He was angry. It could be what’s plaguing his people.”

“He may be right,” a scientist agreed, “the samples we have gathered are showing two distinct DNA patterns. It is possible it came from the alien’s world, or something he picked up on the way here.”

“I didn't get a good look at the green liquid, but it seems to be a virus of some kind,” Matthew added.

“Is there a health risk?” Parkson asked the second scientist.

“Only if touched in its liquid state. Now that the cocoon has finished forming, there is no harm in contact. Everyone has been monitored and checked. There is no contagion in the air either.”

“My question is why didn’t Austin suffer the same effects as Patient Zero,” Whitney interrupted.

Parkson glared at her, “That is for level eight security clearance and will not be discussed at this time.”

Matthew looked at Austin curiously but kept his mouth shut.

“What will happen to us now?” Matthew asked. “What about our home?”

“We’ll get to that later,” Parkson said.

“What about Rajax? Is he going to live?” Austin asked. “He seems pretty fervent on getting help.”

The others were silent. Whitney looked at the scientists, then to Austin.

“We don't know...” she started, “even in this cocoon state he is in a lot of pain. From what we have been able to monitor, there

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are dramatic changes going on inside. All we can do is try to study this effect and make him as comfortable as possible.”

“When can we see him?”

“You can’t demand to see him whenever you want,” Parkson interrupted.

“As soon as you settle in,” Whitney said glancing at Parkson. “We’ll need to issue your level two badges and set up living quarters. As far as the public is concerned you had a science experiment gone wrong and suffered several burns. The townhouse has been condemned and you were transferred to a burn facility to recover. Your parents will be informed that you are in good hands.”

She stood and Austin and Matthew followed. Parkson grumbled under his breath and turned to the scientists and doctor speaking quietly. Whitney waved over to an agent who took his place behind them.

“Just so we’re clear,” she said glancing at Matthew, “you will comply with having an escort at all times until no longer necessary.”

Matthew ignored her. Whitney swiped her card for the elevator, and they waited in awkward silence.

“So how big is this place?” Austin inquired.

“Forty floors. That’s all I can disclose.”

“What about the levels we’re allowed on?” Matthew asked.

Whitney swiped her card again, “It’s mostly conference rooms, housing, the cafeteria, and gym. Enough to keep you busy till we find a suitable place for you here.”

“Are we hired?” Austin joked.

Whitney looked at him, “Think of it as an internship. You do a good job and obey the rules, maybe you’ll get to stay.”

The elevator arrived and they climbed in.

“Shouldn’t we know about this place?” Matthew questioned.

Whitney hit a button, “To a degree. You can look and see that this department’s information is available to those who ask.”

“So only selective people know?”

Whitney nodded. The elevator beeped as it ascended.

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“How much classified stuff do you know,” Austin pried.

Whitney looked at him playfully, “That’s not for level two clearance to worry about.”

“What level of clearance do you have?” Matthew pried as the elevator stopped.

Whitney led them out and down the hall.

“Classified as well,” she smirked.

Whitney escorted them towards a room on the left and swiped her card. The door pushed open and she led them inside. Matthew and Austin slowly stalked in and looked around. The room resembled a small office with one large desk and a few chairs on the side. The agent looked up and smiled. Her blonde hair was sleeked back in a bun, her complexion warm.

“Welcome. Let’s get started,” she said.

“This is Agent Angela Myer,” Whitney explained, “she’s in charge of personnel and security. She will be taking you back in turn to get your ID’s, fingerprints, badges, the works. You will also be assigned sleeping quarters. When you are both done, we’ll check on Rajax’s condition.”

“So double A”, Austin smiled leaning on the desk, “that’s a great code name.”

Agent Myer rolled her eyes and smiled, “I was told you were funny, but I wouldn’t get too close. It looks like you’ve got other problems.”

Austin’s face turned red and Matthew rolled his eyes.

“Mr. Loughty can go first,” she instructed, “Mr. Alcott, you can wait out here with Director Blake until I’m ready for you.”

Agent Myer waved Austin over to a door on the side of the room. Whitney nodded to the seats and Matthew sat down. He could here Austin’s muffled confidence from behind the wall. Whitney leaned against the desk, taking out a small device and punching in commands.

“Will Austin have the scarring forever?” he asked.

Whitney shrugged, “We’ve come far with advancements in medical technology; he should clear up in the next week.”

They waited in silence.

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“A lot of people seem to know who we are,” Matthew stated after a few minutes.

Whitney stopped and looked up at him, “You two are the closest I have to family, why would I not talk about you? Besides, you did crack into our private server. That was a tremendous headache I had to go through for a month. Anyway, I thought Austin and Angela would really hit it off. I’ve been hoping you guys would get here eventually.”

“As opposed to before?”

“If you want to stay angry with me about that fine. But don’t think for a second I didn’t fight for your chance to be here.”

Matthew was about to shoot back a retort when Austin returned. Agent Myer called Matthew back and he entered the small room off to the side. He was surprised as how quickly the process took. He stood on a small plate as Agent Myer stood by a computer and began the scanning process. Small blue LED lights glowed on the wall as their light traveled from his feet to his head. Within minutes she had all the information she needed and handed him his badge and living arrangements.

When they were ready, they said their goodbyes and left. Whitney opened the door and waved for them to go first. Matthew pushed Austin forward as he waved another goodbye to Angela. Returning to the elevator they descended further inside and came to a halt. The doors opened to the Medical Level; the floor dark with red lights flashing on the wall. Alarms blared echoing the hallway. Whitney ran over to a speaker box.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“Something’s wrong with the alien,” a doctor responded, “we need you in here.”

Whitney turned to them; her eyes filled with worry.

“Change of plans, you’ll be taken to your rooms.”

The agent pulled them back towards the elevator.

“What’s going on?” Matthew asked as the door closed.

“I wish I knew,” Whitney whispered.

CHAPTER 8

Whitney paused before opening the door to the medical bay. She knew Austin and Matthew had a flurry of questions assaulting the agent's ears. No one had a clear answer of what would happen to Rajax. She worried about what lay on the other side of the door. All their hard work might come to an end. Slowly, she pushed the door open as the alarms grew louder. She ran to the window. On the other side of the wall the cocoon glowed brightly, revealing Rajax's outline. He shook and convulsed inside as hazmat team members set up a perimeter beyond the bed. Dr. Bishop and his team kept scanning the monitors as they tried to stabilize his condition. Rajax began screaming inside, cracking the glass. Parkson stood beside her deep in thought. Dr. Bishop stepped outside and shook his head.

"What happened?"

"He's been like this for almost half an hour," Dr. Bishop explained to her. "When I returned my team was already working to stabilize him."

"Why wasn't I immediately informed?"

"I had it under control," Parkson answered.

Before she could reply Bishop continued, "We believe the last of this 'virus' or whatever has cocooned over his body is in its last stages. I'll be surprised if he makes it."

Whitney placed her hand on the glass and watched Rajax.

"Is there anything we can do?" she asked quietly.

Parkson lifted his head and cleared his throat, "We've set up hazmat in case something goes wrong. Whatever he has been swimming in is bound to have the same effects on us as it did on Mr. Loughty. I suggest Dr. Bishop, that you remove your team."

Whitney turned away as Rajax screamed louder. She shut her eyes and folded her arms carefully.

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“Quite the fighter,” Parkson mumbled, “too bad all that knowledge is about to go down the drain.”

Whitney looked at him shocked.

“Is that all you care about? What knowledge he has?” she asked angrily. “He's dying and there's nothing we can do. All you've wanted since the beginning was that ship, you don't care what becomes of him!”

Parkson glared at her, “That's not true.”

“Yes, it is. I was brought on to be the compassionate side you do not possess. All this technology you've acquired over the years and we've barely scratched the surface.”

“May I remind you; you haven't been here since the beginning. You do not know how I have fought for this department, even at Roswell. I know what they say, but I had every right to the choices I made.”

Whitney slid towards Parkson meeting his hard gaze.

“I'm here because of what happened after Roswell. I am here to help preserve life outside our world. You best remember that.”

Whitney and Parkson held their cold stares, Dr. Bishop shifting uncomfortably. The room became silent. They whipped around and faced the glass. Rajax laid motionless inside the cocoon, the heart monitor barely moving. The light from inside slowly faded. Dr. Bishop pulled his team out as hazmat circled the bed. The cocoon darkened, solidifying Rajax inside. Whitney held her breath. Parkson tapped the glass. The heart monitor stopped.

“All for nothing,” he muttered.

The cocoon cracked, shaking the room. Whitney ran for the door.

“You can't go in there,” a doctor yelled.

Whitney ignored him and rushed in. The nearest hazmat member grabbed her before she could get any closer. She stared at the cocoon, more cracks beginning to form. A hand pressed against the side.

“He's still alive,” she gasped.

Whitney reached forward as another crack shook the room. The hazmat team member covered her as the blast from the cocoon

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slammed them against the wall. She coughed through the smoke and dust as the lights flickered above them. Shattered remains of the cocoon laid about the room. She squinted through the dust searching for the bed. It laid in a disintegrated heap under Rajax, where he knelt. He no longer looked like the frail green creature they had found a few days before. His muscles rippled under his light blue skin, his tall stature returning. Short hair on his head shined a blackened silver in the florescent light. His eyes were sealed closed. Whitney slowly stood and treaded lightly to him. She lifted her hand and placed it on his shoulder. Rajax's eyes flew open at her touch. They shone with dark silver light.

He grabbed her arm tightly and she tried to pull away. Rajax held his grip and slowly stood. He towered over her, his eyes adjusting to the light. The hazmat members jumped back as agents flooded the room. Two agents tackled him, attempting to release his grip. Whitney stumbled at their attempt; her arm was pulled from its socket. She let out a sharp gasp as a third agent slammed into Rajax. He let go as he fell to the ground. Whitney jumped back as the team wrestled to keep him down. She held her arm tightly.

“Stop,” she yelled over the fighting.

Rajax stopped and looked over at her, his ears perking at her voice. His eyes focused on her.

“You're safe,” she said calmly, “it's over.”

He looked at her curiously. She instructed the agents to let go. They backed up; their eyes fixed on him. He looked around the room tensely.

“You're safe,” she repeated.

Rajax slowly stood, swaying. More agents entered the room behind her followed by a few doctors. Whitney turned to them. Dr. Bishop stood amazed with Parkson at his side. She could not read his expression. They kept their distance and she turned to Rajax.

“We will help you,” Whitney assured him.

His gaze drifted to her as he stumbled. An agent shot him with a tranquilizer dart and Rajax fell to the floor.

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Rajax slowly opened his eyes. The harsh light above him was blinding. Squinting, he turned his head. His memory was a blur. He remembered the stars above him. He remembered two dark haired men and a dusty room. He remembered his fear of the masked faces that carried him. His last memory was falling as a brown-haired woman came to his side clutching her arm. Now he was in a different room, a different bed. As his eyes adjusted, he looked around. A chair and small table sat on the other side of the room. There were strange noises coming from the machines next to him. His gaze followed the tubes and wires, sticking into his skin.

He started to panic and pull at his restraints but stopped. Rajax looked at his skin. It was blue; the wonderful blue that he barely remembered from long ago. Tears formed in his eyes. The familiar weight of hair rested on his head. Breaking his hands free, Rajax ran fingers through the blackened silver locks. A tear slipped down his face. He looked up at the glass in front of his bed. His reflection stared back. It had been so long since he felt like himself. So long since he was his own person.

The door to the room slowly opened and he wiped his face. Three beings entered the room. The two men in front smiled at him. The woman hung back, her arm in a sling. He recognized them.

“You... helped... me...” he said slowly.

“I told you he didn’t forget us,” one the men joked.

“Don’t rush him Austin,” the woman said. “He’s been unconscious for a while. Give him time.”

Rajax’s memory began to clear. He remembered Austin sitting with him when he woke in the dusted room. His friendly nature set him apart. The man next to him with a rigid stance was his friend.

“Aus....tin,” Rajax said pointing to him.

Austin beamed, “Right! I’m called Austin, and you remember Matthew.”

Rajax looked at him. Matthew nodded politely, but in his eyes Rajax could see his excitement.

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“This is our friend Whitney,” Matthew said nodding to the woman. She smiled warmly.

“We... met...” Rajax replied.

“You've been out for a few days,” Whitney explained sitting down in the chair next to him. “We are happy with how you are progressing. It looks like you'll make a full recovery, since the green substance has subsided.”

Rjax's face fell. In his own excitement, his mind slipped as to why he had come.

“Home...” he gasped sitting up, “Help...”

They jumped. Whitney placed her hand on his gently. Rajax sat back, his head swimming.

“I know. Austin mentioned that you need help,” she said calmly, “but right now you need to get stronger. Whatever happened took a lot out of you. We are still trying to understand it all. You need lots of rest. We will do everything we can. I promise.”

Rjax shifted anxiously but could feel his body tiring. He looked at Austin and Matthew.

“Thank you...”

“Thank you,” Matthew said glancing at Whitney. “Since you showed up, we know why Whitney ditched us all those years ago.”

Whitney shot him a look but said nothing. Rajax could see the strained past written on their faces. He did not understand the way they behaved. Their strong emotions about each other subsided. Whitney patted Rajax's hand and smiled.

“If you're up to it, would it be alright if I asked some small questions?”

“I have some big questions of my own,” a voice from the door said.

Rjax looked past Whitney. A tall older man, with a dignified posture and bitterly fake smile entered the room. The grey hair on his head was thinning, revealing deep wrinkles. His clear beady eyes made Rajax nervous. He tried to swallow the unsettling lump in his throat. Rajax saw Whitney clench her jaw.

“Right,” Austin said uneasy, “we'll see you later.”

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They walked past the gentleman in the doorway and out. The man looked at Whitney and she crossed her arms, standing her ground. Tension rose in the air. The man adjusted his tie and grunted. Whitney nodded in return. The man walked over to the other side of the bed and smiled at Rajax.

“My name is Director Parkson,” he said holding out his hand. Rajax looked down at his hand and back at him.

“Oh, so sorry,” Parkson said drawing his hand back, “in our culture we shake hands in greeting. But you are restrained to the bed. How foolish of me.”

Rajax lifted his hands, startling Parkson. Whitney smirked.

“I didn’t realize you broke through.”

“Security has been watching. He’s done nothing to harm others,” Whitney defended.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Parkson sneered nodding to her arm.

Rajax looked at Whitney’s sling and back to Parkson.

“Have... I... wrong...” Rajax attempted to get out.

Whitney waved her good hand, “It’s fine.”

Tension heightened in the air.

“Name...” Rajax said breaking the silence, “Name... Rajax.”

Parkson turned to him, “Ah yes! I have heard. If you do not mind, I have a few questions about the craft you arrived in.”

“How about we start with simple questions,” Whitney said sternly.

Rajax looked from Parkson to Whitney and back.

“I... do...not know.... mu.... much.... about....it...”

“Is it not from your planet?” Parkson asked. “Did you steal it from another planet? Are there two different species on your planet? How far is it from here? Can we salvage the craft? Are there more coming?”

Rajax tried to answer but could not think of the words. The language barrier was still present. Director Parkson seemed so intent on knowing how he got here instead of why. He was overwhelmed, trying to understand and answer the flurry of

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questions. Rajax opened his mouth to reply but nothing came. He shifted uncomfortably as Parkson's gaze turned to frustration.

"Let Rajax answer after he's had rest," Whitney said with authority.

She took a step closer to the bed. Parkson let out a huffed sigh and looked at Rajax and smiled.

"When you're ready to answer questions, I'd be happy to return."

He nodded curtly at Whitney and stormed out. Rajax looked at her as she sighed unclenching.

"You.... n... not... like...him?"

Whitney suppressed a sigh, "We have a different way of doing things. We are both working on trying to take each other's suggestions. Some days are better than others."

Rjax cocked his head to the side confused.

Whitney smiled, "It's an expression."

She looked at the door then back at Rajax.

"I should let you get some rest. If you would like, maybe later you could answer some questions I have. They are not as demanding as Director Parkson's. And of course, I will answer any questions you have about us. I know this can be overwhelming. You are in a strange place with strange people. I hope you don't hold any ill will against us as we try to maneuver through this process together."

She turned to go.

"That...me?" he asked.

Whitney stopped and looked down at her arm.

"It was right after you broke free of the cocoon. You were probably frightened; I don't blame you. We are still trying to understand the process, which is along the lines of the more difficult questions we'll be asking. Besides, it's an occupational hazard when you're reckless."

"Reckless..."

Whitney forced a smile, "It was a defensive move, and a pretty impressive one if I might add. Not many people can catch me off guard."

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Rajax smiled slightly and his eyes grew heavy. His body tired more. She moved towards the door.

“Whitney...” he said softly.

She turned around and looked at him.

“Yes?”

“I... am...”

Rajax could not finish his apology as his eyes closed shut.

CHAPTER 9

Several months passed as Rajax tried to regain his strength. He was restless, deeply troubled by his beloved Trem-NA. The Xenos had taken a huge toll on his body. It was weeks before he could get out of bed without his head spinning. Dr. Bishop and his team visited him daily, checking the monitors, changing the IV bag, helping him in and out of bed. They introduced him to small varieties of food as his appetite began to grow. After shuffling around the room regaining balance, he was allowed into the rehabilitation center. Whitney would join him in a session from time to time, helping Rajax as his muscles regained their strength. Her presence was encouraging, even when Rajax wanted to quit. She helped him push the limits and soon he could get around on his own. The dark clouds he walked around with began to clear. Soon Rajax was back to his old self as much as he could remember.

Austin came to visit often, his arms full of language books. He sat with Rajax as they started off small and slowly progressed throughout the months. After a few weeks Rajax was speaking in perfect sentences. Each time Austin visited, Rajax begged for more books. He put in a special request with Agent Myer and soon Rajax had a library of his own. Rajax read anything they could find, from classics to comic books. The paper was rough, different from the smooth circle books on Trem-NA. Rajax broke down and cried for hours clutching the books as Austin watched, feeling uncomfortable.

Matthew tried to expand Rajax's horizons by bringing maps and books about the different cultures and environments around Earth. The information was overwhelming, but Rajax never gave up. He was amazed at how big their world was. There were so many different people and languages. So many ideologies and cultures. So many climates and animals. Matthew tried to answer

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Rajax's in-depth questions as best he could, realizing this was a task for someone who had more patience. Rajax tried to study the information himself as Matthew was a loss for words at his questions. He made sure Matthew knew his help was appreciated.

Whitney stopped in when she could, but Parkson kept her busy with the ship. As soon as she entered Rajax's room Parkson wasn't far behind, hounding for any information he had. Rajax's memory still had not returned, making Parkson irritable by the day. Whitney spent weeks analyzing data to judge the ships trajectory and possible place of origin. Ultimately, they handed it over to the experts at the Space Center for a more detailed analysis. Her own project kept her busy as she readied it for the President's approval. She spent her time running from one meeting to another. Whitney always kept Rajax's interest in mind.

She wanted to know more about Rajax and his people, but she did not want to press him. He was very lost, his memories locked inside his mind. Each day he spent meditating, his legs crossed and forefinger resting on his chin. Small rays of clarity shone through the clouds time to time. She knew he cared deeply about his people and was desperate to get back to them. She watched from behind the two-way glass as he clutched the books sobbing. Whitney caught a glimpse now and then of him sitting alone in his room, his eyes filled with tears and homesickness. Her heart ached for him. She knew whatever his people suffered could be their own fate.

Austin found himself being bored to death. After helping Rajax learn their language, Austin's days blurred into one. He tried to find other subjects to teach Rajax, but the guards shoved him away. Matthew was convinced their time with Rajax was fleeting because Parkson was ready to kick them out. Austin tried to ignore Matthew's paranoia, but did not leave the possibility behind. He knew this was the best place for Rajax. Austin tried to stretch his legs by walking the base, but his clearance did not get him far. The confinement was starting to wear on his mind. He started spending more time in the gym, the other agents beginning to take notice. At first, they avoided him. After a commander showed an interest in

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his skill, the agents began to ask him to join. Austin found himself more at ease, meeting more people and starting small friendships.

Matthew was becoming restless, his paranoia taking over. He felt like a fish in a bowl. After Rajax decided to study Earth himself, Matthew was lost on what to do. He bullied Whitney into helping the scientists analyze the green substance to give himself something to do. She barely put up a fight. Being in a lab put him at ease. Matthew worked well with the scientists, discussing different theories. It surprised him that many were interested in his conclusions, unlike his former college classmates. He worked closely with one scientist, who always clutched his worn-down notebook. Though the lab was calmer, Matthew could hear the whispers throughout the halls, tension in the air, as if everyone was waiting for a battle.

Rajax slowly cracked his eyes open and stretched. He sat up feeling rested and looked around his room. Everything was still the same except he had a visitor. Rajax cocked his head to the side as he watched Whitney slouched down in the chair, slowly breathing in and out. Her head rested on her hand. Rajax could not help but smile.

“Whitney,” he called softly.

She barely moved.

“Whitney,” Rajax called louder.

She shot up and looked at him embarrassed.

“I’m so sorry,” she said trying to look professional, “I came to see how you were doing and you were sleeping. I guess I dozed off.”

“It is all right,” he assured her.

She smiled slightly and stood, “I thought maybe you’d like to take a walk and we could talk.”

“Are we going to the gym?” he asked.

“I was thinking maybe we can walk the halls,” Whitney smiled. “You could see more of the base. Maybe take a trip up to see where Austin and Matthew are staying.”

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Rajax's spirits lifted. His confinement to his room, the medical bay, and gym were tiring. He was itching to learn more about where he was staying and the people working inside. Whitney grabbed a bag from behind the chair and handed it to him.

“Here are some clothes for you to wear. I noticed you were having some trouble getting comfortable, so I got pants and shirts tailored. Was that okay?”

Rajax stood and opened the bag. He pulled out a pair of blue pants and shirt.

“This will do. Thank you.”

Whitney turned away and waited as Rajax entered the bathroom to change. He pulled on the pants and shirt as he dressed, the material itching his skin. The clothes he had been given during his stay were foreign to him. He tried to remember the clothing of his people, but no memory came to mind. Many asked about his people, but all he could remember was the destruction of their way of life. He had nothing to offer in hopes of learning about his species. If any Naanan life had survived, he would have the opportunity to learn beside his friends. Rajax opened the bathroom door and Whitney turned to him.

“They fit,” Rajax announced.

She grinned, “Much better. Now you don’t look like you’ve hit a growth spurt.”

Rajax looked down at the pants, noticing they touched his feet.

“I probably looked rather silly before.”

“I’m sure everyone was too focused on an alien walking around to notice. Let’s get out of here.”

Rajax followed her slowly as she led him to the door. He could feel the cold rush from the hall entering his room. She led him out into the empty hall. Without a guard hurrying Rajax along, he was finally able to survey the hallway closely. The lights hummed above him and around them in the walls. Rajax ran his hand down its smooth whiteness and onto the cool tile floor. He stood up and looked back at his room through the two-way glass. The constant discomfort of someone watching him at all times

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made him uneasy. He looked away and down the long hallway. The hallways were usually crowded, their muffled sounds echoing in his room. Now they were abandoned.

“Where is everyone?” he asked looking around.

“I thought it would be best if you explored without the crowds,” Whitney explained. “It can get pretty hectic around here. Shall we?”

Rajax moved up the hall, Whitney walking next to him. His bare footsteps echoed against the walls. Whitney’s heels clicked next to him. He watched the hallway, his fear beginning to rise. His memory flashed of his body being dragged down a white hall, Xenos gripping him tightly. Their shrill clicking echoed against Whitney’s heels. Screams roared in his ears. Rajax grabbed the wall trying to breathe. Whitney pressed her hand on his arm as he collapsed to the floor. He looked to her, the scene fading.

“A bad memory,” he assured Whitney.

She loosened her grip and took a step back. Rajax flinched at the sound. Whitney looked down at her heels and kicked them off. His breathing returned to normal. Rajax stood and continued, his footsteps shaking. Whitney continued beside him.

“If it’s not too much,” she began slowly, “I’d like to know more about your home.”

Rajax stopped silent, trying to organize his memories. He tried to block out the terrors on the surface of his mind.

“Trem-NA...” he started.

“Trem-NA? Is that your home?”

Rajax filtered through the images, “My people, the Naanans, were a peaceful race. We had no quarrels with others. We lived in harmony no matter our status. Our culture was very compassionate, serving others and working together to better ourselves...”

His mind drifted as they walked. The people were a blur, mixing in the murky waters of his mind. Faces would appear, their features blocked. Blue skin and dark silver eyes stood out. Hands reached out in greeting as children’s laughs echoed far inside. Scenes of groups trading danced past his memory.

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“What is it like? Your planet?”

“It was... calm,” Rajax concentrated harder. “I remember fields of grass expanding as far as the eye can see. There were large animals that lived on the plains. Your planet is similar in some ways. The pictures of your jungles and deserts spark some of my forgotten memories. Your mountain ranges are not as grand as the few on Trem-NA.”

“Is that so?”

They reached the elevator and entered descending.

Rajax continued, “There is not as much greenery as I expected. From what I can recall, the mountains on Trem-NA were lush with color and life. Your mountains seem... harsh.”

“There is life in the mountains,” she assured him, “but you are right; the mountains are not easy to live in.”

The elevator opened and they continued their walk falling silent. Rajax watched Whitney, her face dark. He could tell her mind was racing with questions. She stopped for a moment.

“Rajax...” she looked at him concerned, “you speak as if your planet and people are gone forever. What... happened to them?”

Rajax’s face darkened, “The Xeno arrived.”

“The Xeno?”

“The Xeno are a savage race; infecting other planets and killing everything in sight. They arrived on my planet and began to turn my people into hosts. They forced us to help in the destruction. That is why I came here.”

“Your people are still in danger of these Xenos?”

Rajax grabbed Whitney's arms and she jumped slightly. He looked at her intensely, feeling his emotions beginning to pour forth.

“There is nothing left of my people. They are all gone. It was mere chance that I was able to escape. I have spent who knows how long stuck under the influence of a Xeno. Do you realize the toll it has taken? I have spent so much time recovering my mind that I fear it may already be too late. I barely have my own self back, will any of my people recover? My planet is being harvested

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and I had to help. They used me against my will to pull apart my home atom by atom. There is nothing left—”

Whitney placed her hands on his arms and looked at him softly. Rajax stopped and tried to calm his breathing. Her eyes watched him closely, full of emotion.

“Rajax,” she said calmly, “I will do everything I can. When you're fully recovered—”

“No,” Rajax snapped stepping away.

He walked down the hall with Whitney at his heels.

“No,” he repeated his voice rising. “I am well enough. We need to go now. I need to know if you will help me or not. If your people cannot then I will leave and find someone who will.”

Rajax's head began to swim and he staggered to the floor. His emotions encased his mind. Whitney caught him as he fell. She sat him up against the wall, Rajax's head beginning to clear.

Whitney's eyes saddened, “It's not that easy. I want to help; I will. But there are channels I must go through. I cannot command without my leader's approval. I will schedule a meeting with everyone tomorrow and you can plead your case. I know it has been put off, longer than either of us wanted. But if you do not take care of your health, returning home will take longer.”

Rajax looked up and stared at her for a moment. Whitney leaned on the wall next to him, silence thick in the air.

“I am sorry,” he started but Whitney held up her hand.

She turned to him, her professional persona beginning to show, “I understand your concern and your need, but the people above my head have a system of what's more important. While you recovered, they deemed it best to access the technology you brought. I disagreed, explaining your care was more important but I was voted against.”

Quietly she added, “It would have gone a lot faster doing it my way, but it's not professional to brag.”

Whitney cleared her throat and helped Rajax off the floor.

“Would you like to finish our walk?”

Rajax's spirit sank heavily, “I would like to go back to my room.”

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He watched Whitney's face fall a bit. They walked back to his room quiet. Rajax was discouraged being kept away from his mission for so long. With his emotions flooding over him in waves, he could not concentrate. How was he going to explain his home's predicament without lashing out? Whitney made it look so easy, keeping a cool head when her passion outweighed popular opinion. Fear in the back of his mind gnawed at Rajax, telling him there was no way to leave or return home. He could not give into the doubt. Rajax and Whitney returned to his room and opened the door. Rajax climbed back into bed and curled up into a ball. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Whitney pulled shutters across his two-way glass giving him privacy. She said goodbye and left. Rajax tossed and turned. He knew she was trying her best. With her heart in the right place, he would receive the help his people greatly needed.

CHAPTER 10

Whitney tapped her fingers impatiently as she looked around the room. They sat in silence waiting for Director Parkson to join them. She shuffled and straightened her papers again sighing. Parkson iterated to her on many occasions that he was more interested in using the technology before talking about why Rajax was here. She knew his biggest fear was Rajax taking the technology away before Parkson could grasp its use. Matthew and Austin had jumped at the opportunity to help and were eager to learn more about Rajax's home and circumstance. Matthew now rocked his chair back and forth annoyed, as he always did while waiting. Austin was watching Rajax, who sat a few places down from her. Rajax sat pulling at his shirt, his face stressed. After their walk yesterday his demeanor changed. His face constantly scrunched, trying to get his memories to form. He said little, lost in his own world.

"Rajax," Austin said grabbing his attention. "You're going to rip a hole in your shirt if you keep pulling it like that."

Whitney looked down, noticing his shirt was stretched. Rajax tried to smooth the fabric.

"I am nervous," he admitted. "There are many things I need to say, but I am not sure how to put them together. I am trying to stress that the Xeno are dangerous and need to be eliminated."

"The Xeno?" Matthew asked.

"That's what we're here to talk about," Whitney answered, "if Parkson ever decides to show up."

Matthew nodded and looked at Rajax.

"Has meditating helped memories resurface?"

Rajax shrugged, "Everything is still a blur. I have regained enough to have an idea of who I was, but I am not certain how much is accurate. The only memories that are certain are those that occurred after becoming a host."

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Whitney furrowed her brow and tapped her papers again. Austin had suggested this unique approach, hoping the calming technique would help Rajax's recovery along. Whitney had her doubts, but his unique physiology welcomed the change.

"I'm going to see what's taking so long," she announced.

Whitney opened the door and looked around the hallway. Parkson stood near the elevator, talking with two scientists and Dr. Bishop. He let out a laugh, jabbing one of the scientists in the arm. Dr. Bishop looked tired. She shut the door behind her, leaving Matthew and Austin to badger Rajax with questions. Her anger rose as she marched towards them. Parkson eyed her as she approached.

"We've been waiting for an hour, where have you been?" she demanded.

"We were making our way over," he answered coldly.

She glared at the scientists, "I'm sure you were."

"There's nothing against socializing with our colleagues," Parkson defended.

"I didn't say there was," she replied evenly, "but when I call a meeting, I expect you to show a little respect."

The scientists and Dr. Bishop shifted uneasy as Whitney held Parkson's stare. Dr. Bishop ushered the scientists down the hall, avoiding the oncoming storm.

"If you had the decency to show me a little more respect," Whitney growled lowering her voice, "I wouldn't have to reprimand you in front of our colleagues."

Parkson clenched his jaw, "I'm not the only one lacking respect."

"I am your equal, no matter what you think of me," she threatened. "I have put up with your quest for technology long enough. Now, you will go in that meeting and you will do things my way. Do I make myself clear?"

Whitney whipped around and marched back towards the conference room. She started to turn the door handle when Parkson grabbed her arm. He pulled her away from the door as it opened slightly. His grip tightened as she pulled back.

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“If you ever talk to me like that again, you’ll be sorry,” he growled.

His grip loosened and she jerked her arm back. Whitney slammed open the door and took her seat. Anger boiled in her stomach as she slid a paper to each member. She slid one to Rajax, noticing he was watching her intensely, his fist clenched.

“I called this meeting today for Rajax to have the opportunity to tell us why he is here,” Whitney began pushing her anger aside. “The paper you have been given outlines his patient record Dr. Bishop has provided. Also included is the little knowledge we have learned about the craft and the science behind the parasitic liquid. All the information has been given to President Graves, Department of Defense Director Turner, and Homeland Security Secretary Williams. What information Rajax has to offer today will also proceed up the ladder. We will jump right in, as we’re already running behind. Rajax, would you like to start?”

Whitney nodded to Rajax, taking him off guard. He looked around the table, his eyes wide. Slowly he stood, looking to her for confidence. She smiled at him.

“Trem-NA,” Rajax began, “is where I am from. My people are peaceful. We have no desire to inflict harm on other entities that exists beyond our stars. That unfortunately, does not speak for all the beings that you may encounter. Over two hundred years ago my planet was overrun with the Xeno. They are a vicious parasitic race that conquer and destroy all in sight, forcing the inhabitants to assist in their home’s destruction. Worlds have become dry as they have pillaged, analyzed, and adapted each environment they come across. At the end of this dreadful apocalypse, they move on to the next target. However devouring worlds takes time. I do not know how much of my planet has been stripped, but I know they are on the verge of seeking out another to conquer. If we do not act now, my planet will never recover, and others will suffer our same fate.”

“How do we know what you are saying is true?” Parkson asked leaning back in his chair.

“Though most of my memory is still lost to me, I have never forgotten the moments leading up to my assimilation. I also know

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this from sharing memories with the Xeno. They assault their host with images of planets who have come before. It is no laughing matter that these creatures are a dangerous plague.”

“If your planet is overrun, how did you escape?” Parkson asked suddenly showing interest.

“How does this connection with the Xeno work,” Matthew inquired.

Rajax steadied his breath and continued, “The Xeno requires a host to survive. They attach to the back of the neck and incase the host, forming it into a viable working entity. With this connection, the host is aware of its actions, but not able to alter them. It is like walking in a dream, only it is a nightmare. Your life is threatened at every turn. You learn how the Xeno deals with unwilling hosts, and you are forced to watch as your people are slaughtered.”

“If they have been on your planet for two hundred years wouldn’t your race have died out? Or does the Xeno keep you alive?” a scientist asked.

“If memory serves me right, Naanans can live to six hundred years,” Rajax explained.

“That would make you...” Austin inquired.

Rajax hesitated, “Perhaps... over two hundred and fifty. I recall life before the Xeno, but my actual age is a blur. My people do not age as your kind do.”

“But how did you escape?” Parkson asked again louder. Whitney eyed him carefully.

Rajax tried to collect himself, “I escaped by slowly connecting to the Xeno's sense of action. I do not know when I became conscious of myself, but it was a very fragile sense that I could not lose. I tested my self-awareness countless times to see how far I could take my limited free will. It took me years, and many... many days of torture.”

“Torture?” Whitney asked.

“The test chamber I worked in,” Rajax explained trying to calm his shaking nerves, “was used for two purposes: to analyze the environments and punishment. Little acts of defiance were to be expected. The more extreme cases... They did not make it.”

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“Why do you think the Xeno allowed you to continue?” Whitney asked him softly.

“I do not know. The Xeno Queen left me alive for reasons that escape my memory. But I believe my Xeno was new. They come from the Queen who continually produces them. Mine was not as skilled as the others. It took many tries to earn its trust. The Xeno was surprised I was willing to help, not seeing my underlying plan. In the end, I was successful. As we left Trem-NA it became in distress.”

“The ooze we have collected is the dead Xeno?”

“What is left of it, yes. Each Xeno has a specific structure for its place in the colony. There are scouts, scientists, guards, and so on. My parasite was bred to be a scientist, testing different environments for adaptation. It was not meant to leave the planet. It tried to kill me when we left,” Rajax's hands began to shake again as he continued. “I had to leave; my people cannot suffer any longer. They do not deserve to be disposable hosts in this injustice. We need our home back. I know there must be more Naanans out there who are determined to get back what is ours; I cannot be the only one. I refuse to believe that.”

Whitney looked over at Parkson, trying to study his face. He sat in silence tapping his thumb on the table. His expression turned compassionate, but the look in his eye made Whitney's stomach turn.

“I believe there is something we could do, to help a friend in need,” he smiled.

Whitney's stomach dropped as she watched Parkson. He clearly had something else in mind for this venture.

“How would we get to Trem-NA?” Whitney asked turning her focus back to Rajax.

Rajax sat down, “If I search the stars, I could find my home. I would need access to many star charts. But I fear that you do not have the technology to make the journey to Trem-NA.”

“We could use some help with the ship,” Parkson put in. “We could arrange a time for you to translate the computer for us. That would help move the work along.”

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Whitney eyed Parkson.

“I could try,” Rajax agreed.

Parkson grinned.

“The ship is not the only means of transportation back to Trem-NA,” Whitney put in.

Matthew and Austin looked at each other curiously.

“Really?” Austin asked.

“They don't have clearance,” Parkson reminded her.

“They do now,” Whitney said pulling out two cards. “I had a chat with the President, and we believe that since Mr. Alcott and Mr. Loughty were the first beings Rajax encountered, they would make him feel more comfortable. I also added all the help with bringing Rajax up to speed on our way of life. Now they have level eight clearance pertaining to this case.”

Parkson glared at Whitney as she slid Matthew and Austin their new badges.

“This will get us anywhere?” Austin asked excitedly.

“Anywhere that concerns Rajax's case,” Whitney corrected him.

“Does that include Patient Zero?” Matthew asked.

“Yes, it does.”

She stood and hit a button on the wall. The lights turned off and a screen on the wall flickered on.

“This footage was taken a few hours after a craft similar to Rajax's crashed in Russia,” she explained.

They watched as the video began. Smoke clouded the screen. Two men looked around the craft as it slowly opened. They began shouting orders to others and circled in a tight formation. The Xeno slid out pulsing. The men shouted and ran as it moved rapidly around the screen. It jumped flattening and grabbed a man closest to it as gunfire lit up the darkness. Screaming ensued and the picture cut out.

“This is now,” Whitney added as the screen flicked again.

A man lay strapped to a hospital bed, covered in dark green ooze. He kicked and screamed pulling at the restraints. The Xeno whined as it pulsed. Attached to its host neck, jagged tentacles

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curled around the torso. His face was unrecognizable, deep cuts covering his face. Whitney paused the recording.

“This is the effect the Xeno has had on us,” Parkson said as he flipped the lights on, “did this happen to any of your people?”

Whitney watched Rajax stare at the wall. His face was pale.

“No,” he started, “the scouts have hosts from other planets that decay inside them over time. They require assistance from the Xeno Queen to take on another host that can be adaptable in any environment. The process is slow and time consuming.”

“It's possibly a survival tactic,” Matthew suggested. “Similar to how a virus mutates in order to keep spreading. It appears that after the crash the Xeno would find a new host and begin to mutate it in order to survive.”

“The Russians did shoot it down,” Whitney explained. “They were able to disable the ship before it landed, a lot of key systems were damaged.”

“Well one thing's for sure,” Parkson said, “whatever power cell the ships use, we can't seem to match the amount of power. Both cells are damaged.”

Rjax turned to him, “Translating the data from the ship is one task, trying to fix the power cells are another. If you can bring the pods back to full power, the Xeno will come.”

“Both pods are destroyed beyond repair. Any technology we put into the reconstruction would be our own, how would they know?”

Whitney looked at Rajax, his fist clenching.

“They keep careful track of all pods. The scouts must provide hourly check-ins. When a pod is decommissioned, whether it be by a malfunction or destroyed while on a mission, its cataloged into the hive mind. If its power signature is detected they will come, sooner than you expect.”

“How do you know we're next?” Whitney asked him.

“There must be dozens of crafts around the galaxy searching other planets. Having two pods crash down doesn't seem as concerning as a full-on invasion that your planet suffered,” Parkson added.

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“The samples my Xeno studied in the lab,” Rajax said looking around the room, “are the same samples I have seen here, in the pictures of your books. The dusty sand from the Sahara Desert, bits of rocks from Mount Everest, the exotic tree leaves from the Amazon; you are the next target. The craft I arrived in had preset coordinates to arrive here, they are studying you now. It is only a matter of time before they arrive.”

“Are you sure?” Parkson asked intently.

“Each pod is given a specific destination that cannot be altered. I assume after the first pod crashed, they sent another to locate me.”

“We were able to detect your ship and the one that arrived after,” Whitney remarked, “why haven’t we detected any others?”

Rajax’s face saddened, “The Xeno have adapted our cloaking technology to use on their pods to avoid detection. My people used it to study the creatures that inhabited our planet and moons without disturbing them. You detected my ship because I was unconscious during most of my travel. Scout pods must drop the cloak in order to scan planets for lost pods.”

“Is it possible they were conducting a search and rescue?” Matthew asked.

Rajax shook his head, “It is possible, but unlikely.”

Parkson tapped his fingers, “So now we have a bigger target on our backs?”

“That was not my intention,” Rajax assured them.

Whitney looked around the room studying their faces. Austin and Matthew were in shock. The scientists looked stressed. Dr. Bishop was watching Rajax. She looked at him, grief written on his face. The burden he carried had not eased. She looked at Parkson, his expression was unreadable. It made her uneasy.

“We need to take this to our world leaders,” Parkson said diplomatically. “We will reconvene after that to decide what action will be taken next. All we can do now is wait.”

Rajax banged his fist on the table and glared at Parkson. “I have been waiting for years. I cannot wait any longer. I have wasted enough time already. Will you help me or not?”

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Whitney looked from Rajax to Parkson.

“If it were our decision, we would start preparations right away,” Whitney said shooting Parkson a look. “Our scans of our solar system haven’t shown anymore Xeno activity, so we’re in the clear for now. But with the cloaking technology you mentioned we cannot be sure. Mounting a rescue operation of this scale will draw a lot of public attention; that is why we need to meet with our leaders first. We need a cover story. We also need the help of the other countries in Chora. In short, we need more manpower. Is there any way you could give us a time window? Something more concrete?”

“I do not know,” Rajax admitted. “They are not finished harvesting my planet. You may still have a chance.”

Whitney looked at Parkson and they stood.

“We will discuss this with our President as soon as possible,” Parkson said. “For now, we need you to wait until we can come to a decision.”

Whitney followed Parkson and the scientists to the door. Dr. Bishop shook Rajax’s hand before he left. Whitney took one last look before shutting the door. She stopped when she heard Matthew’s voice.

“Rajax, what will you do if we can't help?”

“I will leave and find someone who can.”

CHAPTER 11

Whitney shifted in her seat as the car took another turn. She looked down at her folders and sorted them again. Parkson and Whitney had worked together the past few days on a presentation. They focused on Rajax's warnings and the possibility of combatting an invasion. Whitney took it upon herself to focus on the benefits of helping Rajax's people and the effects the Xeno would have if they invaded. Parkson had scurried off to do what he did best: argue why the technology would be far more important. After numerous calls they managed to get an emergency meeting with the President. After the place and time was set, Parkson became a ghost around the base. He was always conveniently in a meeting or out when she needed to see him. His aloofness only deepened her anxiety. Austin and Matthew continually nagged her about the meeting, asking to help but only becoming a nuisance. She threw them out of her office several times as they got into a debate about what should be a priority. It reminded her of old times.

What bothered her the most was seeing Rajax unhappy. Since the meeting he became quiet and detached, wandering around his room and hallways. He spent most of his time in the gym training with Austin to keep up his strength. Anytime Whitney tried to cheer Rajax up his spirits never lifted. She set aside time for him to help with translating the ship's data, which helped him concentrate. It gave Rajax a few hours each day to help make a difference. He pulled her aside one evening to thank her for her efforts. She hoped their efforts would not be in vain. Many times, Director Parkson and others brushed her ideas aside, forcing her to stand alone. Tonight, she hoped that would not be the case.

Whitney peered out the tinted windows at the trees. The car shifted again on the dirt road through the Oregon woodland. Meeting in Washington D.C. with such sensitive information

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would have been suicide. They could not risk exposure on the project now. Parkson made all the arrangements to meet at an old safe house. He insisted on driving separately as to not arouse suspicion. The car began to slow, and Whitney caught sight of an old cabin in the dark. It was decaying and gave off an eerie glow. The perfect place to meet alone. She stepped out of the car and headed inside, pushing the door as it stuck. The air was musty and grey as she walked carefully in the dark to the kitchen. Whitney felt around for the dishwasher and pulled the door down. She managed to find the keypad inside and punched in her pin. Slowly little lights came on and the refrigerator creaked open. Whitney climbed inside and shut the door behind her. She tried to breathe evenly as she descended cramped in the small space.

Finally, she reached the bottom and the door opened. Whitney slid out and stepped onto the tile floor. She nodded to a security guard standing watch and walked down the hallway. She stopped at a door and punched in her pin again. As she pulled the door open, she could hear Parkson inside. His voice sounded determined and excited. Whitney slinked in and looked around the room staying in the shadows. The President sat in front of a screen with Department of Defense Director Turner on one side and Secretary of Homeland Security Williams on the other. Parkson stood by the screen motioning to its display.

“Here,” he was explaining clicking picture after picture, “these are stills from the video we obtained from Russia. The creature moves far more agile than we have ever seen, being able to take out this small team in a matter of minutes. Despite its size, the Xeno was able to overpower Patient Zero.”

He hit a button and the screen shifted to the days following.

“After blowing up the craft, Patient Zero was taken to a Medical hospital in Russia. They flew him to our Alpha base for tests while they initiated their damage control. As you can see from these samples, the cells are fighting for dominance.”

He clicked to another slide that showed the comparison between Patient Zero and Rajax. The President leaned forward studying the screen. Turner and Williams sat rigidly next to him.

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“Here is a sample taken from the creature. Now if you look closely, you can see there are tiny variations in the cells. These cells are working together, instead of against each other. We theorize this is possible due to proper bonding. As Rajax has informed us, there are different groups of Xeno that have different duties. Patient Zero is the result of an unsuccessful bonding.”

Whitney watched as Parkson changed the slide again to show several samples taken from Rajax.

“These were taken after the remains of the Xeno were expelled from Rajax. There are small variations from his original cells. We believe that when Rajax broke free, this chemical became active. This has caused an enhanced genetic structure, making him more agile and alert to his surroundings. If we can find a way to control this chemical imbalance, then we can control the Xeno.”

“What?” Whitney yelled making everyone jump.

“I’m glad you could join us Director Blake,” the President said turning to her.

“President Graves,” she nodded. “Director Turner. Secretary Williams.”

“Parkson informed us that you wouldn’t be able to make it. Something about an emergency,” Turner explained.

Whitney’s anger boiled, “Did he now? I don’t recall there being an emergency.”

Williams rubbed his temple, shooting Parkson a glare.

“Sit down,” the President beckoned, “we’re almost done going over the plan you two are proposing.”

“Our plan?” Whitney asked accusingly. “I didn’t realize we came up with this radical plan together. I was only aware of the simple presentation we created.”

Whitney could see panic in Parkson’s eyes, but he kept his composure calm. She sat down next to Williams and crossed her arms.

“As I was saying,” Parkson continued, “if we can control the Xeno we can gain its knowledge and technology. By using this

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chemical imbalance, we could in theory shut down its need for a host. We could push our society years ahead of its time.”

“That’s quite a stretch,” Turner jested, “considering Rajax has done more for us in a few days than you have in months. I could add all the years we spent attempting to use other alien technology with no headway.”

Parkson clenched his jaw, “There have been setbacks, but with retrieving memories the Xeno’s possess there will be no problem. The bond they share with the host can be used to our advantage.”

“What about the Naanans?” the President asked.

Parkson adjusted himself, “The people should be fine once we get control of the Xeno. In theory they shouldn’t be harmed.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Whitney pointed out.

“Rajax has recovered well enough. The rest should be fine,” Parkson shot back.

“What you’re talking about sounds a lot like making a bioweapon,” Whitney yelled, “It took years for Rajax to recover enough of his self-awareness to get here. He has no idea if any of his people have done the same. There is so much we do not understand about the Xeno that you think throwing a bomb at it will fix everything. How do we know they won’t kill the hosts at the first sign of trouble?”

President Graves held up his hand and they both looked at him. He cleared his throat and leaned forward. Turner rolled his eyes and Williams sighed.

“You didn’t come up with this plan together did you?” he asked evenly.

“No, we didn’t,” Whitney said glancing at Parkson, “we came up with a different presentation together. It seems we both made our own on the side. I was told we were meeting and discussing the predicament we are all in. I did not realize that Parkson’s plan included a possible annihilation of an entire planet in order to move our society forward. This is about liberating a people and saving our own. The technology can wait.”

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“Can it?” Parkson asked. “You’ve seen the pod; you know how valuable that could be. We have been doing this for well over fifty years and we have not reached our potential. We are not even close. I will admit, Rajax has helped us with the data. But we are in the position to demand so much more.”

“Are you saying we should just take from them and leave the Naanans with nothing? Are the lives that have been lost, and could be lost, worth it in order to fulfill your pursuit for technology? The Naanans are a benevolent and passionate race, we have seen that in Rajax. The toll however from his separation caused a lot a damage. We did not even know if he would survive. Do you want to throw away an entire civilization to get your hands on a few gadgets that we won’t have a clue about?”

“The lives lost will help us overcome the pending invasion.”

“That is the thinking that caused so much loss at Roswell,” Whitney spat.

Parkson glared her down and leaned onto the table in front of him.

“I did what I had to do.”

“That’s not how I see it,” she growled.

“Enough,” the President snapped. He sighed and rubbed his head.

“Look,” he began, “the past is in the past. We need to learn from it. The events that happened at Roswell were unfortunate and we did not consider how serious the consequences would be. We regret the way the situation was handled and that is why we brought on a humanitarian consultant to make sure it never happens again. We are a people of equality and passion, if we need to put technology on the back burner we will.”

Parkson was about to protest but Graves shot him a look.

“Now, I understand how important the use of new technologies could help us progress. But we need to make sure we understand it first. That is what happened with Roswell. We lost an opportunity to have contact and help a different species. I am not going to repeat our mistakes. Director Parkson, you have a good point in helping our technology grow, but I want more than spare

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parts. I want to open a dialogue of friendship for others to follow suit. Now, I would like to hear what Director Blake has to say.”

Parkson grimaced and sat down. Whitney stood and turned off the projector and switched on the lights.

“What we know about Rajax’s people is very little,” Whitney began setting photos on the table. “From what he can tell us, his people are called Naanans. They have been under the Xeno’s reign for almost two hundred years. Unfortunately, this is all we really know. The host body loses all memories from its life before. Rajax has been able to remember here and there through his recovery process, but he has not been able to piece it all together. He does believe that the Xeno’s have a weakness, every parasite does. I believe that we could utilize operation NOVA to get to Trem-NA. With an outside team on the ground, we can assess the situation from an outside perspective and eliminate the Xeno from his planet.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to do anything for them?” Turner asked. “What about what happened to Patient Zero?”

“Patient Zero happened because there are different classes of the Xeno; scientists, scouts, etc. as Parkson said. The scout is not designed to inherit a host without help and we see the effects that it has caused on Patient Zero. If the Xeno can turn Naanans into host, it’s reasonable to believe the same can happen to us. I’m not saying my plan is the easiest, it has many dangers involved, but it has the potential for the least casualties.”

President Graves looked over the pictures for a few moments. Turner and Williams leaned in whispering quietly. He looked at Parkson and then at Whitney.

“I agree with Director Blake,” the President decided.

Parkson huffed and grumbled under his breath.

“But I agree with Director Parkson as well,” he explained. “It would be best to make sure we can control this Xeno and see what advances we could use. But I want it to be with little to no casualties. I want to meet Rajax before I hear your final plans. As I understand it, he is becoming anxious to get the ball rolling. Therefore, I believe that it would be vital to understand how Rajax

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feels about both ideas. I will schedule when I am available to meet him and go from there.”

President Graves, Director Turner, and Secretary Williams stood and began to walk out. Whitney started to follow when Parkson jerked her by the arm.

“You’re in too deep Whitney,” he threatened. “You may have gained favor with everyone, but I know where your loyalties are lying right now. I’m keeping a close eye on you.”

Whitney jerked her arm back and grabbed his tie. Parkson gagged as she tugged it down.

“If you ever touch me like that again,” Whitney said slowly, “you’ll be very, very sorry.”

CHAPTER 12

Matthew slouched back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. While Parkson and Whitney were away, he buried himself in studying the Xeno. The scientists he worked with had grown quiet, suspense thick in the air. Lines were forming for who supported Parkson and who supported Whitney. But they all agreed there was little to no chance that Patient Zero would recover. Any attempt to remove the Xeno was in vain. Matthew crouched over a microscope for three days, slowly watching the cells deteriorate. He compared Rajax's cells to Patient Zero's, trying to distinguish key structures in both samples. Rajax's cells had markers signifying the bonding process. Patient Zero's did not. Matthew looked around the lab at the other scientists hard at work. Stress and lack of sleep was weighing heavy in the air. Matthew stood and stretched as another scientist slouched back in their chair. He drummed his pencil on his worn-down notebook.

"Any good news?" the scientist asked.

Matthew shook his head, "It's a matter of time before we lose Patient Zero. There's nothing to suggest how we could remove the Xeno without killing him."

The scientist sighed and rubbed his eyes. Matthew walked over and looked at his screen.

"What are you working on?" Matthew inquired.

Out of all the scientists he worked with, Dr. Nathan Bernard was the most willing. They worked a lot together, bouncing ideas off each other. The others watched them warily, their want of inclusion written on their faces. With tensions on both sides, many were afraid to confide in each other after major decisions were made.

"I'm looking at the different cell markers," he explained, "I think it's possible to uncover the proper bonding process and

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release. If I am right, it could lead to helping the Naanans recover, and maybe a possible defense for our people.”

“So,” Matthew began, “have you seen anything like this before?”

Dr. Bernard looked up at him and smirked, “Curious to know all the secrets?”

“Just making conversation,” Matthew said casually.

Dr. Bernard chuckled and stood stretching. He looked around the room at the others.

“I’m going on a coffee run. Does everyone want one?” he asked the room.

The scientists nodded, not taking their eyes off their screens. Dr. Bernard motioned for Matthew to follow. Matthew headed out and down the hall, Nathan walking fast for his old age. They walked silently until they reached the cafeteria. Dr. Bernard stopped at the first table and took two cups. He handed one to Matthew and poured his coffee in silence. Matthew filled his cup scanning the room. It was mostly empty, save a few agents enjoying a late lunch. They walked towards the end of the room out of ear shot. Matthew sat, his back facing the door. Dr. Bernard sat across from him and took a slow drink. He tucked his fingers under his tie and pulled it loose.

“A gift from my daughter when she was little,” he said proudly.

“It’s nice,” Matthew said cocking his head to the side.

Dr. Bernard grinned, “She thought it’d be fun to stitch the Statue of Liberty on it. I know it does not look great, but she did a marvelous job in my opinion. She was seven at the time, I’m sure she got a lot better.”

Matthew looked at him puzzled.

“There’s a lot that happens here that I don’t know,” he began, “but I’ve been here a long time, and as I’m sure you are aware tension lives in the air. We try not to take sides, but a lot of us are forced into situations we cannot control. But to understand where the tension began, is to tell you about Roswell.”

Matthew leaned in as Nathan grew quieter.

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“I was a simple geneticist working on breakthroughs in cloning. I was diving into replicating atoms when I was kidnapped and thrown in the back of a van. I had no idea where they were taking me. I found myself in Roswell, New Mexico. Believe me, I was scared out of my mind. This man approached me, Director Parkson, who interrogated me about what I was working on and where I thought it would take me. I told him that I wanted to help anyone and everyone. He took me back into a lab room where I saw that we weren’t the only ones out here.”

“How many were there?” Matthew asked.

“There was only one. They did not tell me how long it had been there. Its injuries were extreme. There were rumors surrounding Roswell, but it had been a few years. Director Parkson told me to forget everything I knew about the government and help him to use my ‘scientific gift’ as he called it, to revive the alien. I did everything I could, but its genetic makeup was greater than anything I have ever seen. Others who worked on it before me did not get far. Its DNA was so complex, it took me days before I could understand what the screens were showing me. I was able to keep it alive for a while before Parkson got a hold of it.”

“What happened?”

Nathan sighed, “After I was able to get him conscious and talking, Parkson took over. He wanted to know about its ship, its people, or if it had been sent by another nation. Of course, the alien could not understand and no matter how much I tried to reason with Parkson, he had his way. I could not save it,” Nathan’s gaze darkened, “Parkson got what he wanted, he got the technology, but we have spent over fifty years trying to figure out how it works, with very little headway. The only thing we can get working is the lights. If you listen, you can hear the walls hum. That is the alien power source working; it can only power small insignificant utilities. Parkson was not impressed, but it keeps the electric bill down and prying eyes of the public away.”

“What happened after Roswell?” Matthew asked.

“The President at the time added Department Chora to Homeland Security and all those who worked in Roswell were

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immediately included. My family probably still believes that I disappeared one night without any leads. At the time it was assumed the best course of action. Director Parkson was put in charge but the President appointed a second-in-command to act as a humanitarian. We haven't had any visits since then; until now. I was worried that it would be Roswell all over again, but Director Blake is a strong force against Parkson."

"Do the seconds-in-command always get along with Parkson?" Matthew asked. "Whitney seems to be pushing buttons."

"None of them stood up to him until Director Blake. He always had a hold of them, and of course they didn't have to deal with any alien entities. But after Director Blake's predecessor passed away the President decided he needed a stronger hand and he chose Whitney."

"How did he know she'd do a good job?"

"We know more about you three than you've been led to believe. We have kept an eye on you since you first got arrested for trespassing. When Director Blake was hired, she insisted that you and Mr. Loughty join as well. Parkson believed you two would be wild cards. You sure showed him when you found Rajax first."

"I always assumed Whitney left us behind because she wanted to get away," Matthew confessed. "And when we learned she worked for Homeland Security I was pretty bitter about it. I thought she could have at least told us what she was doing. It was unlike her to ditch out without notice."

"Don't believe everything you think or hear," Dr. Bernard dropped his voice to a whisper, "Don't tell anyone I told you about Roswell. It is not exactly something we divulge on a daily basis. Ever since Rajax's arrival, tensions have been higher than ever. Director Parkson and Director Blake have drawn the lines on the battlefield, you can be sure everyone has their own agenda to help one or the other."

Matthew studied his face and leaned closer, "Then why tell me? Why trust me to not betray you?"

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Nathan sat up and adjusted his tie, “Because I’ve seen the way you work. I have seen the dedication you’ve shown to Director Blake, even when you don’t agree. We need more people like you Mr. Alcott; we need people who are not afraid to push forward by stepping on some toes. And to be honest, I could not tell you what the others think. We do not talk about it. All you need to know is that when the time comes, I’ll stand by you.”

Austin bounced the basketball up and down in front of Rajax. They both needed a break from the other agents. Many were cross with Rajax for breaking equipment. Rajax didn’t mean to, but his frustrations and growing strength led to many broken machines. Austin reserved the gym for them to work before agents started to riot.

“How does it do that?” Rajax asked him.

“The material of the ball and the air inside give it the ability to bounce. Do you want to try?”

Rjax cocked his head, “What do you do with it?”

“See that hoop at the end of the room?”

Rjax nodded.

“The goal of the game is to make the ball into your opposing teams hoop as many times as possible,” Austin explained. “You have to keep the ball constantly moving. I’ll show you.”

Austin gave the ball an extra bounce and started to run. He dribbled the ball in front of him, quickly weaving back and forth. He tossed the ball swishing it into the basket. Rajax’s eyes widened. Austin dribble the ball back to Rajax.

“There’s more rules, but for now let’s keep it simple. Follow my lead.”

Austin took a starting stance and nodded for Rajax to do the same. He dribbled the ball up and down then shot to the left and started for the hoop. Rajax was right behind him attempting to get the ball. He zigzagged back and forth behind Austin as he dodged each attempt. Austin jumped and threw the ball as it landed into the net. He grabbed it grinning at Rajax.

“You lead this time.”

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Rajax grabbed the ball from Austin and bounced it up and down. Austin watched as the ball bounced faster and faster. Rajax grinned and took off running. Austin tried to catch up but Rajax was a blue blur weaving in and out. He stopped under the opposite hoop. Austin ran towards him. At the last moment Rajax tossed the ball and Austin watched as it sailed perfectly into the hoop on the other side of the room.

“Someone finally beat you at your own game,” a voice laughed.

Austin and Rajax turned around as Whitney entered the gym. He watched as Rajax beamed and went running towards her.

“Austin has taught me how to play basketball,” he said excitedly. “I think I have caught on quickly.”

“I let you get that shot,” Austin joked.

Whitney smiled at them, “I’m glad to see you out and about more.”

“I finished translating the computer while you were gone,” Rajax explained. “I got the impression my presence training with others was not welcomed. Austin suggested we try something else.”

Her smile faded and she looked at them tense.

“After Parkson and I talked with the President, he’s decided he wants to meet you before any more action is taken. We need to finalize the details of our plans.”

“I thought you said he would be willing to help?” Rajax asked her confused.

“He is, there’s just...”

“There’s lots of hoops he has to go through,” Austin cut in. “He has to meet with his team and hear everyone’s opinion. President Graves needs to cover all the bases before he can make a solid decision.”

“Is this how all governments are run?” Rajax asked.

“Not all of them,” Austin replied. “This is a special case, so it needs more care and time. He can’t come forward to the public with something this big.”

“Why not?”

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Whitney cleared her throat, “Not everyone is as open minded as you would think. Our department is set up as a ‘don’t ask don’t tell’. You are fortunate to have met people who are willing to look past the brim of their nose into the unimaginable. There are other countries that are part of this organization, but there are some places in this world that you do not want to land.”

Rajax nodded thoughtfully. Whitney gestured to the door.

“President Graves will be here in a day or so. We will need to catch you up on some official procedures that will take place. We will meet to organize our presentation. My small part was the tip of the iceberg. I’ll need to get with the rest of our team to decide exactly how to put everything together.”

The two guards by the door scanned their cards and it creaked open. Austin placed his hand on Whitney’s shoulder and jerked his head.

“We’ll catch up,” Whitney told Rajax as the door shut behind him.

Austin turned to Whitney, “You didn’t get Rajax what he wanted did you?”

Whitney sighed and adjusted herself, “It’s not that I didn’t get him what he wanted; I got the President to agree to meet with Rajax didn’t I? President Graves agrees with both Parkson and myself, but now we need to make our plan look like the better one. I hate to say it but Parkson’s idea isn’t a bad, but the lives he’s willing to sacrifice isn’t an option in my opinion. Mine is more dangerous, but more lives could be spared. I know this is going to be an uphill battle and I’m afraid Rajax will be caught in the crossfire.”

Whitney leaned closer to Austin and lowered her voice, “If anything jeopardizes the humanitarian aid of this mission, will you and Matthew have my back? Whatever the President decides, we need to have a backup plan. Can I count on you two?”

“For old times’ sake? Of course.”

CHAPTER 13

“Are you both crazy?” Matthew asked irritated.

Whitney and Austin exchanged glances and looked back at him. Matthew was working in the lab when Austin pulled him aside. Frustrated he had followed, his work for the day nearly completed. Whitney and Austin brought him to an empty conference room and explained the situation.

“I know what I’m talking about,” Whitney stated. “All I’m asking is will you have my back. Austin already agreed you both would.”

“Last time I checked,” Matthew growled, “Austin doesn’t speak for me.”

“Look Matthew—”

“Whitney,” Matthew said cutting Austin off, “I get that your job is not easy. I have learned who Parkson is and that he’s a hard man to get to. But as far as I can see you two are making things worse for the rest of us. Don’t you think going into this mission already planning on going rogue is a bad idea?”

“I’m not talking about going rogue,” Whitney snapped. “I’m talking about watching out for anything that isn’t on the mission plan, whatever that may be. I am asking who’s side you’re going to be on. Whether you realize it or not this place is a war zone.”

“A war zone,” Matthew scoffed. “Oh, it’s not a war zone yet, but it’s going to be. Most of the people I have worked with are afraid to speak their mind. They want the freedom to have an opinion instead of being forced onto a side. The only people at war are you and Parkson. And if I am being honest, I think he has a point.”

Whitney stood and slowly cornered Matthew.

“And what, exactly, is his point? Gaining technology at the price of a species?”

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“Look,” Matthew started his back against the wall, “I get that what he’s done humanitarian wise is not the best structure but think of this technology. I have been studying those cells for weeks and there are parts of them that we could utilize to help a lot of people. I haven’t gotten a good look at the technology, but that ship is incredible. We could use it. And you said yourself, the President is considering doing both plans, and you saw his side of the coin.”

“To a small degree. Parkson’s plan is like playing with fire. If I know him, and I do, Rajax’s people are going to suffer. We can’t control what feeds off usurping others.”

“Then why don’t we tell Rajax?” Austin interrupted. “Shouldn’t he know what Parkson is planning?”

Whitney turned to him, “We can’t, not yet.”

“Keeping secrets from him isn’t going to help your case,” Matthew jeered.

Whitney spun around and pinned him onto the wall with her arm on his neck.

“Whitney take it easy,” Austin said overwhelmed.

Whitney didn’t back down. Matthew gripped her arm for support. She glared at him and leaned close.

“The reason I won’t tell him is because if I did, he’ll never meet with President Graves. He will refuse to cooperate and probably get himself killed. I do not like it, but what other choice to I have? I am trying to look out for him. My goal is to show the President the plight Rajax has to free his people and how dangerous the Xenos are. So yes; I will keep him in the dark for now. If that is an issue for you, then I suggest you figure out which side you want to be on.”

Whitney jerked her arm away and Matthew fell to the floor gasping for breath. He pushed Austin’s help away and staggered up.

“As of right now, these ‘sides’ are only pushing this facility apart. If you want to be a fallen hero fine. I won’t stand in your way.”

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Matthew tossed and turned that night. He tried to play through his memories to find any hint to which scientist favored Parkson or Whitney. Everyone got along fine, where was the problem? Where were the secrets? Nathan Bernard had warned him about trusting any of them, but being there since the beginning, he could be biased. His boldness had taken Matthew by surprise; there could be merit in Nathan's warnings. Matthew felt the tension in the air around them, but he tried to play it off as a Parkson and Whitney problem. He could not shake his own paranoia, telling him to only trust himself.

As he finally dozed off into a twisted sleep, his alarm beeped. Matthew grudgingly rolled out of bed and got ready. When he went to open his door, Matthew noticed a package shoved underneath. He picked it up, slim and heavy. The wrapping around it was rushed, tape sticking out of the sides. Puzzled, he tossed it onto his desk and headed to the cafeteria. Austin groggily smiled at him as Matthew entered the line.

“Rough night?” Matthew asked.

Austin laughed, “Rajax wanted to play more basketball. Let's just say I mostly stood on the sides till three in the morning as he whizzed around the court.”

Matthew laughed a bit and looked around. He watched the scientists and engineers sit together and chat. Whatever Whitney had said about sides, there was little evidence here. The conversations sounded lighthearted, but no one talked about what they were working on. He scanned the room and noticed an empty seat with the scientists. Matthew didn't see Dr. Bernard anywhere. He shrugged it off, assuming he was running late or in the lab already and collected a breakfast tray. Matthew shook off Whitney's warning. Austin worked with these people too; he never mentioned any high tension. He decided the stress was due to the unique case. Everyone wanted to participate in this historic discovery.

Matthew and Austin left the line and looked for a place to sit. Austin jerked his head over to Whitney. She sat at the end of the

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room her nose buried in papers. Matthew grudgingly followed and sat across from her.

“You must be reading something fascinating,” Austin joked.

Whitney didn’t look up, “I’m going over notes from my presentation with the President to figure out which parts we should expand on. The three of us, including Rajax, will meet after lunch to begin putting it together.”

Matthew grunted. Austin kicked his leg under the table.

“Who else did you get?” Austin asked.

Whitney was nodding at her papers half listening, “Austin has spent a lot of time with Rajax, helping him learn about our culture and regaining his physical strength, that could be a good thing to mention. Matthew knows a lot about the Xeno so he can talk about that. I’ll have to get with Dr. Bishop to discuss Rajax from a medical perspective.”

“Nathan Bernard is the scientist in charge,” Matthew put in. “He’s studied the Xeno a lot longer than I have. He has some interesting theories. Shouldn’t he be on the team?”

Whitney looked up from her papers, “That’s what I wanted. But for some reason he hasn’t responded to my pages or requests to see him. And when I went by his room to talk to him, he wasn’t there. I do not have time to chase Dr. Bernard down. He is probably busy with more work than he admits. You get the job of being the big presenter.”

Before Matthew could respond a chef came over with two trays and handed them to Whitney. She thanked him and stood, putting her things together.

“Are you that hungry?” Austin asked.

“Rajax asked me if I would have breakfast with him and I said yes,” Whitney said scooting her papers together.

“Like a date,” Austin teased. “I’ve been teaching Rajax earth etiquette but not that.”

Whitney smiled for a second then picked up her things, “I’m sure he’s tired of being alone, and Rajax isn’t comfortable with crowds. He’s already been alone enough; wouldn’t you want company whenever you could?”

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Matthew watched Whitney leave. His gaze drifted around the room.

Austin turned to his food, “Angela said she and the Commander I’ve been working with are surprised how well I’ve caught up on training. Their program is pretty intense, but I think...”

Matthew was not listening. He was staring at Nathan’s empty chair.

“Hey,” Austin said slapping his arm, “did you hear what I said?”

“What? No, sorry. You were saying?” Matthew asked composing himself.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Matthew reassured, “it’s probably nothing.”

Austin shrugged his shoulders and started up again about working on training. He also went over what he taught Rajax recently. Matthew did not hear a word he said. Where was Nathan? Did this always happen? Whitney could be pulling his chain. He’s probably fine, but wouldn’t it be best to be safe? He tried to heed Nathan’s warnings with a grain of salt, but as he watched the empty chair, Matthew could not shake his sinking feeling.

Matthew finished up his breakfast and Austin left to join a few agents on their way to the gym. Austin’s friendship with others came so easily, it made Matthew jealous. He didn’t see the tensions because Austin looked beyond disagreements. Matthew walked through the halls to the lab. He fought with his paranoia on the way. Everything was going to be fine; no harm had come to Nathan. As he walked into the lab, he scanned the scientists. They were already hard at work, their faces buried in computers, microscopes, and lab sheets. His eyes landed on Nathan’s station, and noticed it was cleaned out. A lump formed in his throat.

“Has anyone seen Nathan?” he asked out loud.

No one turned to look at him.

“Hey, you guys seen Nathan,” he repeated louder.

“Do you mean Dr. Bernard?”

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Matthew turned to see a young man about his age in a freshly pressed lab coat and a smile on his face. His blonde hair was slicked back neatly, not a hair out of place. The cheeky personality he carried radiated the room making Matthew sick.

“Yes. I was going to talk to him and ask if it’s okay to look through his notes before a meeting I have. I was hoping he’d be here to give me some pointers on the presentation,” Matthew explained.

“All his findings are on the computer. Everyone has access to it as long as you have the right badge,” the young man laughed.

“Yeah but, Dr...”

“Dr. Kaine. We get so caught up in our work I guess we need to introduce ourselves first. Got to get out and mingle more,” he jested.

“You’re... new,” Matthew stated carefully.

Dr. Kaine grinned, “Yes sir. I transferred from a different department. Happy to work with you.”

Matthew nodded unsure, “Uh, huh. I see Dr. Bernard’s desk has been cleaned and I know he kept his notes in a big notebook-”

“They’re scanned onto the computer every day. Whatever you’re looking for should be there.”

Matthew looked past Dr. Kaine at a woman with short black hair.

“Anyone know where he is though?” he asked carefully.

“He’s been moved to another project on a different security clearance. Whole new change, he’s excited,” Dr. Kaine piped up. “I’ve been put in charge of this project, but you still have your own freedom to work on what you’ve been studying.”

“Yeah...” Matthew began.

He looked past Dr. Kaine at the black-haired scientist as she shook her head in the slightest movement. Matthew could tell she was worried.

“Yeah well I look forward to working with you,” Matthew finished holding out his hand, “I’ll just look for what I need on the computer. Thanks.”

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Dr. Kaine shook his hand tightly. Matthew sat down at his desk and exhaled. Everything was fine. He logged on and scanned for Nathan's notes. Adjusting himself he squinted his eyes. Something wasn't right. The notes seemed out of date.

"Need anything?" Dr. Kaine asked as he leaned over Matthew making him jump.

"No, I'm good," he assured Dr. Kaine. "I'm trying to figure out the best focus for my presentation."

"Well I'd be happy to help," Dr. Kaine smiled scooting up a chair. "What are we looking at?"

Before Matthew could answer an alarm blared. He jumped out of his chair and ran to the door. Security guards ran past him, yelling something about Patient Zero's holding cell. Matthew ran after them, ignoring Dr. Kaine's shouts. He pushed his way through to the emergency stairs following them down. As they entered the holding cell floor, he was shocked to see smoke all around and charred walls. Lights flickered and small fires filled the hallway. Matthew could hear Whitney and Parkson over the intercoms yelling orders. All around the guards pushed parts of the hallway to the side clearing a path. Matthew watched as scientists and doctors tried to get free. He helped a guard drag a beam off a scientist and checked his pulse. A doctor ran up beside him as he started treating injuries. Through the smoke Matthew looked towards the crowd slowly forming around Patient Zero's cell. He pushed himself to the front of the crowd and stood dumbstruck.

All around him lay bodies blackened, the cell blown open, and Patient Zero in bits and pieces. The noises around him muted as Matthew slowly walked around the bodies. He counted seven in total, not including Patient Zero. Charred pieces of the Xeno stuck to the walls. Matthew bent down next to a body and pulled out gloves from his pocket. He slowly studied the body, what was left. The face was crumbled beyond recognition and pieces of the torso were melted away. Charred skin flaked away as Matthew ran his hand down the arm.

Matthew gently pushed on the black goo that hardened into a shell on the torso. He began to wipe left and right clearing the

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debris away from the body when his hand caught a corner. Matthew pulled it back slowly and held his breath as the stench of charred flesh hit his nose. He noticed a piece of cloth, charred but unscathed. Holding his breath, Matthew pulled it off the body. He peered at the fabric. Matthew's heart started to race. He looked at the body in anger and remorse.

“Sir? Sir!”

Matthew looked up as the noise came crashing back to him all at once. He shoved the cloth in his pocket and turned around to face a guard.

“Sir, you'll have to leave, we need to preserve the crime scene for forensics.”

“Yes of course,” he said finding his voice.

Matthew stood and coughed, feeling the smoke in his lungs. He navigated out of the hallway to the broken doorframe where Dr. Kaine stood. He was panting and looked frazzled.

“You're quick to see what goes on here,” he panted out of breath. “Let's get out of the way.”

Matthew followed him up the stairs, pausing for doctors to run past.

“I guess it's safe to say Patient Zero didn't have a good night,” Dr. Kaine sighed leaning on the stairs. “The forensic teams should be able to shed some light for us.”

“I want to see the full report before they put it on the computer. It could be useful for my presentation,” Matthew ordered.

“Whatever is in writing goes into the computer,” Dr. Kaine insisted. “But I can see if it can be forwarded to you as soon as its ready.”

“Yeah that's good,” Matthew muttered beginning to walk up the stairs. He stopped and turned around, “Dr. Kaine? There's one more thing you can do for me.”

“Sure! What do you need?”

“You can take that chipper nice guy attitude and shove it up your ass.”

CHAPTER 14

Rajax brushed his wet hair and stared into the mirror. He traced his fingers along his jawline. The steam fogged the mirror as he pulled at his cheeks. The face staring back at him was familiar, but Rajax did not feel whole. Something was missing. Rajax wiped the mirror and sighed. His light blue skin was comforting, his eyes the dark silver he remembered, but it felt out of place. A part of him was gone, destroyed long ago. The Xeno had stripped him of his sense of self. Even now, as he recovered day by day, the mental toll the parasite inflicted on him would scar Rajax's mind forever. He was jerked away from his dark thoughts from a knock on his door.

"One moment," he shouted as he took one last look in the mirror.

Rajax dried himself off and dressed, opening the bathroom door. The knock sounded again as he tiptoed around the piles of books that covered his floor. Rajax opened the door and Whitney smiled.

"Sorry. I did not mean to interrupt your morning routine. I brought breakfast," she said nudging the trays.

Rajax smiled at her, "It is alright. Please come in."

Rajax held the door open farther as Whitney shuffled in. She stepped over the books and set the trays on the table. She tripped over a small stack by the bed.

"I apologize for the mess," Rajax explained grabbing her arm before she fell. "I have run out of room for the books your people have brought me."

She laughed, "It's okay. We are in the process of getting you a bigger room. Your home away from home."

Rajax smiled as they sat down. He loved hearing her laugh. Whitney lifted the tray covers and placed them on the floor.

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“I brought waffles, eggs, biscuits and gravy, cereal, and milk. This is all the food we offer. I wasn’t sure what you’ve had or what you were hungry for,” Whitney explained as she cut into a waffle.

Rajax grabbed one and ran his fingers across the crevices.

“This is a waffle?” he asked.

Whitney nodded swallowing her food.

Rajax took a bite and chewed happily.

“This is delicious,” he exclaimed taking more bites.

“I’m glad you like it; they’re my favorite.”

They ate in silence. Rajax pulled apart his food with his hands feeling the textures inside and out. Whitney looked up from time to time smiling slightly.

“You said this was my home,” Rajax said after a while. “How is this my home?”

Whitney sat up straighter, clearing her throat and wiping her mouth on her napkin.

“This is where you’ve been living since you arrived. A home can be where you reside most of the time. A home can be a place that is special; makes you feel at peace. It makes you feel complete. A haven where you can get away from it all.”

Rajax thought for a moment, “Is this your home?”

“It has been for a few years or so.”

“But is it your *home*?”

Rajax watched as her face fell. She had a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“No, it’s not.”

“Where is home to you,” Rajax inquired.

Whitney paused for a moment, “My home was in Buffalo, New York. It’s where my mom lived before... she passed. It’s close to Niagara Falls.”

“I read about it in my books. What is it like?”

“The sight is truly breathtaking. I find myself getting lost in the lull of rapids and the mist of water. Waterfalls drown out the sounds around you. It gets crowded but I don’t notice when I’m there...”

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Rajax watched as Whitney trailed off into her memories. He watched as she brushed her hair back across her shoulder and out of her eyes. Rajax watched the strands slowly fall, as if her hair became the rapids she dreamed of.

“When is the last time you were there?” he asked softly.

“It’s been years,” she sighed. “Whenever I would go on a trip or had a weekend off, I’d go and take my mother. I have not been since... since she died. It’s one of the true wonders of our world. This job keeps me so busy I haven’t thought about it in a long time. I’ve seen the inside of this building so much I would notice if they finally got around to filling the small cracks in the ceilings.”

“I do not like it here,” Rajax murmured. “The walls remind me of the Xenos hives.”

He looked up at Whitney, studying her face. He could see the hurt and determination in her eyes. Whitney slowly reached her hand over and placed it on his.

“Rajax; I will get you home. I swear.”

Rajax looked down at her smooth hand as it gently brushed his. His heart beat faster as he slowly turned his hand touching their palms together. A surge of energy rushed through him as he gripped his fingers around her wrist.

“Whitney...”

Alarms startled them. Whitney shot up and ran for the door. She grabbed the phone on the wall outside his room.

“What’s going on,” she demanded.

He watched as she tapped her foot anxiously. Rajax could feel the tension in her rising.

“Everyone stays where they are until we get this under control. I want a mandatory meeting in half an hour. No excuses.”

She slammed the phone down and turned to him apologetically.

“I’m sorry I have to cut this short. I’ll see you after lunch.”

Rajax waved his hand as she shut the door. Her footsteps echoed his room as she ran down the hallway. He looked down at his hand and stopped. A small swirl of dark blue liquid started to fade on his palm. Rajax stared a few moments more, waiting for it

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to reappear. The sensation was familiar, catching his curiosity. Perhaps the Xeno had left a part of him whole after all.

Matthew paced back and forth in the conference room waiting for Whitney to arrive. He returned to work in the lab after the explosion itching for answers. Dr. Kaine hovered over him, undeterred by Matthew's constant threats if he was not left alone. Matthew gripped his pocket, feeling the charred fabric crumble. The forensic results arrived while Dr. Kaine was on lunch, giving himself time to look over them alone. Matthew poured over the results from the explosion, but it only increased his anxiety. Rajax arrived in the conference room after Matthew escaped Dr. Kaine's watch. He looked as if something else was on his mind. They waited in silence as the clock ticked by. As the door swung open, Matthew halted and let out a sigh of annoyance.

"Finally," he barked. "We need to talk."

Austin and Whitney walked in and looked surprised.

"I've had my hands full with an extremely sensitive issue that you are aware of. Excuse me for trying to get all the facts," Whitney huffed. "I just finished going over all the reports and interviews."

"I... had a big lunch," Austin laughed trying to lighten the mood.

Matthew glared at them.

"What do you know about the explosion?" he asked.

Rjax snapped out of his thoughts, "What explosion?"

Whitney sighed and sat down. She motioned for everyone to sit. Exhaustion covered her face.

"Patient Zero is dead," she answered solemnly. "We're trying to piece it together, but we know seven people were caught in the blast. From what we can tell, Patient Zero started convulsing. An attempt was made to steady his vitals, when the Xeno let out a high-pitched scream that knocked out our systems. The witnesses say that's when the cell exploded."

Rjax looked astonished. Matthew swallowed the lump in his throat.

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“Has anything like this happened before?” Whitney asked Rajax.

Rajax shook his head, “Although the bonding was not done properly, the Xeno would have fought to adapt.”

“The cells have been deteriorating for weeks,” Matthew remarked, “it was only a matter of time.”

“For the host,” Rajax explained. “Whatever was left over would be the Xeno, an adaptation of its original purpose. It would have been a lengthy process.”

“Then it’s plausible to assume there is more to the explosion,” Austin stated.

“More than you realize,” Matthew said resentfully.

Whitney looked at him in surprise, “Care to elaborate?”

Matthew stood and pulled the fabric out and tossed it on the table.

“I pulled this off one of the victims before security stepped in. Look familiar?”

Whitney pulled it closer to the light and ran her hands on it carefully. Austin leaned over the table and squinted.

“Is that supposed to be a lady?” he asked.

“A statue,” Matthew corrected, “In fact it’s supposed to be the—”

“—Statue of Liberty,” Whitney finished.

Rajax looked at them confused, “Why is this significant?”

“That’s the tie that Nathan Bernard wore,” Matthew explained his anger rising. “His daughter gave it to him as a gift before he joined Chora. He oversaw the science lab I worked in and was helping to plead your case. He mysteriously went missing when Whitney needed him, and when he told me about Roswell. Now he’s dead.”

“I asked him to help with the research of Patient Zero when he arrived,” Whitney barely got out. She cleared her throat, “He was a good friend and a great scientist.”

“Are you sure he was there?” Austin asked. “Have the bodies been identified?”

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Whitney shook her head, “All we’ve been able to do is search the security cameras and take a headcount of who was on the base at the time. It will be a long process. We’re trying to run dental records now as we speak.”

“I guess you were right Whitney,” Matthew spat out. “I guess there really is a war going on inside the walls. The only problem is you and Parkson brought it on us.”

Whitney whipped around and pushed her chair, slamming it into the wall.

“My fault,” she yelled. “I don’t go around murdering people. I fight for what’s right, I don’t get what I want by fighting dirty.”

“I thought we were all working together. Has that changed?” Rajax asked.

They turned to Rajax. The pit in his stomach grew. Whitney looked in his eyes. He could feel ice building inside her.

“You know how I told you Parkson has his own agenda,” she started slowly. “I suspect this is foul play on his part. I don’t have any evidence, but I know it was him. No matter who gets in the way, he’ll make it to the top. That unfortunately...could mean your people could not get the help they need.”

Rajax’s heart skipped a beat.

“He wants the Xeno weaponized,” she finished. “Release a biochemical weapon to render them weak enough to get technology.”

Rajax’s heart raced and the room spin. He slowly stood and gripped the table.

“He wants to what,” Rajax managed to get out through clenched teeth.

“I didn’t want to tell you,” Whitney admitted. “I was trying to spare you from Parkson’s real plans. I’m sorry.”

Rajax gripped the table harder and roared in frustration as the table snapped in half. Whitney, Austin, and Matthew jumped out of the way in time as large splinters flew in every direction. Two guards slammed the door opened and pulled out their weapons.

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“No,” Whitney shouted raising her hand to them. “Leave him be.”

Rajax panted gripping his hands into tight fists. He could feel his anger surge through him with every heartbeat. How could these, these naïve children think of such things. He let his anger get the best of him as Rajax began throwing chairs into the wall. Austin and Matthew ducked out of the way and hid behind the guards. Whitney ordered them to stay back. A crowd began to form in the open doorway. Rajax slammed his fist into the wall shaking the room. He closed his eyes, trying to wake from a bad dream. A hand gently pressed against his arm.

“Rajax,” Whitney whispered, “I know—”

Rajax whipped around and grabbed for her arm. She dodged out of the way as guards raised their guns. She grabbed his arm and pulled it behind him as Rajax struggled. He pushed up with his knees, knocking her grip loose. They dodged each other’s blows till Whitney broke free, jumping on the wall to gain height, and landed on Rajax’s back in a sleeper hold. Rajax tried to roll her off but she held her ground. He started to fall grabbing at her arm on his neck.

“Rajax,” Whitney panted, “You need to calm down. I know your mad. I’m—”

“I. Do not. Want. An. Apology,” he spat through gasps of air. “I want to go home and fix this myself if I have to.”

Rajax felt a surge of emotions. Dark liquid formed in his hand creeping up his arm. His mind clouded with resentment, pity, loneliness, frustration, dismay, hopelessness, and fear. Whitney looked at his arm and released her grip. She backed up, letting Rajax catch his breath. The liquid stopped and slowly gravitated back into his palm. Rajax looked up at Whitney. Her suit was torn and her hair askew. She was breathing hard. His anger caused him to lash out at his friends, and Whitney had been afraid of him.

Rajax staggered backward, placing his hand on the wall for balance. He let his yearning for home cloud his judgement of those who had given him refuge. His anger had taken control. They treated him with kindness, and he knew one man’s desire did not

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account for them all. Rajax could barely look at them as he pushed his way to the door and out to the hall. The crowd dispersed as he shoved through. The guards caught up with him and grabbed Rajax by the arm. They slammed him against the wall and cuffed his hands. Rajax did not resist. Guards barked over the radio as they led him down the hallway. All around him doors were opening, curious eyes cautiously peeking out. The crowd stood rigid by the conference room door. Rajax was shoved into the elevator, hitting his head against the wall. As the doors closed, he looked up, catching a glimpse of Whitney in the hallway. Her bright eyes were filled with tears.

CHAPTER 15

Austin looked around the room at the smashed table, chairs, and wall. Matthew stood frozen beside him. Whitney walked back through the door in a daze.

“Maybe you should go to the medical bay,” Austin suggested.

“I’m fine,” she snapped wiping her face.

Austin could tell she was trying to remain strong. Whitney picked up papers, stacking them in her hand. He looked at the damaged table and wall.

“That was unexpected,” Matthew finally said.

Whitney gestured to the room, “Are you happy now? I wanted to ease Rajax into it instead of laying it all down on him. Now we have nothing. This is not going to help his case. We. Have. Nothing.”

Before Matthew could spat out a reply Austin jumped in.

“We can work around this.”

“How?” Whitney challenged him.

“Rajax’s response and physical skills can be used to our advantage. He is passionate about saving his people, and with these fighting skills—”

“Yes, we already know he was a soldier and a fighter,” Matthew sighed.

“What’s your point,” Whitney snapped.

“Can I finish first?” Austin asked raising his voice.

Whitney and Matthew looked at each other surprised.

“As I was saying, we can use his skills to our advantage. It shows that Rajax is willing to fight for his people tooth and nail. Showing off his fighting skills in a more controlled environment will show President Graves, and possibly Parkson, that the Naanans are not weak. They want something in return, right? This is it; a fighting force they can’t refuse.”

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“It took Rajax a long time to recover, and we don’t have a huge guarantee that we can free the Naanans. How would you respond?” Whitney asked him.

“We can bend the truth a little,” Austin shrugged.

“Lie to the President and Parkson. How big is this hole you’re digging?” Matthew asked.

“Look,” Austin explained, “we don’t have an ace up our sleeve. Word is probably already spreading about what happened. You can bet Director Parkson is already all over this. We do not necessarily know that we can’t free the Naanans, that’s where the science comes in. All we can do is give a good presentation and show if they go with our plan, we’ll have more people on the ground.”

Whitney shifted her papers and bit her lip. Austin watched her as she looked around the room in thought.

“Okay,” she replied after a few moments, “we’ll try it. Where are your volunteers for this demonstration coming from?”

“The agents I’ve been training with are the best,” Austin explained his excitement rising. “They’re part of this squad and their commander has shown a lot of interest in seeing how well Rajax can hold up in an intense environment.”

“Orion Squad and Commander Daniel Evans,” she nodded. “They’re the best. I can talk to Evans and get him onboard.”

“I know every agent here is looking to see how Rajax holds up in a fight,” he beamed.

“How do you know that?” Matthew asked.

Austin turned red in the face, “Angela.”

Matthew rolled his eyes and Whitney looked at him intently.

“What does she say?”

Austin smiled, “There’s a lot of agents on her security teams who have come to watch Rajax train. They want to know what his people are made of.”

Whitney nodded approvingly, “We’re still left with the big question: can we free the Naanans. We don’t have a case if we can’t help them.”

“That’s where Matthew comes in.”

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Matthew looked at him shocked, “Wait. I’ve only studied the cells after the fact, there’s no way to know the process of what goes on in-between. I don’t have enough information on that. Even if I studied the data put in the computer by the other scientists, I have no idea whether its accurate or not.”

“What about Patient Zero?” Austin asked. “That was documented, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but there’s no way—”

Matthew stopped.

“What is it?” Whitney asked.

“This morning when I got up, there was a package stuffed under my door. It’s still on my desk. I have a hunch who it might be from.”

“Dr. Bernard?” Whitney asked hopefully.

“I hope so,” Matthew said. “He had a worn-down notebook he wrote in, and I don’t believe everything goes on the computer like I’ve been told several times.”

“Your paranoia has finally come in handy,” Whitney smiled.

“If Matthew can handle that,” Austin declared, “I can work with Rajax. Get him prepared and break him out of his cell.”

“Let me handle that,” Whitney stated. “I’ll pull a few strings. Staying in isolation for a few hours will help Rajax cool off. He will be confined to his room the rest of the night. I want Dr. Bishop to look him over, I want to know what happened with his arm.”

“I’ll visit him and let him know the plan,” Austin suggested.

“You’re not allowed on that level, but I’ll see what I can do. If you go with Dr. Bishop, it should be fine. Anyone who gives you a hard time will have to deal with me. I’ll run damage control and finalize my side of our report.”

“I hope we can pull this off,” Matthew muttered.

“Hey, it’s the three of us,” Austin grinned, “winging it is our game plan.”

Rajax shifted on the hard bed as he curled tighter into a ball. The guards had forced him down the hall into the first cell of the detention center. Outside he could hear Parkson talking with the

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guards, asking for every detail again and again. Through the muffled sounds, Rajax could tell Parkson was enjoying every minute of it. He sat up and let out a long breath, pulling his knees towards his chest. Leaning his head against his knees, Rajax closed his eyes. Emotions flashed through his head. His frustrations and rage mixed with Whitney's fleeting concerns and fear. He did not want them to be afraid of him. This place shook him to the core. So much of it reminded him of the Xeno hives. The constant waiting for action wore on his mind. Did he ruin the chance of saving his people? What could he do to make it better? A knock sounded from the outside but Rajax ignored it. He did not want to see anyone. The knock sounded again, beating several times.

"Go away."

His words echoed across the cell, entrenching his loneliness.

"Rajax it's Austin," a muffled voice came from the other side of the door. "I've got Dr. Bishop with me; we want to make sure you're all right. Can we open the door?"

Rajax sat up straight kicking his legs out. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Fine."

Rajax heard the cell door slowly open as Austin and Dr. Bishop walked in. Austin smiled at him and gestured to the doctor.

"Dr. Bishop wants to make sure you're okay and check out your hand."

"I am sore. That is all."

"May I look at your hand then?" Dr. Bishop asked.

Rajax held out his hand to the doctor. He turned Rajax's hand this way and that, then pulled out a stethoscope and held it to his palm.

"When did this first happen?" Dr. Bishop inquired.

"This morning."

"Before or during the conference meeting?"

Rajax hesitated. Austin placed his hand on his shoulder.

"No one is mad at you," he reassured, "we just want to know what happened so we can help."

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“That’s not the case,” an angry voice sounded from the doorway.

Rajax looked at Director Parkson’s fuming red face.

“The prisoner is not to receive visitors,” he declared.

“He’s not a ‘prisoner’, he’s my patient,” Dr. Bishop replied not looking up from his examination. “After I finish, Rajax is to be taken to his new room where he will stay until tomorrow. Those are my orders.”

“And I suppose *Director Blake*,” Parkson growled thick with contempt, “thought of this course of action.”

“Rajax is a guest and will be treated as such.”

“If you have a problem with it,” Austin smirked, “you can take it up with her.”

Parkson glared at them and stormed out.

“Is Whitney all right?” Rajax asked.

Austin grinned, “She’ll be fine. I think I was more surprised by her reaction; I didn’t know she could fight like that.”

“To the matter at hand,” Dr. Bishop said bringing them back, “was it before or during?”

“Before,” Rajax responded, “during breakfast.”

“How did it happen?”

Rajax felt a rush of curiosity shoot up from his hand as blue liquid began to slowly swirl. Dr. Bishop let go of his hand and it disappeared.

“You are very curious,” Rajax stated.

Dr. Bishop looked at him in awe, “How did you know that?”

“I felt it.”

“Wow,” Austin gasped, “it’s like a superpower.”

“What?” Rajax asked confused.

“It’s something unique to you,” Dr. Bishop explained. “It must have been lying dormant until a strong emotion awakened it. You said this happened at breakfast? What happened?”

Austin cocked his head, “You had breakfast with Whitney, didn’t you?”

“I asked her to sit with me for breakfast. We were eating and I touched her hand.”

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“Is there anything in particular that you think set it off?” Dr. Bishop asked. “What were you talking about?”

Rajax replayed the memory in his mind. The way Whitney’s hair moved across her shoulder, the way she laughed and smiled. The way she placed her hand on his ...

“Home,” he said aloud. “We were talking about the meaning of home.”

“That’s a tough subject for you right now,” Austin said sadly. Rajax could only nod.

“Emotions are funny things,” Dr. Bishop stated. “No one really knows how they affect one’s self. It is possible your people have a very in tune sense of emotions through touch. It’s been lying dormant since your arrival. Its possible more abilities will show up overtime, but I would like to do a blood test if that is all right. Possibly a few scans as well.”

Rajax was deep in thought. Would he constantly change over time? Why did Whitney’s presence cause this reaction?

“Rajax,” Dr. Bishop said grabbing his attention, “can we do the tests now?”

Rajax followed Dr. Bishop and Austin to the elevator with two guards close behind. They squeezed in and travelled to the medical bay. Small groups hunched over and whispered, glancing up at Rajax as he passed. Word had spread about his outburst and many looked hostile, while others looked impressed. Rajax kept his gaze ahead. Dr. Bishop opened the medical bay and led Rajax to the far end. He changed into a robe and laid down on a machine. Rajax’s anxiety grew as the bed slid in and lights inside flickered on.

“Stay still for a few moments,” Dr. Bishop instructed over the intercom. “I need to make adjustments to the machine to get a better picture.”

Rajax laid staring at the lights listening to the bustle outside. The medical bay was quiet, with only the shuffle of feet and swish of lab coats. He could hear Austin spinning in a chair tapping the desk each time he turned. The lights above him brightened and Rajax held his breath.

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“Relax Rajax,” Austin assured over the intercom, “this is how the test works.”

Rajax breathed out a bit as the machine clicked a few more times, then slid him out of the tube. Dr. Bishop helped Rajax sit up and directed him over to a bed. They gave him a physical and took blood samples. Rajax watched the black liquid exit his arm into the tube. Austin stayed by his side tapping monitors. Dr. Bishop left them to go over his results. Rajax laid staring at the ceiling, exhausted from being poked and prodded. He turned to see Austin grinning at him.

“What?”

“Whitney huh,” Austin grinned.

“What about her?” Rajax asked defensive.

Austin put his hands up, “Oh nothing. Just interesting.”

Rajax back at the ceiling, “I do not think she is pleased with my behavior. Will she forgive me?”

“She will,” Austin reassured him. “She’s tough. Whitney understands your plight. We’re trying to help you.”

“I know... I did not mean to lash out.”

“Why don’t you tell her then,” Austin suggested. He leaned in closer to Rajax. “To be honest, that was awesome, coolest fight by far.”

Rajax looked at him, “I disagree. I lashed out at my friends. I believe I have made my relationship with Whitney worse.”

Austin stretched, “I know Whitney, she doesn’t hold a grudge. Well, maybe with Matthew she does. Anyway, she understands you are upset. She really does want what’s best, there’s just a lot of hoops she has to jump through.”

Rajax shook his head, “I do not understand why. It is a simple solution to answer.”

“To us, but not to everyone. It’s always good to hear both sides of the situation,” Austin explained.

Rajax thought for a bit, “I suppose I understand. I wish I could remember how my people would have handled it.”

Rajax pulled the blanket over him and closed his eyes. He heard Austin sit down next to him and drum his fingers on his leg.

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Rajax wanted so badly to remember. He wanted to remember what his people were like. All he saw were vague images of a life before. Would he be able to save it? Would he ever get his home back? Would Rajax's home here forgive him?

They sat in silence for a few hours, Rajax slipping in and out of consciousness. Through his tired haze he remembered seeing Dr. Bishop coming in to check on him. Austin snored in the chair. Whitney walked through at one point but did not stop to talk. Her face was buried in notes as she fought with the doctors on whether she needed to be examined or not. Rajax tried to reach out to her, but before he could Dr. Bishop was standing over him. He handed the medical results to Rajax to look over while he explained the strange effect that surfaced. Rajax's body was still adjusting to the Xeno's absence and his brain activity was far superior than humans in emotion and agility. This unique physiology was hard for Dr. Bishop to understand, but with Rajax looking over the results, something may spark a memory of understanding.

Austin escorted Rajax back to his new room, discussing their plan for the coming day. Rajax understood he made things difficult and was not as hopeful as Austin. He watched Austin's eyes spark as he hinted at his ideas, leaving the rest to imagination. Finally, they reached his room. It was larger than he expected. The books Rajax read were placed on bookshelves wrapping the room. His bed was soft and to his delight, no window to be spied on. Rajax wished Austin a good night and sat in the dark, gripping the results in his hands. The notion that he would know more seemed fatal, but Rajax knew if he searched for faith in himself, he would be able to understand. Rajax opened the folder and turned on a small light. He would make his wrong doings right; he would not jeopardize his mission any longer.

Whitney brushed her brown hair into a ponytail and rubbed her arm. Her body ached from being thrown around, but the pain was subsiding. After she left Austin and Matthew to work on their jobs, she buzzed around trying to cover all her bases. Whitney and Parkson got into a yelling match about the conference room

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incident, but she didn't let his threats scare her. Her injuries were minor, no reason to keep Rajax under lock and key. Whether Parkson liked it or not Rajax was not a prisoner. She stopped by the medical bay looking for Dr. Bishop's results and passed by Rajax as he slept. There were many outcomes to weigh and reports to finish. They were running out of time.

Whitney slouched back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She looked around her dimly lit room at the pictures and research thrown about in frustration. Everything was falling apart around her, and all she wanted to do was help. Whitney feared Austin's plan wasn't going to work. The thin ice they were walking on was already breaking, and the nagging anxiety didn't let up. Whitney could feel the tension as she walked through the halls, asking for reports and help. No one seemed willing. There were a few, but not in the numbers she was hoping. They had nothing. Parkson would have everything.

Her eyes slowly began to close when a knock sounded at her door. Whitney looked up at the time. It was after midnight and she had been closed off in her room since dinnertime. She threw herself full force into the presentation and hadn't realized how late it was. The knock came again. Slowly wrapping up her robe Whitney opened the door with surprise. Rajax stood in the doorway with two guards behind him. He looked up at her, the ground, then back.

"We told him he wasn't allowed to leave his room until tomorrow," one guard said gruffly.

Whitney looked at him, "Well here you are."

"He lost the arm wrestle," the other replied.

Whitney looked at him amused as his face flushed with embarrassment.

"May I come in?" Rajax asked softly.

Whitney nodded and opened the door all the way as he stepped in. The two guards began to enter but she held up her hand.

"Did I say you could come in?"

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“Parkson wants him to have two guards at all times since the incident this afternoon,” one guard answered. “We aren’t supposed to be here anyway.”

“And will it look suspicious if you are casually standing outside my door?”

The guards exchanged glances. Whitney held her ground.

“This is my room; I’ll decide who is safe enough to come in and who is not.”

They exchanged glances again and backed up.

“We’ll be out here then,” the other stated.

Whitney shut the door tightly and sighed. She turned around and saw Rajax picking up papers turning them in his hand.

“I was trying to get the presentation together,” she explained.

He nodded and continue looking through them.

“There is a lot here. But this craft I do not recognize,” Rajax said holding up a paper.

Whitney took it from him, “That’s for a later time. You might get to see what I’ve been working on the past few years.”

“Is there any luck with tomorrow?”

“Yes and no,” she sighed. “I’ve been trying to narrow it down.”

Rjax stood up and placed the papers on the table. He turned to her; his eyes filled with regret.

“I wanted to apologize; I did not mean to hurt you. It was not right for me to lash out the way I did. Please forgive me.”

Whitney briefly replayed the incident in her head. She was shocked that he had tried to grab her and the way he had fought her so violently. Whitney was afraid that he blamed her for letting his people down. She feared for him, and that hurt her the most.

“You didn’t hurt me,” she lied. “This place brings out the worst in people.”

Rjax walked towards her and she could feel her heart thumping in her chest. He slowly brushed her shoulder and down her arm. His fingers lightly brushed her hand.

“I do not want you to be afraid of me Whitney.”

Whitney was taken aback.

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“I’m not afraid of you Rajax.”

“You were this afternoon.”

“How...” she started.

Whitney looked down at his palm and blue liquid swirled to his fingers. She pulled her arm back and sat on the couch surprised. Rajax sat next to her, his expression blank.

“Dr. Bishop believes it is a dormant ability that has surfaced. After closer examination of the results myself, I was able to remember more about my people. This unique ability is natural. But I do not remember it acting this way. I can feel the strongest emotion emitting from someone who I touch. Today you were afraid.”

Whitney took his hand feeling his warmth, “I only read part of the findings, seeing it in action doesn’t cover its amazing uniqueness.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“I was fearful that I wouldn’t be able to fulfill my promise to you and help your people. I was afraid you would not trust me again. One way or another, I’m going to get you home.”

He looked surprised, “You were not afraid of me.”

Whitney shook her head. Rajax stared off into the distance. His eyes seemed to be searching for anything his memory could hold on to. She wanted him to remember, but all the wishing in the world would not make it happen. Rajax turned to her and looked into her eyes. Their deep silver gaze seemed to shine as she looked at him. He reached over and touched her hand slightly. The blue liquid began to swirl and dance under his skin. He smiled leaning closer. Whitney could feel her heart race.

“You do not need to worry anymore; it will work out,” he whispered.

“How do you know,” she breathed.

Rajax pulled back moving strands of hair from her face, “You never give up. You are determined. You are open hearted...”

Rajax trailed off and slowly gripped her hand tighter.

Whitney’s heart raced as the blue liquid danced wildly up his arm. She looked at him, her heart feeling it would burst. They needed to

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keep a professional relationship, but she could not help it. Whitney wanted to bury her face in his chest. She had never felt like this before. Rajax took both his hands and placed them on her cheeks. Her breath tightened as he leaned in. Rajax slowly placed his forehead on hers and closed his eyes.

“This is how we comfort and greet each other on Trem-NA,” he whispered. “I see it in my fleeting memories. It feels right.”

Whitney closed her eyes and placed her hands on his cheeks. His skin was smooth to the touch. She breathed slowly, taking in his sweet smell. They sat there in the warm moments of silence. Whitney opened her eyes as Rajax did and she stared into the deep. Their unspoken bond danced around the room. Rajax smiled warmly at her. She needed to keep her distance and professional composure. She smiled back. Parkson told her she was in too deep, and she knew.

CHAPTER 16

Rajax smiled as Whitney drifted off. They spent the last hour discussing possible routes to take with the presentation. She listened intently to his input. Now, her breath slowed as she fell asleep. He carefully laid her down on the couch. Whitney rolled over and breathed out. Rajax could see the stress slowly melt away as she slept. He picked up a blanket and draped it over her. Stroking her cheek one last time he left her to sleep. As he walked down the hall, the guards close behind, his mind was clouded. Whitney's last emotions lingered in his mind. Rajax could feel her worry. The stress of tomorrow whirled around her thoughts. Something was wrong, and Whitney did not know what was coming. Rajax knew it had to do with Patient Zero. Something deep down inside gnawed at her fear. They were in danger, and Rajax was determined to keep Whitney safe.

Rajax slowly opened his eyes as a thud sounded against his door. He sat up in bed as a guard barged in. The breakfast tray shook as he slammed it onto the desk.

"Breakfast," he said bluntly. "Today we get to find out what we're going to do with you."

The guard slammed the door behind him and Rajax stood. The cereal splattered across the desk, drenching the muffin in milk. Rajax sighed and dressed. He sat in lonely silence as he ate, patiently waiting to be escorted to the meetings. Time ebbed on as he flipped through a book about the Rocky Mountains. Rajax started to doze when his door swung open and Parkson entered.

"Sorry about all this," Parkson smiled. "We can't have you attacking anyone else. You understand the severity of your actions yes?"

"I apologized," Rajax explained.

Parkson ignored him, "Are you ready? The President will be here soon."

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“Will Whitney be joining us,” Rajax inquired.

“Director Blake will be chauffeuring President Graves around, so you and I will be getting to know each other. Please follow me to the conference room.”

“Actually,” a voice sounded from behind, “We’re taking Rajax to the gym.”

Parkson turned around and Austin stood in the doorway.

“The gym?” Parkson asked evenly.

“We’re doing exercises with Orion Squad to practice fighting moves and keep everyone up to date. You know, so he doesn’t attack another staff member.”

Austin winked at Rajax. He followed Austin while Parkson grumbled behind them. As they headed to the gym, Rajax could feel his anxiety rising. Austin’s confidence radiated, but it did not put Rajax at ease. They opened the door and saw Whitney and the President standing on the side of the court. He watched them for a moment. The President was not how Rajax envisioned him. He was all smiles, his brown hair beginning to grey. His security stood erect next to him watching the room. Whitney looked more professional. Her brown hair was in a tight bun, her grey suit pressed and ironed. Rajax noticed she looked shorter in her flat shoes. He turned to the rest of the gym. Many agents were stretching and gearing up. A small crowd formed on one side. Rajax looked at Austin nervous.

“This is not a good idea,” he whispered to Austin.

“You’ll be fine. These men are Orion Squad, best of the best. They have been waiting for a chance to see how tough you are. And besides, I may have bragged about your skills. The fact that you held your own against Whitney holds a lot of merit around here.”

“Is that what we are going to do? Put on a show?”

“Think of it as blowing off steam in a controlled environment. Let’s go meet the President.”

Rajax followed Austin towards Whitney. His heart raced as they walked. Parkson went ahead of them and was chatting with

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President Graves. Whitney looked slightly annoyed but smiled when they approached.

“Mr. President,” she said slowly nudging him away from Parkson, “we’d like you to meet Rajax of Trem-NA.”

The President looked at him in awe and held out his hand, “President Graves. Welcome to the United States.”

Rjax took his hand and shook. He felt a sense of pride and awe with a hint of stress.

“You take your position seriously,” Rajax stated.

The President smiled, “I have a country to run, I want what’s best for my people.”

“That fills you with pride.”

The President looked amazed, “How did you know that?”

Rjax let go of his hand as the blue liquid swirled back into his palm. The President’s security took a step closer. Parkson looked over curiously.

“I can sense other’s emotions,” Rajax explained. “I can tell how they feel in a situation by touching them. Some emotions are stronger than others, effecting the way the liquid pronounces itself. It is a dormant ability that has resurfaced over my time here. It will not harm you.”

“All your people can do this?” Parkson asked intrigued.

Rjax nodded, “I am finding that some natural skills are not the same as they use to be.”

“You can do this on anyone?”

Rjax looked at Parkson sternly, “I would not like to test it on you.”

The President laughed loudly, and Whitney smirked.

The President shook his finger at Rajax and smiled, “I like him already.”

Parkson’s face turned red and he stepped back grumbling. The President shook his head and composed himself.

“Rjax,” Whitney chimed in, “why don’t you show our President how your people greet each other.”

The President looked at him, “I can do that.”

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“Mr. President,” his security guard said sternly, “I recommend—”

“Come now,” he said waving his hand. “I didn’t come all this way to not learn more about Naanan culture. If I was in any danger, don’t you think we would’ve known by now?”

The security guard clenched his jaw. Rajax lifted his hands and put them on the President’s cheeks. He motioned for the President to do the same and touched his forehead. Rajax pulled back and he looked surprised.

“Your people are very affectionate to each other,” President Graves concluded.

“Yes, we were,” Rajax agreed. “I hope that it can be saved.”

The President rested his hand on his shoulder, “We will do our best.”

Rjax could feel a sense of sincerity, putting his worry at ease.

“So,” the President said folding his arms, “what are we doing here?”

“We thought we would show you what Rajax is capable of physically. That way if our plan works to free the Naanans, it will double our forces,” Whitney explained.

“Not to offend Rajax, but if they couldn’t defeat the Xeno how will this help?” Parkson asked returning.

Rjax looked over at him, “We fought till our last breath.”

“Then show us what you’re made of,” Parkson challenged.

Rjax walked to the center of the court with Whitney. Austin was already checking out the equipment. Whitney waved over a tall strong built man.

“Rjax,” she said as the man joined them, “this is Commander Daniel Evans, leader of Orion Squad. His men are the toughest we have.”

Commander Evans shook Rajax’s hand with a tight grip. Rajax noticed kindness hidden underneath his tough composure. His dusty hair was short and bounced against his head.

“We’ve heard and seen what you can do,” he said smiling, “my men are eager to test their skills. Don’t disappoint.”

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The Commander turned and started to gather his men. Rajax looked to Whitney.

“I still do not believe this is a good idea,” he said quietly. “This place, I cannot shake this feeling I have. My emotions are so intensified here, I do not want to become a danger to your people.”

Whitney studied him for a moment then softly smiled, “Rajax, I understand you feel trapped here, that is not our intention. Perhaps after today’s events you will be more at ease. Emotions run high and everyone is on edge these days. With my hope, you will be feeling better soon.”

Rjax watched Whitney as she pulled equipment away from Austin, scolding him. He admired her tenacious spirit. He watched how she handled herself in any situation thrown at her. His gaze drifted from her to Parkson, who stood waiting with the President. The way he watched them made him uneasy, but the way he watched Whitney was unsettling. His gaze was heightened, like a predator stalking prey. Rajax moved to obscure his view and turned to Austin who called for his attention.

“Here are gloves to protect your hands,” Austin said beginning to hand Rajax a pile of equipment. “We’ll start with boxing then move to sword fighting—”

“—Austin,” Whitney interrupted taking the weapons out of Rajax’s hands, “why don’t we let Rajax decide what he is comfortable with. This is a demonstration not an all-out bloodbath.”

“I thought it would be cool,” Austin protested.

“Then you can fight Orion Squad on your own time.”

Rjax eyed the weapons around him. He looked over each item feeling clouded. Whitney gently brushed his arm calming his nerves. He leaned down and grabbed a long pole. Rajax’s memory flashed of him running, wielding a staff back and forth, helping hold off the Xeno to help Naanans escape.

“This is what I want to use,” he announced.

Whitney helped Austin move the weaponry back onto the cart. They moved to the edge of the court and joined the President and Parkson. Rajax slipped on the gloves and swung the staff back

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and forth in his hands, feeling the weight shift back and forth. He began to swing faster and stab the air. It became so familiar to him. The movement, the weight. It was freeing, but devastating. All these techniques, and his people still lost. Rajax slowed down and looked over at Whitney. She smiled at him and nodded. Rajax would not let them down.

Whitney pulled on her suit jacket as Rajax smiled at her. She signaled for Commander Evans to begin. Evans called his men to attention and they began to advance, slowly circling Rajax. He bent down into a battle stance, sizing up the competition.

“I don’t think this is safe,” Parkson scoffed.

“And why not?” The President asked.

“He can’t control his anger, didn’t you read my report of what happened to our conference room and with Whitney?”

Parkson sneered at her as the President looked at her puzzled. She faced him holding her ground.

“He only lashed out because I told him you wanted to make the Xenos a weapon for your own gains.”

President Graves held his hand up, “Before you two start, I want to see what happens. I want to form my own opinion.”

Whitney folded her arms and returned her attention to Rajax. Orion Squad circled closer to Rajax in an uneven form. Whitney held her breath and looked at Austin, who gave her an encouraging nod. She watched Rajax whip around and knocked the first agent onto the ground. He swung the staff back around in a blur and knocked down a second. Whitney was surprised how fast Rajax moved and how quickly he took out half the squad. One agent grabbed the staff just in time and Rajax struggled with him. Suddenly Rajax swung the agent around and he went flying across the gym. Whitney and the others jumped out of the way as the agent fell at their feet. He grunted and was up again, running back to the fight. The other agents took a step back and then grouped together, attacking Rajax head on. In a flurry of bodies Rajax fell. He tossed agent after agent to the side standing up. They laid around him panting, Rajax scanning for movement. Commander

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Evans stood up and threw his hands up into a boxing stance. Rajax tossed the staff aside and formed fists.

Whitney watched as they circled each other, the agents forming a circle around them. Fists went flying, Orion Squad cheering their leader on. Evans landed a few hard blows, Rajax backing up. In a blur of movement Rajax pinned Evans to the ground by his neck. The blue liquid began swirling up his arm and he let go. Rajax offered his hand to Evans and helped him up.

“You are a brave fighter,” Rajax complimented, “I am glad we are on the same side.”

Evans breathed out a laugh, “The feeling is mutual.”

The President nodded his head in approval. Whitney let out a sigh of relief. The crowd on the opposite side of the gym clapped and cheered. Whitney watched Rajax compliment each agent on their fighting skills. She could see the mix of feelings around the room. Some were impressed, others were shocked. Whitney glanced over at Parkson who looked unhappy.

“That went better than I thought,” Austin whispered to her.

“This was a good idea,” she agreed.

Whitney scanned the crowds and frowned, “Matthew missed it all.”

“I couldn’t get him out of the lab,” Austin explained. “He’s been in there since last night.”

Whitney turned to the President and smiled, “What do you think?”

President Graves thought for a moment, “I’m impressed. Rajax has admirable skill and seems... human. Perhaps it’s the way he composes himself. I must admit I was expecting antennas or a few more eyes. He seems comfortable around us.”

“Austin helped teach Rajax our language and culture,” she explained. “His room is filled with books about Earth; he’s fascinated by our world. Crowds are a struggle, but he is doing well.”

The President nodded and took her by the arm leading off to the side.

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“Director Blake,” he said quietly, “this was great, something my cabinet will be happy with. What bothers me though is what happened yesterday to you and your team. If I am not mistaken, this is not the first time he’s lashed out. Some of my staff feel he will be unpredictable. What I need is your honest opinion on his erratic behavior.”

“We have more in store,” she assured him, “and his behavior is explainable. Rajax’s unique ability to feel other’s emotions has only just surfaced, and reasons that the outbursts are due to oversensitivity. This isn’t exactly the best place if you’re not good with stress and hurt feelings. I give you my word, we have it under control. Director Parkson will escort you to one of our conference rooms while I find my scientist. He’s still hard at work.”

The President looked at her sternly, “I have your word?”

“You have my word.”

“Parkson,” President Graves called, “let us join my generals. You can give us your presentation and then we’ll finish Director Blake’s.”

Whitney watched them leave. Parkson turned back and gave her a dirty look. Her blood ran cold at his stare. One way or another, he would get his way. She turned startled by Rajax, standing behind her. His eyes were full of fear.

“Did I do a good job?” Rajax asked worried.

“Of course,” Whitney assured. “The President is impressed. There’s a few more people we need to convince.”

“I’m convinced,” Evans said as he approached. “That holds merit.”

“Thank you for lending us your team, I hope they’ll recover,” Whitney teased.

“They’ll be fine,” Evans laughed. “Good luck on the rest of your presentation. We’re rooting for you.”

Commander Evans waved goodbye and gathered his team. Whitney called Austin over.

“Go get Matthew before I kill him,” she said lowering her voice.

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Austin nodded and ran out the door. Whitney smiled at Rajax and gestured ahead.

“Shall we meet everyone else?” she asked.

Rajax looked at the door standing tall.

“I am ready.”

CHAPTER 17

Rajax followed Whitney as they walked towards the conference room. He followed closely, trying to slow his pace. The anticipation of the final meeting was overwhelming. Atmosphere in the base was beginning to change. Emotions were heightened. Everyone was on their toes awaiting final orders. Whitney stopped at the door and looked back at him. She nodded, encouraging him to go first. Rajax pulled the door open and stopped.

The conference room was filled with men in military uniforms who stopped and stared. Their expressions were unreadable. Rajax's feet cemented to the floor as he looked around. The only friendly face was President Graves, who sat in the middle. He gestured to a seat across from him. Rajax barely moved. His heart pounded. This defining moment decided the fate of his planet. Whitney nudged his arm and he looked at her. Her expression was kind, the room less daunting. His feet dragged with every step; all eyes fixed on him. Rajax slowly sat down and gripped the arm rests. Whitney sat next to him and looked around. He could feel his heart beating in his ears.

"Where is Mr. Loughy and Alcott?" she asked snapping Rajax back.

"We don't need 'UFO nuts' in this meeting," a general insisted.

"You do realize they're part of my team General Hallock," Whitney defended. "Whether they are nuts or not. You're talking about the men that made first contact with Rajax, are you really going to shut them out?"

Rajax breathed out, lifted by Whitney's courage. The door opened and Rajax looked up at Austin and Matthew. He was surprised at how tired Matthew looked. His clothes were stained, his hair skewed, and his eyes dark.

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“This is the scientist we’ve been waiting for,” General Hallock scoffed.

Whitney shot him a look. Matthew sat down next to Austin, who took the seat next to Whitney. Parkson sat with his team having a last-minute discussion. They quieted as he stood by the projection screen.

“Mr. President, generals, teams,” he said nodding to each in turn. “We are here today to discuss a course of action to take on the impending invasion we could be facing. As you all know, Rajax has made it clear that we are the next primary target for the Xeno. With the pod crashing in Russia and the pod he arrived in, we can assume more are on the way. Upon further investigation of the craft and substance left over by the Xeno, my team and I have come to one conclusion: a bioweapon to render the Xeno useless.”

Rajax shifted uneasy in his chair reading the room. Many were intrigued while others seemed skeptical. Parkson clicked a button and began showing slides of samples.

“As we all know, Patient Zero was the first victim to fall on Earth. As these samples show, the bonding process was incompatible, if we observe Rajax’s reasoning’s of different classes.”

He clicked again before anyone could ask questions, “Here is a sample we took from Rajax after he was relinquished into our custody. These cells are compatible with each other. There is however a variation to consider.”

“Excuse me,” A general interrupted. “Are you saying that this creature is possibly lying about this parasite?”

“I assure you,” Rajax nodded in respect, “I have no intention of leading you or your people astray. There are factions of the Xeno who are not meant to bond. These factions, scouts included, need the Queen’s help in a successful bonding.”

The general looked uncertain and Parkson cleared his throat, “With Rajax’s new cells, we can see a genetic mutation. My scientists and I believe that we can use this mutation to make a weapon that will catch the Xeno by surprise and give us the upper hand.”

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“How do you plan on dispelling this bioweapon?” General Hallock asked.

Parkson pointed to Whitney, “With Director Blake’s NOVA project, we could go and be back within a matter of months, give or take if Rajax can find where his people are.”

The generals talked amongst themselves for a few moments. Whitney leaned on the table and looked straight at Parkson.

“What is your probability for loss of life?”

Everyone turned their attention to him.

“Eighty-eight percent.”

The murmuring continued as Parkson sat down with his team sharing glances. Rajax waited for the President to call for silence, anxiously watching the general’s banter back and forth.

“Now it is time to hear Director Blake’s proposed course of action,” President Graves announced.

Whitney nodded to Matthew. He smoothed out his shirt and walked to the projection screen.

“Thank you all for coming,” he began, “I apologize if my presentation is longer. I wanted to be as thorough as possible.”

Matthew hit a button on a remote in his pocket and new slides began to appear.

“Here are the cells from Patient Zero. These cells and the human cells are not compatible as Parkson explained. They tear away at what makes you human and adapts you to what the Xeno needs. Unfortunately, this Xeno is a scout in the colony; bonding is difficult without aid. It’s like combining oil and water, its cells are not meant to attach itself to another host suddenly. With the crash of its vessel, it adapted to survive, which ultimately killed both the Xeno and host, taking some good men along with it.”

“And how did that happen?” a general asked.

“From what we can tell from the damaged security footage and the logs entered prior to the explosion, we can deduce the Xeno began to be in distress. In its attempt to compensate, it killed everyone within a 10-foot radius. What we can’t seem to understand is why there was so much damage done around the area.”

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“And there were no signs that this would happen?” another general asked.

Matthew shook his head, “Patient Zero’s behavior was erratic. Knowing so little about the improper bonding process, it was hard to say what it would and would not do. We’re lucky it didn’t take more people with it.”

“But he,” General Hallock pointed at Rajax, “he survived. How is that?”

Rjax looked at him feeling his heartbeat rise. His question sounded like an accusation.

“That is because,” Matthew continued, “Rjax bonded with a Xeno that was meant to acquire a host. As Parkson showed, his cells were compatible with the remaining Xeno cells. Like the way salt dissolves in water. The process is slow but precise, leaving the host the same but with adapted attributes and features.”

Rjax leaned forward, “What does that mean for me?”

“Your body is still adapting on a cellular level,” Matthew explained. “While your outward appearance was altered inside the Xeno cocoon, there are still many adaptations going on inside. Your contact with the world outside and the process of regaining your strength has awakened abilities from before that are altered.”

Rjax leaned back taking it all in. He understood why his memory was clouded. The face staring back in the mirror was not the face he had from so long ago.

“When Rjax left his planet did this start the process,” the President inquired.

Matthew nodded.

“Could it happen for his people? Without having such a dramatic impact?”

Matthew smiled confidently, “Yes.”

Parkson sat up straight, “It can?”

Rjax noticed he sounded surprised.

“Yes,” Matthew smiled smugly, “the process Rjax underwent taking the Xeno from its home could be adapted on a smaller scale.”

“Why not Patient Zero?” a general asked.

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“Rajax was on the planet where the Xenon was residing, its instinct was to get back home as fast as possible. It was close enough to leave a host momentarily to get back to the hive for safety.”

“Like ripping off a Band-Aid,” Whitney stated.

Matthew pointed at her, “Exactly. An exceptionally large and painful Band-Aid, but same idea.”

Matthew hit another button and notes appeared on the screen. Rajax saw Parkson adjust himself uncomfortably in his seat as the wall filled with equations.

“To free Rajax’s people, we’ll need to recreate the action he took, but we can do it without causing the torment Rajax was put through.”

Rajax cocked his head curious, “How do we do that?”

“We attack the hives.”

Rajax jumped up startling everyone.

“Are you out of your mind? My people tried for years to take down hives and were unsuccessful. You would lose more people than save.”

Matthew held up his hands and Rajax slowly sat back down. He hit the button again and pod schematics appeared on the screen.

“By studying this technology, we’ve deduced the Xenon runs like a computer. We need to find where the main input is-”

“Please,” Rajax begged, “you do not understand. There is no way you would get to the Queen; she is too heavily guarded.”

“We don’t have to hit the Queen first,” Matthew explained. “We can hit smaller hives and work our way up. The plan is to free the Naanans one by one.”

“How?” General Hallock asked.

“A virus.”

“Fight a virus with a virus?” President Graves asked. “Isn’t that what Director Parkson is proposing?”

“Similar, but this would not have the same effect as a bioweapon,” Matthew explained. “With a bioweapon, it’s unpredictable on what will be killed and what lasting effects it could bring on the environment. My way is to upload a computer

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virus. Its attributes will be similar to the stress Rajax underwent. From the data he translated from the pod, we can recreate it in a controlled environment. Enough data has been put back together to replay the exact time bonding was lost. All we need to do is recreate the energy.”

There was silence in the room. Rajax’s heart raced. His memory flashed before him. Naanans screaming, shots being fired on both sides, blood drenched on his hands.

“I do not want to put your people in such danger,” Rajax said solemnly.

Whitney looked at him, “Rajax we’re already in danger. As you said the ships have been collecting samples from our planet. We need to have the upper hand. Give us the benefit of the doubt.”

“It takes a strong man to admit he needs help,” a general said tapping his pen, “it takes a compassionate man to know that blood shouldn’t be spilled. I have been through hell and back, and I’ll do it again for your people. I’ll do it to save mine.”

“What can your people offer besides gratitude?” General Hallock asked unconvinced. “Usually a partnership includes aid from both sides.”

Rajax looked at him. He glanced over at Parkson who was staring intently. Rajax breathed out a bit and leaned on the table.

“You can have the opportunity to study the Xeno’s technology and use it if necessary.”

Whitney opened her mouth but Rajax held up his hand.

“I have pondered deeply on the subject,” he said strongly, “and I believe that is all I have to offer besides my gratitude. But these are my conditions: No Xeno can be left alive. They are not a species to be given mercy. My people will be with you the whole time. We will decide what is deemed safe and what will be destroyed.”

“You can’t seriously expect us to go along with that,” Parkson scoffed. “You can’t decide what we can and can’t use.”

Rajax stared darkly at him, “The Xeno will not be weaponized by any means. It is a species that is not meant to be controlled. My offer is sound.”

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“And if we don’t agree,” General Hallock inquired.

“I will repair the pod myself and find someone who will offer aid. Then you will have nothing.”

“That won’t stop the Xeno from invading,” Whitney put in.

“Perhaps,” Rajax agreed, “but it would give you and your people time to prepare if they detect the pod. I would lead the Xeno away and direct their attention elsewhere for a time.”

Rajax could feel Whitney’s gaze beating into him. He knew what had to be done. His heart pounded and every instinct told him to take it back. The President looked around the room and stood.

“It’s ultimately my decision to make. I’ve heard everyone’s side and I think I know what the best course of action is.”

Rajax’s heart pounded in his head as the President reached out to offer his hand.

“We will gladly offer aid to your people and work beside them. I believe this will become a fruitful partnership.”

CHAPTER 18

Whitney breathed out a sigh of relief as the meeting adjourned. Many generals sat together in small groups whispering while others left the room to oversee projects in development. She watched Rajax's confidence grow as he talked with the President. His offer concerned her, and she hoped no one would interpret it to their own gain. Matthew flopped down into a chair and rubbed his eyes. Whitney stood and walked to him tapping his shoulder.

"Have you slept at all," she inquired.

Matthew shook his head, "I haven't eaten either. I'm starving."

They watched the room carefully.

"You know we'll have to keep a close eye on the deal Rajax made," he said lowering his voice.

Whitney nodded, "His terms are fair; we need to be vigilant they are upheld."

President Graves walked up to them.

"Very impressive presentation," he smiled.

Matthew stood and shook his hand, "Thank you sir."

"I'm sure your parents are very proud of you."

Matthew shrugged, "I wouldn't know sir."

President Graves turned to Whitney, "You and your team are invited to a dinner tonight. I will have my secretary draft up the official documents for us to sign. I have sent an emergency message to the other countries in Chora. You can finally introduce that project I've heard so much about."

The President rejoined his generals and Matthew looked at her curiously. Her project was months in the making and it was finally ready. Austin pushed his way through the crowd towards them.

"Did we really get it?"

"What do you think?" she asked pointing to Rajax who was talking to a general.

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“I can’t believe it worked,” Austin’s his face lit up, “we did it!”

“Thank goodness for that combat exercise you did,” Matthew stretched. “It gave me enough time to finish.”

Whitney lowered her voice, “Those notes at the end, they came from Dr. Bernard?”

Matthew nodded, “I’m glad he had the hindsight to leave them with me. The risk cost his life.”

Whitney scanned the room reading each face. Her eyes fell to Parkson, his piercing stare boring into her. Whitney held her ground as she locked his gaze. Hate pulsed off him. A hand rested on her shoulder. She looked up at Rajax.

“Thank you,” he smiled.

“I told you I would do my best,” she answered aware of Parkson’s staring. “You’re the one who really made all the difference.”

Rjax shrugged, “I knew it would not be perfect. But this, this is the best decision.”

Whitney adjusted herself and looked at them, “They’ll start getting the large dining hall prepped for tonight. We need a break, maybe take a nap before we start getting ready. I have a few more things to put together before I can relax.”

“Are we going to have to wait to see this special project?” Matthew asked.

Rjax and Austin looked at her in surprise.

“What are you working on,” Austin inquired curiously. “Is it NOVA?”

“You’ll have to wait until tonight like everyone else,” she replied simply.

Austin pulled at his tie and huffed. After leaving the conference room he went to tell Agent Myer the good news. They sat talking for hours. He tried to get Angela to tell him about NOVA, but she claimed she knew nothing about it. As the evening approached, he left to get changed. He met Matthew at his room

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waiting for Whitney to escort them. Now Matthew watched him with an annoyed look on his face.

“You’ve seriously never worn a tie?” he asked.

Austin glared at him, “There was never an occasion.”

“Prom? Homecoming?”

“I went casual,” Austin protested. “Besides, you never went. How would you know?”

Matthew rolled his eyes and Austin faced the mirror again fixing the tie.

“Why can’t I wear a clip-on?”

Matthew scoffed, “What are you twelve? It’s one night; you’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure Rajax is having just as hard a time as I am,” Austin grumbled.

Matthew shrugged and straightened his jacket. Austin finally got his tie semi-decent and threw his jacket on. He let out a loud laugh as Matthew looked at him curiously.

“You know, if you would have told me months ago that we were about to have dinner with Whitney, an alien, and the President in a remote base in the middle of Wyoming, I would have checked you into a hospital.”

“I guess it does sound pretty ridiculous,” Matthew agreed trying to hide his amusement.

Austin shook his head and tied his shoes. They left and made their way to Rajax’s room. There was a different feeling in the air. Word spread about the mission’s approval and everyone was a buzz. Tension still hung in the air, but Austin hoped its lingering would disperse. Matthew knocked on Rajax’s door but there was no answer.

“Rajax,” Austin said close to the door, “can we come in?”

He could hear rustling behind the door and knocked again. Still nothing. Austin swung the door open and Rajax jumped.

“Do not do that,” he huffed.

“You didn’t answer,” Matthew explained.

Austin looked around the room. Shirts scattered the floor. Ties hung on the desk and lamps. Socks overflowed on his dresser.

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Rajax stood in the middle of the room holding several pairs of pants.

“Can’t find the right color,” Austin joked.

“Nothing feels right; it is too foreign. I want to make a good impression. Whitney was kind enough to find clothes for me, but I do not know what to do with them.”

Austin sympathized with him and threw Matthew a silly frown. He glared back at him and started picking up shirts.

“What would feel right?” Matthew asked.

Rajax sighed and thumped down on the bed, “I do not know. I have not been able to rest. We are so close and now I must make yet another good impression. I am tired of putting on a show. It is nerve wracking.”

“You’re not the only one that feels that way,” Matthew confided.

Austin looked around the room as a thought came to him.

“What is the traditional wear of your people?” he asked.

Rajax looked at him curiously.

“Perhaps you’ll feel better if you dress as your people did.”

Rajax was quiet, “What if I cannot remember?”

“Relax and think,” Matthew encouraged him.

Rajax closed his eyes. He moved himself into a calming pose and breathed deeply. Austin and Matthew watched as his breathing slowed and shoulders relaxed. They waited in silence before Rajax opened his eyes.

“Hand me the ties.”

Matthew grabbed a bundle and handed them to Rajax. He began to tie them around the belt on his pants. Austin grabbed Matthew’s shoulder before he could stop him.

“Let’s leave him be,” Austin whispered backing towards the door.

Austin paced back and forth outside Rajax’s room. Matthew leaned up against the far wall and sighed.

“We’re going to be late,” Matthew reminded him.

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Austin stopped, “I’m aware of that. Do you want to mess with Rajax now? He did take out Orion Squad this morning, I’m sure you’d be easy.”

Matthew shuffled his feet. Rajax’s door slowly opened and Austin turned to face him. The colored ties hung around his waist; his pants ripped into shorts. Strips of white shirts hung around his neck in tight braided necklaces. His feet and chest were bare. He looked up at them sheepishly. Matthew stood in silence as Austin searched for words.

“It’s...”

“Where have you been,” a voice sounded from behind.

Austin and Matthew turned around as Whitney moved down the hall. Her hair was back in a low bun and her black dress slowly waved as she walked.

“I have been looking for all three of you,” she said sternly. “It’s almost time to start and we were supposed to be there already. This is huge and—”

She stopped and looked at Rajax who took a step back.

“This is the clothing of my people,” he explained stammering. “It is what I remembered.”

Austin glanced at Matthew in anticipation of Whitney’s response. She smiled proudly with a twinkle in her eye.

“I like it. It’ll be nice to have a taste of Trem-NA at our dinner tonight.”

Austin watched as Rajax’s eyes shone and he stood straighter. Whitney hurried them to the elevator. Austin pulled Matthew’s arm and they hung back.

“They seem close,” he stated.

Matthew looked at Whitney and Rajax walking side by side, “They’re close.”

“You really don’t see it?”

Matthew shrugged, “What do you want me to say? That I noticed Whitney and Rajax get along far too well? That there is something there? You must be joking.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Austin teased.

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Matthew rolled his eyes. They caught up to Rajax and Whitney as the elevator doors slid open. Whitney ushered them inside and slid her keycard on a hidden panel. A keyboard unfolded and she began typing as they started to descend.

“Here’s the deal,” she explained as she typed, “there are going to be a lot of important people joining us tonight. Many powers from around the world will be coming to hear the proposal President Graves agreed to earlier today. You need to be on your best behavior.”

She shut the keyboard back and looked at them. Austin shook his tie loose and laughed.

“How much trouble can we get into around here?”

Whitney tightened his tie and Austin gagged.

“There are a lot of people here who have their own agendas about what we should do. The President on our side is one vote, we need the other six to agree. Both plans are going to be debated, we need to make sure ours is the better one. That is why my presentation tonight is so important; it gives us more opportunity. If we do not convince more than half, we’re stuck with Parkson’s plan, and you can bet none of us will be part of it.”

“But the President already made his decision,” Rajax pointed out.

Whitney turned to him sadly, “No matter the outcome, there will be orders beyond my control. We need to make sure we have an upper hand.”

“To ensure there are no more casualties,” Matthew stated gravely.

Austin pulled at his tie, his nerves on edge. He was trying to keep his cool but as they travelled down in silence, he could not escape the fear. Whitney straightened her dress as the elevator started to slow.

“Rajax,” she whispered to him, “a lot of attention will be on you. Are you prepared for that?”

Austin looked at Rajax who stiffened, “You will be there?”

Austin looked at Matthew slightly grinning.

“All of you,” Rajax added quickly.

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Whitney nodded, “Stick close to one of us, but don’t be afraid to branch out. And most importantly, be yourself.”

The elevator stopped. Whitney breathed deeply.

“Here we go.”

CHAPTER 19

A cool breeze hit Rajax's face as the doors opened. Whitney stepped out first into the vast cavern. He looked around in awe. The roof above was covered in crystals and stalagmites, slowly reaching down to the floor. The manmade structures around reached out to the natural. The room was filled with different kinds of people chattering among each other. Whitney already maneuvered through the crowd to President Graves who was chatting happily with a shorter lady next to him. Rajax looked at Matthew and Austin who shrunk behind him.

"Is this uncomfortable?" he asked.

Matthew and Austin came forward straightening up.

"No, we're good," Austin shrugged. "It's a lot of people to meet."

"Important people," Matthew added.

"Ah, it's not that big of a deal," Austin laughed nervously.

"That could infringe on our plan working," Matthew added again.

"Would you stop doing that," Austin hissed, "you're making me nervous."

Rajax's skin grew hot as he looked around. Many people were beginning to stare. He slowly exited the elevator searching the crowd for Whitney and the President. The attention made his throat tighten, the sounds and emotions overwhelming. His heart sounded in his head as he walked forward, his vision starting to blur. Rajax turned to Austin and Matthew for support, but they were lost in the crowd. His breath shortened, the stress overtaking him.

"Guten Tag," A kind voice said from behind.

He turned to a small woman with her hair in a tight blonde bun and blue pantsuit.

"You must be Rajax I presume," she said her accent beginning to show.

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“Y-yes I am,” He managed to get out.

“My name is Chancellor Gabrielle Weber,” she smiled extending her hand.

Rajax stood frozen for a moment. A heavy hand patted his back.

“Don’t be afraid Rajax,” Parkson laughed, “you shake her hand.”

Rajax’s skin burned again as he extended his hand and they shook.

“You are different,” Rajax noted out loud. “You are not like the others.”

Gabrielle smiled. “No, I am not like the others. I am from Germany, a country across the sea in Europe.”

“I have read about your country and its culture. It is beautiful,” Rajax complemented.

She smiled warmly, “Danke. Our world is remarkably diverse with many cultures, languages, and people. Is your world not like that?”

Rajax’s mind went blank, “I do not remember.”

“A lot of his memory has been damaged from the crash,” Parkson explained patting his shoulder. “You’ll have to forgive Rajax of details he can’t quite figure out.”

“Yes of course,” Gabrielle smiled. “It was nice to meet you.”

Rajax nodded in respect as she walked away. Parkson tightened his grip.

“Don’t worry Rajax,” Parkson said quietly, “everyone here is for their own interests. You may want to reconsider what yours are.”

Parkson nudged Rajax’s shoulder and he looked towards Whitney across the room, chatting with a tall dark gentleman.

“Just a thought,” Parkson sneered as he walked away.

Rajax stood alone confused. What did Parkson mean? He was here to help his people. Why did it matter there were others he cared about? Austin walked up to him with a plate of food and held it out. Rajax stared down at the mountain of choices.

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“You have to try these,” Austin said excited. “There’s food from every country represented here tonight.”

Rajax picked up a small round breaded circle and tasted it.

“It is not bad,” he concluded.

Austin looked at him, “Are you okay?”

Rajax caught sight of Whitney as she circled the room. He watched as she gracefully greeted and smiled everyone she passed. Her confidence shined.

“Austin, is it wrong to care about others?”

Austin munched on more food and looked at him, “You mean like how you care about your people? That is not wrong, you want-“

“—No,” Rajax interrupted, “I mean to care deeply for one person. Is that wrong?”

Austin shook his head, “No. Why?”

“Parkson,” Rajax quieted his voice, “he warned me that my focus is not in the right place.”

Austin stopped chewing and they watched Parkson. He gallivanted about the room, loudly greeting everyone. Many said their hellos while others nodded curtly at him.

“Parkson is trying to get inside your head,” Austin whispered to him. “It’s his way of confusing you, don’t dwell on it.”

Austin’s face lit up as he spotted Agent Myer. He nodded to Rajax and pushed through the crowd. Rajax watched as they hugged. Agent Myer laughed as he made a joke. In a way, Rajax envied him. His relationship with Angela was simple, how did he manage it? Rajax looked for Whitney, spotting her talking with Chancellor Weber. The way he felt, he could not explain. Perhaps, he cared for Whitney on a level no one could understand. President Graves called to him, introducing Rajax to President Santos from Brazil. He was swept up in the crowd, his thoughts escaping to the back of his mind.

President Graves called the room to attention. Matthew looked up from his plate.

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“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” the President greeted diplomatically. “As you are aware a huge decision is upon us. Let us take our seats and we can begin.”

Matthew set his plate down, rejoining Austin at the back of the crowd. Whitney walked to center stage with Parkson close behind. Agent Myer joined Homeland Security Secretary Williams at the President’s table. Matthew waved to Rajax, who stood unsure near the edge of the room.

“You good?” Matthew asked Rajax in a low voice as he approached.

Rjax shook his head, “I am . . . unsure.”

Matthew looked around the room, “Whitney will give a good presentation. Your people will be fine.”

“I am worried this will not go as we have anticipated,” he confessed.

Matthew shifted uncomfortably, “Focus on getting through tonight.”

Rjax nodded slowly and Matthew looked at Austin for support. He was munching on a bagel, careful not to make a lot of noise. Matthew rolled his eyes and turned his attention to the meeting. The President with his few cabinet members presiding sat at the table on the left in the semi-circle. Canada’s Prime Minister and company sat at the next table, Brazil flanking them on the other side. Russia’s representatives sat in front of Matthew, with Germany on the right. Egypt’s President and Prime Minister took seats next to Germany, Australia taking the last table on the right.

“I didn’t think some of these nations had any interest in what lies outside our solar system,” Matthew stated.

Austin swallowed a bite of his bagel, “I guess we should be used to surprises.”

The room became silent as Whitney started her presentation, giving a review of Patient Zero and Rajax’s bonding experience with the Xenos. She highlighted Matthew’s proposal of freeing the Naanans with uploading a virus into the Xenos’ immune system. Her emphasis on the prospect of scientific discoveries caught the attention of many leaders. Parkson took over, emphasizing the

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benefit of the technology. He explained his bioweapon, insisting it was the only option. Matthew watched the room, more leaders inclined to the idea. Whitney finished with Rajax's agreement of sharing the Xeno technology on the Naanan's terms. The leaders sat with their council, whispering in their native tongues.

The Prime Minister from Egypt spoke first, "This is all very interesting, but I want to hear an update on project NOVA before we decide anything."

Whitney hit a button on her pad and the floor in the middle of the stage opened. A hologram projector lit up showing a large spaceship and diagrams. Matthew watched the image spin impressed. The ship resembled an aircraft carrier. Large engines protruded out the back, the top lined with cannons instead of planes. A large dome structure covered where the control tower would have been.

"This," Whitney began, "as you know is project NOVA. We have worked together over a long period of time to construct our first space craft. It includes seven decks, an engine room, and bridge. It is fully armored and equipped with the latest weapon technology. Each deck includes emergency escape pods, and thanks to the technology we've uncovered from Roswell and the Xeno's pod, it is now fully capable to leave our solar system."

"So that's what she's been hiding," Austin said amazed.

Rajax looked surprised, "It appears I have underestimated your people."

"We like a dramatic reveal," Matthew pointed out, "it's the easiest way to get people interested. Looks like it worked."

Matthew and Rajax watched the room, the leaders discussing quietly with their board. He watched Secretary Williams join Whitney and Parkson on the stage, whispering and gesturing back and forth. Both presentations made a significant impact.

"This is what our outreach teams have been working on the past few years?" Chancellor Weber asked.

Whitney nodded to her. Russian President Semenov stood.

"Is it operational now?" he asked his accent thick.

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Whitney hit a few buttons on her pad. The projection changed to show the earth and zoomed in on the moon.

“As we speak, our teams are finishing up odds and ends. It has been docked on the far side of the moon as to not arouse suspicion. As far as the public is concerned, we are working on the first colony on the moon.”

President Santos stood adjusting his tie, “If this threat is as bad as you say it is, why not use this ship to defend Earth?”

The room exploded with choirs of voices arguing for the answer. Brazil stood their ground on keeping their focus on fortifying their defenses. Canada, Russia, and Australia agreed. President Graves, Egypt, and Germany voiced the chance to strike first and the opportunity to be the first to explore space. Each side insisted one plan or the other was the best course of action. The arguing turned to yelling. Matthew watched as Whitney’s eyes scanned the room, clenching her teeth. Rajax took a step forward catching Matthew’s attention. He walked towards the center of the room, ignoring Austin’s whispers to come back. The leaders noticed his movement, their arguing dying away. Rajax turned to face them and stood taller.

“I am Rajax,” his low voice echoed across the cavern walls, “I am a Naanan from Trem-NA. I care for my home as deeply as you care about your Earth. I understand that I have put you and your people in a difficult position. I understand the risk I am asking you to take. I would not be here if it was not for your aid given to me these past months. It is a debt I can never repay. This mission is a huge risk to you and your people. If you decide against it, I will understand.”

Rjax walked around the room looking at each leader in turn.

“But I will tell you, this threat is real. They will show your planet no mercy. You can wait for the impending doom as you reinforce your armies and cities. You can place your planet on full alert until they arrive, but it will not change their plans. They will come and slaughter your people. Your best option: take the fight to them. I know the terrain of my planet; you will have the upper hand. I can get you in and out. You will be walking into a war

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zone, but they will not expect your arrival. Your secrets are now your allies, as long as you strike the first blow.”

He returned to the middle of the room.

“I put the fate of my planet into your hands.”

The room sat stunned. Rajax stood his ground, his confidence emanating. They stared at him, the silence deafening. Suddenly General Hallock stepped up from the back of the room clapping his hands. Matthew and Austin joined in. Slowly the room came alive with the deafening sound of clapping hands. Matthew watched the leaders applaud Rajax’s conviction.

President Graves came forward and shook Rajax’s hand.

“A very moving speech young man,” he said then turned his attention to the room, “I know we have our differences and our concerns, but I know we can get through this crisis together.”

CHAPTER 20

Whitney snuck out of the crowd quietly, leaving Rajax to debate with Canada's Prime Minister Gagnon. She stepped towards General Hallock who was talking with Matthew and Austin.

"Thank you for joining us," she smiled shaking his hand.

"It looks like I showed up at the perfect time. If we go to Trem-NA many of my soldiers will be going with you. I'm proud they'll have a strong soldier to lead them."

"I know he will appreciate the confidence," Whitney assured him.

General Hallock joined the debate. Matthew and Austin stood on either side of her. They watched the crowd.

"I never properly apologized to the two of you," Whitney said breaking the silence between them.

"What do you mean?" Austin asked.

"I uprooted you from your lives. I whisked you away from your families and home."

"I'm sure we aren't missed," Matthew stated.

She turned to them, "I also never properly thanked you for taking care of my mother. She was so grateful for your help. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Austin looked at Matthew and to Whitney, "You've given us the chance of a lifetime. I think we can forgive you."

Whitney smiled softly and turned to the debate. Rajax was working to quiet several fears. Questions berated him at every side. Parkson stood by the President, watching like a hawk.

"I want to change a lot," she admitted. "Director Parkson plucked me from my life on such short notice. I did not get a chance to say goodbye. I didn't get to see my mom when she..." Whitney cleared her throat, "The way we run needs to change."

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“It’s not going to be easy,” Matthew explained quietly.
“Parkson has his claws in deep.”

Whitney stood tall, “When the fight comes, I will be ready.”

The debate began to die down, leaders taking their seats. Whitney rejoined Parkson and Rajax on stage. Rajax stood close to her as President Graves took center stage. He looked around at each leader.

“This is what the future looks like,” he stated proudly. He opened the folder and began to read:

“We, the members of Chora: Class A, hereby agree to the humanitarian mission to free the Naanans of Trem-NA. Our mission: to liberate the Naanan people from the parasitic race known as the Xeno, by any means necessary. In this mission, utilizing project NOVA, it is our intention to send military force to Trem-NA. Our goal: to deploy a computer virus throughout the Xeno strongholds. This process will render the Xeno’s hold on each Naanan useless. Rajax of Trem-NA has agreed to terms of sharing technological advancements to each country represented in Chora: Class A. The utmost importance of this mission is to offer a hand of friendship to the Naanan people. It is proposed that those countries who stay behind, will aid in the fortification of Earth against the Xeno. We will operate under Code 10 until further notice.”

President Graves closed the folder. Each leader stood as Parkson took the floor.

“We will now call this motion to a vote,” Parkson began.
“President Graves, United States?”

“Yea,” He called proudly.

Parkson continued.

“Prime Minister Gagnon, Canada?”

“Nay.”

“President Santos, Brazil?”

“Nay.”

“President Semenov, Russia?”

“Yea.”

“Chancellor Weber, Germany?”

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“Yea.”

“President Amari, Egypt?”

“Yea.”

Prime Minister White, Australia?”

“Nay.”

Parkson counted the votes and lifted his head.

“The results of the vote stand as follow: Yea- four, Nay- three. We will proceed with the mission to Trem-NA.”

The room erupted in applause as Rajax stood frozen. Whitney squeezed his arm beaming. His people were finally receiving the help they desperately required. Parkson handed the tally to President Graves. Whitney noticed he was trying to hide his unhappiness. The official document went around the tables as each leader signed. When it reached the end Chancellor Weber stood.

“I think it is only right that Rajax has his signature accompany our own,” she stated.

The leaders agreed and turned to Rajax. She handed him a pen which he grabbed shaking. Rajax looked around the room at the faces watching him. Whitney placed her hand on his shoulder as his eyes closed in thought. He opened them and broke the pen in two, rubbing the ink on his fingers. Everyone watched as he traced a diamond with his thumb and placed three dots inside the shape.

“My people are indebted to you.”

Whitney slumped on her bed, exhaustion taking over. After the signing, photos were taken for such a historic event. They would not come to light yet, but maybe one day. Her face hurt from all the smiling she had done. Rajax was tense during the photo session. He was surprised by the camera, the flash making him uncomfortable. Whitney watched as Rajax thanked all the leaders, excited to work with their people and for taking the time to hear their proposals. Whitney was the last to shake his hand, his gaze warm. His hand erupted into blue shapes, which prompted more hand shaking and discussion of the ability. Whitney stood off to the side with Parkson watching the display. He leaned over to her and looked at her carefully.

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“Tread lightly,” he threatened.

She glared back at him, “As should you.”

Secretary Williams congratulated them on their success, and took that time to discuss which steps to precede in. Now was crunch time. Within the next few weeks, teams would be formed, and training would begin to prepare for space travel. The question that bothered her the most: would she or Parkson be joining the mission. Williams had asked them to sleep on it and discuss it the following day. Whitney wanted to go; she had every right. It was her project, but it would be a good opportunity for Parkson to stab her in the back. She wished she had something up her sleeve.

Whitney sat up straight, a thought coming to her. Patient Zero’s accident. She ran to her office and rummaged through the files, grabbing the folder and disc. Racing down the hall, she found Matthew’s room and banged on the door. She waited a few moments then banged again, hearing movement inside. Matthew cracked the door open, his dark eyes bloodshot and black hair in knots.

“Whitney,” he mumbled, “what do you want? Do you know what time it is? I’ve gotten maybe four hours of sleep over the past two days.”

“I need your help,” she said quickly.

“Ask tomorrow.”

He started to close the door, but she slammed the folder in the way.

“This can’t wait. I need your help, now more than ever.”

Matthew stared at the folder, his eyes adjusting. Clarity filled his face and looked at her concerned.

“That’s the file on Patient Zero, what can that do?”

“Come to my office. I need your computer skills.”

He sighed tired and agreed. They walked quickly to her office. Matthew squinted his eyes against the lights and fumbled behind Whitney. She opened her office door and pulled him inside. Making sure they were not seen, she shut the door quietly and turned the lock. Whitney turned on her computer and slid in the disc.

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“This is the video footage from Patient Zero’s holding cell,” she explained, “I need you to clean it up.”

“I thought he blew out most of the feed,” Matthew said sitting down in a chair, his eyes closing. “Besides, wasn’t it already looked over?”

Whitney hit Matthew’s arm startling him, “I need to know if anything was left out.”

“Why do you need to know now?” he asked grunting and typing on the keyboard.

“Secretary Williams has asked for me or Parkson to accompany the mission. Parkson has the upper hand because he has dirt on me. I need something to even the score,” she explained.

“Is this about you and Rajax?” Matthew asked his eyes glued to the screen.

Whitney shifted awkwardly, “There’s nothing to tell.”

Matthew turned to her and leaned in his seat, “Look, I’m not going to pick apart your friendship with Rajax. I’m just asking if that’s what Parkson is going to use.”

“...It’s possible.”

“Then keep a professional distance. Once Parkson is done watching you like a hawk live your life.”

Whitney stared at him as Matthew turned back around in his seat and faced the computer. His bluntness took her by surprise. She sat down on the other side of the desk, drowned in her thoughts. They sat quiet, Matthew clicking the keyboard every few minutes. Whitney dozed off in her seat until Matthew woke her up.

“I found what you wanted,” he said nodding at the computer.

Whitney fumbled around him and watched the screen. She smirked and looked up at Matthew.

“This will work perfectly.”

CHAPTER 21

Whitney gripped her folder tightly as the elevator began to slow. She spent the night going over the footage. Matthew had trudged back to his room while she worked. She fell asleep on her desk, the janitor waking her when he came in to clean. Whitney threw her papers together and scurried back to her room. Quickly taking a shower and getting dressed, Whitney readied herself to face Parkson before Secretary Williams arrived. The elevator doors slid open and she stepped out walking confidently down the hall. Opening the conference room door, Parkson turned in his chair to face her.

“Coming in early I see,” he sneered, “perhaps to discuss my role on this mission?”

“You assume you’re going on this mission,” she said circling the table, “that’s quite bold of you.”

“Is it now?” he asked leaning on the table. “You’re too close to the subject at hand, your judgement is skewed. I know he paid you a visit a few nights ago. I see the way you look at each other when you are together. I would not be surprised if Secretary Williams has you reassigned to a lower branch after my recommendation. We can’t go around romancing everyone we see to get what we want.”

“Is that what this is about?” she asked carefully. “You think caring for another person’s well-being is romancing? You seem to have missed the point of our department. We are supposed to ensure contact with life outside our solar system is handled with dignity and friendship. You have been in the dark too long. You have forgotten what it’s like to care for others. You’re a selfish and greedy old man with nothing to show for your actions.”

Parkson clenched his fists, “I am perfectly happy where I stand. The odds are against you Whitney, you don’t have the guts to play the game as I do.”

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Whitney stood in front of him and slid her folder onto the table.

“I wouldn’t count me out yet.”

She watched Parkson open the folder and his eyes widen. The footage Matthew cleared revealed Parkson with his scientists, injecting Patient Zero with their proposed bioweapon. Lined along the wall were seven victims, Nathan Bernard included. They stood and watched against their will, security guards holding them at gun point. In the photos Parkson gestured and yelled at each victim in turn. Patient Zero began to convulse in pain. Parkson exited with the guards and scientists, trapping the others inside.

Whitney leaned over the table catching his eye, “I know you killed them. I know you injected Patient Zero with your bioweapon. Those good men and women you murdered had families. They stood for what is right, and you could not handle that. You could not come to grips with the fact your way is not the right way. Is this how you happily stand? On the corpses of others? I’m sure this is more damning evidence than the fact I care about what happens to the Naanans, and our people here.”

Parkson was silent, “Who else knows?”

“For now, only myself,” she said taking the folder back. “But I will not hesitate to expose you. I will not hesitate to bring you down. Your reign over this department will come to a swift end. The question is, could you handle it?”

Parkson glared at her, hate spewing from his eyes, “That won’t be necessary.”

Secretary Williams entered the room and nodded to them in turn.

“Already at each other’s throats today I see,” he sighed.

“Not at all,” Parkson said composing himself, “we were discussing how to handle Director Blake’s job while she’ll be away.”

“Yes,” Whitney smiled, “we decided I will be joining the mission.”

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The next few days blurred together. Secretary Williams and Whitney worked together to file applications of staff members who would join the mission. General Hallock submitted a roster of soldiers for consideration. She took Parkson's suggestions with a grain of salt. He said little, roaming the hallways deep in thought. Whitney also sorted through the many volunteer applications she received each day. Many scientists and doctors placed a request, including several agents eager to join. Whitney included Agent Myer in the proceedings, hoping she would be considered as her replacement. Each day Whitney sat in her office, her desk overflowing with folders. Every night she trained with Commander Evans to keep her skills sharp.

Austin and Matthew worked endlessly, studying the Xeno and training with other agents. Matthew doubted they would be joining the mission, but Austin insisted it could not be done without them. They were able to participate in the advanced astronaut training to bump up their skills. Matthew struggled under the immense pressure he put on himself to be as fit as the other agents around him. Austin refused to let Matthew give up. His encouragement put Matthew's self-doubt at ease. They submitted their volunteer applications to Whitney, discouraged by the mountain before her. Their efforts did not go unnoticed.

With final decisions underway, Rajax's anxieties worsen. He feared for his friends. Could they handle walking into a war zone? Whitney arranged for Rajax to meet others working on the Trem-NA case. Many were eager to hear his input and thanked him for translating the data. Rajax found it difficult to concentrate with the emotions around him. All were on edge with the final day approaching for Whitney to make her final decisions. The liquid in his arm burned from the heightened senses around him. He spent most days avoiding crowds. He ate alone, he trained alone. Cutting himself off in his room depressed him, but Rajax couldn't handle the overwhelming emotions going on around the base.

Rajax tossed and turned in his bed sighing. He tried to sleep but to no avail. The day dragged into night as the noise outside his

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door ebbed. He sat up and started to dress. Slowly cracking his door, Rajax looked out into the hall. It was empty, the staff tucked quietly into their quarters. He walked to the elevator and towards the gym. Blowing off steam might bring him sleep. The locker room was empty to Rajax's relief. He opened his locker and slipped gloves onto his hands. Soft thudding sounds echoed in the room. Rajax lifted his head to listen. He followed the sounds to a small room to the side of the gym. Whitney and Commander Evans stood toe to toe in a small boxing ring. They circled each other.

"You're pulling your punches," Evans panted, "if you're going to hit me then hit me."

"What do you think I've been trying to do," Whitney growled.

Whitney lunged forward and threw a punch. Evans evaded and hit her back. She fell on the ground and twisted, knocking him off his feet. Whitney lunged on top and held Evans down by his neck, forcing her weight onto his chest.

"Impressive," Rajax called.

Whitney jumped startled. She climbed off Commander Evans.

"I thought everyone was in bed," he said trying to steady his breath.

"I could not sleep," Rajax explained climbing into the ring.

"Neither could we. I've heard you've been a ghost these past few days."

Whitney looked at him surprised, "I didn't know that."

Rajax's face grew hot, "Emotions have been high. It has been difficult to filter. Could I join you? If that is alright."

Evans smiled and gestured to the center of the ring. Rajax stood in the middle and crouched into a fighting stance.

"When you begin to tire," Rajax explained slowly forming punches, "it is best to make each blow count. Keep your torso safe and reserve your energy."

Whitney and Evans copied his movements. He showed them how to perform different Naanan moves he remembered. Rajax helped to perfect their form, adjusting their stance and proper movement for impact. Evans and Whitney each took a turn sparring with Rajax, deflecting their throws with ease. As the night

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wore on Rajax noticed how tired they looked and ended his lesson. Commander Evans thanked him for the opportunity and headed for the locker room. Whitney climbed out of the mat and sat on the stairs. Rajax slid down next to her. They sat in silence as Whitney caught her breath.

“These moves are impressive,” she concluded, “I see how the Orion Squad was caught off guard. I trained with Evans when I first arrived and let me tell you, you’re a much more patient teacher than he was.”

“You two are close.”

Whitney nodded, “Daniel was the first person to show me any kindness when I arrived. My life was turned upside-down and he helped smooth out the bumps.”

Rjax felt Whitney’s admiration for Evans. Her feelings were the same for Matthew and Austin – they were her family.

“I want you to be able to protect yourself,” Rajax said breaking the silence. “Trem-NA will be dangerous; I do not know what kinds of horror it will hold.”

Whitney looked up with determination in her eyes, “I told you I would get you home and I intend on seeing that through, danger or no danger.”

Her conviction reminded him of a Naanan from long ago. His memory was never clear enough to show her face, but her strength resonated next to Rajax as they charged into battle. He could not remember what happened to her, but if Whitney fell to the same fate, Rajax would never forgive himself.

“Have you decided who will accompany us?” he asked changing the subject.

Whitney sighed and rubbed her forehead, “Not everyone no. I’m holding final interviews tomorrow. There are a lot of good candidates, but I don’t know if I can ask certain people to take the journey. Some have been taken from their families once, I don’t know if they could do it again. There’s also the problem of not knowing how long we’d be gone. Our trip could be one-way. How can I ask people to trust my gut?”

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“I trust your gut,” Rajax said calmly watching Whitney. “Many of these people have worked with you for years. I am sure there are plenty willing to take the risk if you are in charge.”

Whitney stood and sighed, “I can’t shake the feeling I’m missing something. I feel like there’s something else going on. Maybe it’s the way Parkson has been acting. I don’t trust it. If I’m not sure we will all be safe, how will I live with myself?”

Rjax stood and looked down at her smiling softly, “You have a big heart Whitney, do not let anyone take that from you. Your people know where you stand. They will follow you anywhere.” Rjax leaned in meeting her vibrant blue eyes, “I will follow you.”

CHAPTER 22

Austin's alarm blared in his ears. He groaned rolling over hitting snooze. His head was swimming after last night's antics. Agents challenged Austin and Matthew to a drinking contest, which Matthew declined. Austin beat three out of four. With help from Matthew he fumbled back to his room. Angela might have come to visit, but he couldn't be sure. He turned in his bed to face his desk, noticing a folder. Austin sat up, careful not to upset his stomach. Staggering over, he opened the folder. His eyes widened and looked back at his clock. Austin fumbled around his room throwing clothes on and muttering to himself. Inside the folder was his application and time for an interview.

He slipped out of his room, squinting at the lights. Austin slid down the hall holding the wall for support. His fingers shook as he hit the elevator buttons. He leaned his head back trying to breathe. Austin might make his interview on time. The elevator opened and he noticed the long line against the wall. Doctors, agents, scientists, and soldiers filled the hallway. Matthew stood at the end of the line watching him amused.

"I thought you weren't going to make it."

Austin smiled trying not to vomit, "I may be hungover, but I still made it slightly on time."

"You're lucky they haven't started yet."

Austin surveyed the line, "That's a lot of people. Do you think we'll make the cut?"

Matthew shrugged, "To be honest, everyone here is more qualified than the two of us combined."

Austin looked at him confused, "How so?"

"I'm a college dropout—"

"—You said you were taking a sabbatical—"

"—College dropout and you're still working on figuring out your degree. All the training and work we've gone through doesn't

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stack up to the years of experience everyone has. We don't have our lives in order.”

“Do you think Whitney did? Look where she is now.”

Matthew paused, “Fine. You got me there.”

“Exactly,” Austin said loudly drawing attention. “What do we have to worry about?”

Matthew turned red and glared at him. The conference room door swung open and Whitney called the first agent in. The line receded as several hours went by. Austin slouched against the wall fighting his headache. Matthew stood erect next to him. Agent Myer walked by from time to time, going from the conference room to the elevator. Austin stood as they approached the conference room. The hallway was quiet now, the other interviews over and done. There was no way to know who made it. Austin came to the realization that Matthew was right, they were underqualified. If they didn't make it onto NOVA, would Parkson fire them? Could he go back to a normal life with the truth he knew? At the base Austin wasn't someone to be laughed at, he was part of a bigger whole searching for the truth. He couldn't give that up.

Whitney opened the door calling Matthew inside. He inched past her as the door closed behind him. Parkson, General Hallock, and Secretary Williams sat at the far end of the table, while Whitney took a seat in the middle. Matthew sat across from her. She smiled.

“Thank you for your patience,” she began. “You're here today because you submitted your name for consideration to be part of NOVA. This interview is designed to review your skills and qualifications.”

“I don't feel very qualified,” Matthew admitted.

Whitney cocked her head in surprise, “You are the one that figured out a way to free the Naanans, why wouldn't you be joining us?”

“I assumed you would give my findings to someone else.”

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“I don’t take away from where credit is due Mr. Alcott. This is a formal matter; you’ve already been approved for the mission.”

Matthew looked at her surprised. Parkson let out a huff. She began asking Matthew questions about his education, work on previous projects, and his views of the mission at hand. He answered all questions truthfully. Matthew could tell he impressed Williams with his computer and scientific skills. General Hallock looked unsure of his skills physically. Parkson tensed up when he mentioned working with Nathan Bernard before he passed. Whitney stood at the end and shook his hand. She led the way out and called Austin back. Agent Myer wished him luck and smiled at Matthew as she lingered.

“Security slow?” he asked making conversation.

“I have my own interview after Director Blake is finished. I’m one of the very few who have been selected as a possible replacement,” Myer explained.

“I hope it goes well.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I haven’t told anyone yet. I don’t want people asking me for favors.”

“Smart move,” Matthew agreed.

The elevator at the end of the hall opened and Rajax stepped out looking around.

“Lost?” Myer teased.

Rjax looked at her and joined them.

“I have been searching for someone to have dinner with,” Rajax explained, “but it appears you all are still busy with Whitney’s interviews. I was hoping she would be done by now.”

“If you’re hungry now I’ll join you,” Matthew offered.

Rjax nodded in thanks and they left for the cafeteria. The room was packed, everyone excitedly chatting. Matthew and Rajax joined the line. He watched Rajax examine each item with caution. After much irritation from the agents behind them, Rajax quickly picked a few items and exited the line. Matthew pointed to a table away from the crowd. He sat, realizing how hungry he was. Rajax sat across from him and dug his fingers into his food. Matthew looked at him surprised.

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“Does the metal bother you?” Matthew asked.

“My people have no use for utensils.”

Matthew looked around and noticed others watching. He set down his fork and joined Rajax, sticking his fingers into the mashed potatoes. They turned their attention away. Austin joined them awhile later looking stressed. He pushed his food around, complaining he didn't make a good impression. Whitney joined shortly after.

“How did it go?” Matthew asked wiping his fingers on his napkins.

Whitney finished swallowing and answered, “I think it went well. Secretary Williams was pleased with the interviews and choices I made. General Hallock has his reserves about physical power. Parkson... didn't say much. Tomorrow I'll be turning in my final report of who made the team.”

“Did we make it?” Austin asked concerned.

“You both did,” Whitney smiled. “Williams believes you two are a valuable asset, as do I.” She shot Austin a look, “Even if you were hungover from the night before. Do not let the Orion Squad talk you into any sort of hijinks.”

“Do you have a story to tell?” Austin asked playfully.

“How many people are we looking at?” Matthew asked changing the subject back.

“About fifty personnel comprised of agents, soldiers, doctors, and scientists.”

“That does not seem like much,” Rajax put in.

Whitney nodded agreeing, “It is all we can spare without arousing suspicion. There's also the issue of having enough supplies. Tomorrow the President is holding a press conference about the first moon colonization along with the other countries that agreed to help; that's our cover story. After the media conference, we'll be transferring to the NASA training center in Houston, Texas. Two years of training will have to be shoved into two months before we launch to the moon and go from there. Even though many of us have already gone through the astronaut

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training our skills are rusty. We'll need an intense brush up and aid. That's Matthew and Austin's saving grace."

"We're going to be busy," Matthew sighed.

"Catch up on your sleep now, you're going to miss it for the next two months."

CHAPTER 23

Whitney finalized her crew list in time for the President's media conference. The base was alive with excitement as the broadcast began. She arranged for her team to watch alone in one of the conference rooms. Rajax sat at the front, amazed by the TV which made her chuckle. When the President announced the colonization of the first moon base, the reporters erupted with questions. It took President Graves several minutes to quiet the room. As Whitney expected, the public was shocked. Why were they kept in the dark, who decided this step, where was this money coming from; the flurry of questions went on. Agent Myer and her team set up outside the base in case of trouble. The last thing they needed was hungry eyes demanding more answers.

Once the President finished his official statement on the matter, he began answering questions. As the demands started up again, Whitney switched the TV off and turned her attention to the team. The room was filled with excited faces. Their determination outweighed their fear. She smiled at them, diffusing some unease. A few scientists looked uncomfortable. They worked closely with Parkson and were surprised to be brought on. Whitney had her reserves about them, but their input was still valid. She handed out itineraries to each member for specific tasks they would need to accomplish. After finalizing last minute questions, she dismissed her team to prepare for their long drive. The room emptied, leaving Matthew, Austin, and Rajax behind.

“Are you ready for tonight?” she asked them.

“We are closer to Trem-NA,” Rajax said tears running down his face. “Thank you.”

Matthew zipped up his bag and took one last look around his room. After dinner he returned to finish packing. His excitement jumped in his stomach. He walked to the elevator and Austin ran to

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join him. They ascended to the surface in silence. The elevator opened and they walked out, breathing in the fresh air. Matthew caught a glimpse of the sunset outside the bay doors, letting the last of the rays warm his face. Austin ran over to Angela, pulling her into a hug. Whitney waved Matthew over to a small shack at the end of the bay.

“I have a gift for you,” she smiled as he approached.

“What is it?” Matthew asked.

Whitney opened the door and inside sat a desk with a simple phone connected to it.

“I pulled a few strings,” she explained, “this is my way of saying thank you.”

“I have no one to call,” Matthew protested as she began to shut the door.

“Are you sure?”

The door clicked shut and he stared at the phone. Matthew placed his bag down and picked it up, breathing heavy. Slowly he dialed a number. He leaned over, his forehead hitting the table, listening to the ring.

“*Hello?*” a kind voice on the other end asked.

Matthew was lost for words.

“*Hello?*” it asked again.

“Mom...”

“*Matty? Is that you? OH my! Matty I can’t believe it’s you!*”

“Yeah mom, it’s me.”

“*Let me put your father on the phone.*”

“Mom wait—”

Matthew heard crackling over the line.

“*Alex! Alex get over here, it’s Matty.*”

“*Matthew?*” a low voice asked.

“Hi dad,” Matthew answered.

“*You’ve given us quite the scare,*” his father’s voice relaxing, “*after hearing about your house being quarantined and your disappearance, we assumed the worst. Are you okay?*”

“Yeah I’m fine,” Matthew reassured, “I’ve just... I’ve been busy working on a big project.”

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“Whitney called us sometime after we started looking for you,” his mom explained, *“she told us they had hired you on short notice.”*

“Something like that.”

“Sweetie why didn’t you call sooner?”

Matthew paused wiping a tear away.

“Are you still there,” his mother’s worried voice sounded in his ear.

“Yeah,” he said softly, “I’m still here.” He sniffed and sat up, “I wanted to call now, because I’m going to be going away for a bit.”

“Where are you going?” his dad asked.

“Did you hear about the moon colony?”

“Oh, Matty is that where you’re going,” his mom sounded concerned.

“Yeah mom, that’s where I’m going.”

He could hear his mother gasp and hold back sobs.

“Mom please don’t cry,” he begged, “I won’t be gone long.”

“Oh Matty,” she said crying, *“I’ve just been so worried about you. The first time we’ve spoken in years and you’re telling me you’re leaving. Can’t they find someone else?”*

More tears rush down his face, “It’s the project I’ve been working on mom, I mean to see it through.”

He heard more sobbing as his dad tried to comfort her. His own tears flowed down his cheeks staining his shirt.

“I know honey,” she began calming down. *“I know you finish what you start. Please, please be safe sweetie. And you’ll tell us all about it when you come back, won’t you?”*

Matthew gripped the table, “Don’t worry mom, I won’t be far away.”

She let out a tired sigh.

“Dad?”

“I’m here.”

“Could you do me a favor?”

“What do you need?”

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Matthew pulled out the charred tie from his pocket, “There’s a man I met here, he was my friend. I was wondering if maybe you could track down his next of kin, perhaps his daughter.”

“*Did something happen?*” his father asked worried.

“I need you to find his daughter. His name was Nathan Bernard.”

His father paused, “*I’ll see what I can do.*”

There was a knock on the door and Matthew wiped his face, “I have to go now. Take care of each other alright? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“*Matty please be safe,*” his mother’s cries begged.

“I promise.”

“*Matthew,*” his dad said quietly.

“Yes?”

“*... I’m proud of you,*” his voice cracked. “*We’re both so proud of you.*”

“Thank you,” Matthew sobbed, “I love you guys.”

“*We love you,*” they cried in unison.

Matthew pulled the phone away from his ear and placed it back, the click echoing the room. He tried to steady his breath and wiped his eyes. Composing himself he stood and opened the door. Austin stood with Whitney chatting outside. They both looked over at him, smiles of comfort forming.

“Are you going to be okay?” Austin asked.

Matthew barely nodded. Austin squeezed his shoulder and Whitney pulled him into a hug. He buried his face in her shoulder as he cried. Whitney cried with him as Austin wrapped them in a hug. There was the chance that was his last conversation he’d ever have with his parents, and it was the best. Matthew calmed his sobs, wiped his tears, and silently thanked Whitney. She nodded in understanding and Austin smiled at him. Whitney pointed to the vans parked by the bay doors.

“We’re almost ready to go, we’re waiting for Rajax to be brought up.”

Matthew looked at the vans, his feet cementing to the ground. He didn’t know if he could do it now. Austin took his phone call as

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a line formed. Everyone was silent, reality setting in. Matthew waited for Austin to finish and they walked towards the caravan. Austin waved to Angela one last time before climbing in. They sat next to each other, wrapped in their sense of loss. The families they were leaving behind, they may never see again. The sacrifice they were making to save Rajax's people wore heavy on them. Their sacrifice now, would mean a civilization's rebirth. It would mean saving their families from the Xeno's violent ways.

Rajax held his breath as the elevator opened into the hangar. He stepped out, the security detail following closely behind. The buzz of low hanging lights lit up parts of the ceiling. Once the sun had set, he was cleared to leave. Rajax longed to see the daylight. Whitney stood by the vans directing the last of their team. The air was heavy with sadness. He joined her and she waved the security guards away.

"Are you ready?" she asked him.

"Everyone seems... unhappy," Rajax said softly.

Whitney nodded solemnly, "It's hard to say goodbye to your loved ones with the future unknown. Everyone who volunteered knew the risks."

"You do not seem as sad as the rest," Rajax noticed.

Whitney shrugged, "I never knew my father, and my mother died a few years ago. Everyone I care deeply about is going on this mission. I have no loved ones here to miss."

Rajax watched her composure, her eyes saddening at the thought. He squeezed her arm in comfort. Whitney smiled and gestured to the last van.

"We'll be riding together with Austin and Matthew."

Rajax followed her and climbed in. He could feel the air thick with sadness and regret, the liquid in his hand beginning to slowly swirl. Whitney knocked on the dark window and the van came to life. Rajax tensed as the van sputtered forward, smoothing out while gaining speed. The darkness inside made him uneasy. He looked over at the outline of Whitney's face. She was looking up at the roof, as if waiting. He followed her gaze, noticing a strange

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tint. As they drove out of the base, Rajax gasped as the roof lit up with stars. Austin and Matthew looked up surprised.

Rajax couldn't keep his eyes off the sky. The last time he saw the stars was when he crashed and the journey to free his people began. He was a different person back then, he had grown. His gaze drifted down to Whitney, who searched the stars. A warm smile spread across his face. It was her conviction that helped get him this far. Rajax looked at Matthew and Austin, his rescuers. Their friendship meant more to him than they would ever realize.

CHAPTER 24

Their journey to the NASA training center took almost two days. Along the way they played car games. Most ended in heated debates of the rules and who won. It made Rajax smile. Matthew woke up a different person after leaving the base. Rajax noticed the upset in the back of Matthew's eyes, but he didn't pry on why. When they stopped to stretch and eat, Rajax wasn't allowed to leave the van. He pressed his nose against the window watching the many people who passed. Some whispered to each other eyeing the caravan while others went about their day. At each stop Whitney grabbed a sample of the local food for Rajax to try. He ate in silence, watching the towns and open fields around him.

Rjax understood why his presence had to be kept a secret. People could be scared or violent. Whitney arranged a detour the last night for Rajax could stretch and look around. The dark sky of stars amazed him, their lights flickering across the sky. Dark clouds formed obscuring his view. Rain poured from above. He held his arms out as the water ran down his skin. Rajax could not remember the last time he was this alive. The sunrise was his favorite part of the trip. He pressed against the window as the sun slowly rose, the dawn colors painting the sky.

Finally, they arrived in Houston. Whitney called orders over the radio as they approached the Space Center. Rajax sat uneasy next to her, watching the buildings towering around them. Austin was jittery eager to start. Matthew kept a calmer composure. Their caravan came to a halt outside the entrance. A crowd formed outside, police keeping them off the main sidewalk.

“What's going on?” Matthew asked.

“Protestors it looks like,” Whitney said eyeing the crowd.

“How are we going to get Rajax through?”

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Whitney called over the radio, “Let’s try the back entrance instead.”

“We can’t,” a voice crackled, “it’s blocked by more protestors and maintenance crews.”

Whitney watched the crowd. Signs waved in the air of hate and jeering as the police tried to control them. Others were shouting and pushing to get through the barrier.

“Is this what you meant when I could not leave the car?” Rajax asked her.

She nodded, “We’re getting pushed on both fronts, but this front is harder to control.”

Whitney thought for a moment. The vans in front began letting out their team. They crept forward. Her heart raced with every inch they approached. There was no way to get Rajax inside. She cursed under her breath. Rajax grabbed her shoulder.

“I may have an idea,” he said quietly.

Rajax leaned in whispering.

“That’s risky,” Whitney said shocked.

“That is the only course of action,” he concluded.

Whitney breathed a heavy sigh. She motioned for Matthew and Austin to move as she opened their seats pulling out equipment.

“This seat can be wheeled out of the van, but you’ll suffocate if we snap the top shut. We’ll have to go slow and gently,” she said as she tossed boxes aside. “It won’t be comfortable. You have to stay as hidden as possible.”

Rajax squeezed himself inside, “I understand.”

Austin handed Whitney a blanket and she draped it over Rajax. She shut the top as security guards opened their door.

“Austin,” she said hushed, “you’ll pull Rajax. Matthew and I will grab the other bags and keep you in the middle. Do. Not. Drop. Him.”

Austin nodded sweating. Whitney faced the crowd, grabbing their bags and stepping out. She held her breath as Austin pulled the container out of the van. The wheels clicked on the sidewalk as they walked. She could hear Austin huffing as he dragged the

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trunk. Around them protestors yelled. Whitney kept her fear under control as they inched towards the front door. She looked over at Matthew who kept an eye on the crowd. Austin began to stagger under Rajax's weight.

"Can you go any faster," she hissed.

Austin huffed, "I'm trying."

They reached the building. Whitney went to pull the handle when a reporter broke through the barrier and ran between her and the door. Her stomach dropped.

"I have no comment," she said calmly as a recorder was shoved in her face.

"Is it true that there is an alien lifeform among us? Is this the reason for the moon colony? The people demand answers."

Whitney looked at Matthew and Austin, begging them silently to stay calm. She glared at the reporter.

"I have no comment," she repeated.

"Is that your final answer?" he asked. "Are you willing to keep the American people in the dark? What are you really hiding?"

She pushed the recorder away from her face, "The only thing I'm hiding is my distain for pushy reporters like you Mr. ..."

"Mr. Jones," he said with authority. "My first responsibility is to the people; can you say the same for yourself?"

"I serve my country with dignity," Whitney said her anger rising, "you can quote me on that. Move aside."

She pushed past Mr. Jones and walked into the Space Center. Matthew and Austin followed closely behind as security grabbed the reporter. She let out a relieved sigh and joined her team in the lobby. Austin sat down next to the crate panting.

"He weighs a ton," Austin complained.

"I do not," Rajax's muffled voice replied.

Whitney looked around the lobby to see a woman approaching. Her short black hair hugged her face and she walked with authority.

"Nice to see you Director Blake," she smiled. "I'm glad you could brave the crowds; they've been here since President Graves

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announced the moon colony. I see you met the thorn in my side Mr. Jones.”

“Director Chang,” she smiled, “you have your hands full with him. Are you the only friendly face around these parts?”

Director Chang laughed and escorted them to a conference room.

“I’ve made arrangements for your team to have their own training facility to deter any unwanted eyes. We’ll make you as comfortable as possible. Where’s the alien?”

“I am in here.”

Rajax lifted the lid slightly, “May I get out? I am very cramped in here.”

Whitney nodded amused.

Rajax climbed out and held out his hand to Director Chang, “I am Rajax of Trem-NA.”

She shook his hand, “Edith Chang, Director of the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center.”

“When do we start?” Whitney asked her.

“You’ll begin tomorrow after you settle in,” she explained. “In two months, you should have enough experience to survive the travel in space. Our experts will be joining you in order to ensure your safety.”

“You’re the best Edith,” Whitney smiled. “I trust your team.”

The next two months dragged by. Matthew and Austin were thrown into physical training routines and technology lectures. Each day they struggled learning how to maneuver in space and reviewing operating systems on NOVA. Austin and Matthew impressed their instructors with their knowledge of the technology, but their fitness instructors were a different story. Although Austin trained harder than anyone, he wasn’t making a good impression. Matthew struggled under the pressure. He was beginning to slow everyone down. The other agents and soldiers started taking bets to see if they would last. Whitney threatened her team that she’d start replacing them if they didn’t support each other. Soon, Matthew received extra advice and help in his training. Austin received

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words of encouragement. Each day Austin and Matthew strived to make a significant impact on their team.

Whitney worked with Director Chang, bringing her up to speed on NOVA and overseeing the training. The ship was almost complete, the crew and supplies on its way. She kept in touch with Chora: Class A on how their teams were coming along. Canada, Brazil, and Australia had allowed those who worked on the project to remain if they wished, while they worked on a defense for Earth. Russia already dispatched their team to NOVA. Germany allowed Egypt to join them in training at the Washington D.C. German Aerospace Center. Commander Evans and the Orion Squad also joined them in D.C. to speed the process along. Going back and forth from overseeing preparations to her own training, Whitney slept like a rock each night.

Rajax passed his physical tests with ease, so he spent his time learning the technology that would help his planet. He spent many hours locked in the astronomy room, pouring over the star maps Director Chang provided. His search was slow and beginning to frustrate not only him, but the rest of the team. The astronomers that assisted helped move the process along, showing their findings from the data they received. Finally, Rajax had a breakthrough. According to their star maps, Trem-NA was two galaxies over in a small solar system. From what they could see, his planet along with two others orbited a small star. Rajax recognized his planet from the three moons in orbit. His memories filled with long nights under the sky, watching the moons rise in turn. With the destination set, they were ready.

Whitney gathered her team one last time before setting out for NOVA tomorrow. She looked around the room and noticed how much her team had changed within the last two months. Her team's excited chatter buzzed throughout the room. The soldiers laughed and joked with the scientists and doctors. She smiled as she noticed Matthew and Austin feeling at ease with their colleagues. Their strength had been tested these past months, but she knew they would come out on top. She noticed Rajax sitting at the back of the

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room alone. He met her gaze and Whitney smiled softly, her encouragement from afar. They held each other's gaze for a moment, the room slowing. Over the past two months they had little time together. She turned her gaze to the podium as Director Chang took the stand.

"Today we celebrate a momentous occasion," Director Chang's voice boomed over the room, "in a few short months, we at the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center have prepared you for your journey far from home. Two months is no measure to the few years you would have spent with us, but our instructors and I agree that what you have learned will help guide your way. Our experts are eager to see you fulfill your journey. I thank each of you for what you have taught me about hard work."

The room erupted with applause as Director Chang motioned to Whitney. She stood and walked to the podium. Her team quieted, excitement buzzing in the air. Whitney looked around once more and beamed.

"To echo the words of Director Edith Chang," she began, "I am in awe of how far we have come in two short months. The path before us now is clouded. Once we leave to cross our vast galaxy and fight against a threat none of us have ever encountered, we must remember to look for the light."

Rajax lifted his head and she smiled at him.

"I have watched each of you grow to be a part of one of the best teams I have ever seen. We may have our differences, but we all have one goal: to survive. We survive by showing others that we are not afraid. We are not afraid to expand our knowledge, our creativity, our strength, our compassion. We are not afraid of the coming hoard. We, as a people, will show others that we are the light when our future looks bleak. As we pass that light to others, we can light up our world and those beyond in a sounding voice: we are one. We fight for what is right. I am honored to be leading you into the unknown, for I know that with you, anything is possible."

Her team clapped fervently. Each member rose from their seats applauding their accomplishments. Whitney watched Rajax

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as he joined in, his fear fading away. Whitney turned her attention to the rest of the room, pride rising in her chest. Her team was the best they could hope for, and each member as valuable as the next. A lump formed in her throat. New information she received last night would dampen their spirits. She fixed her papers and breathed in.

“Now to the matter at hand,” she said. “Tomorrow we will be driving out to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Launch times begin at noon the day after; don’t be late. We estimate it will take two days of nonstop launches to have everyone aboard NOVA.”

She paused taking a breath, “Unfortunately, some of you will not be joining us.”

The room erupted in confused murmur.

“Why is that?” an agent asked from the back of the room.

“NOVA is only able to hold so many crewmembers,” she explained. “We believed that having each nation allow fifty members to join NOVA, not including the crew and repair teams accompanying us, would be a reasonable amount. With the threat possibly on the way we had to cut corners.”

“What changed?” a doctor asked.

Whitney clenched her jaw choosing her words carefully, “With the limited supplies we were able to acquire, NOVA would not be able to support the supposed crew manifest.”

“How many can it?” an agent asked.

“Less than half.”

The room fell deadly silent, shock plastered on their faces. Whitney was about to continue before the flurry of questions.

“What do the other nations think?”

“What happened to the supplies?”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“How will you decide?”

Whitney stood unable to breathe evenly as the questions turned to angry voices. The hole in her heart grew with guilt. Each member deserved this chance of a lifetime. The lack of supplies and cutting corners did not help the situation. Her suspicions fell to

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Parkson and those who fought against the mission. Miles away and he was still pulling strings. She saw a doctor rise from her seat.

“May I ask how many are joining us from the other countries?” she asked.

Whitney was taken aback, “There’s no telling how many, but I know their soldiers out way any other department.”

“Then it stands to reason for us to cut out those who will not be joining the fighting.”

The room erupted into arguing, but the doctor stood her ground.

“You only say that because you have a better chance of going,” one scientist accused.

“My work with Dr. Bishop on Naanan physiology does not influence my conclusion,” she answered calmly. “It is the most logical action to take.”

Whitney cleared her throat and gripped the podium, “I understand this is hard for everyone, and I know you feel betrayed. As do I. But I cannot ignore the fact that this is more of a military mission. Those staying behind will have the opportunity to aid us from Chora Base, and later the Space Station on the moon. I will update you on details as I receive them.”

Whitney looked down at her paper and lifted her head.

“This is my decision and I will stand by it. If any would like to volunteer to stay behind, please stand.”

The room stayed silent.

“Very well,” she continued, “I have selected fifteen members to stay behind. I will speak to them privately. In the meantime, I suggest you all get a good night’s rest and a hot meal before our journey tomorrow.”

Matthew stabbed at his food in the mess hall. After the meeting earlier that afternoon, the team became quiet and bitter. He noticed a few agents gathered in hushed voices, watching the room. It made him uneasy, as if they were back at Chora Base. Austin sat next to him mindlessly eating. Rajax sat across from Austin staring into space. He was quiet since the meeting. The air

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in the room shift as the door open. Matthew looked up and watched as Whitney entered and grabbed a tray. She picked her food from the buffet as the room dragged on in silence. As she faced the room everyone turned back to their plates. Matthew waved her over and she sat across from him, her eyes giving away her emotions.

“How’s the food tonight?” she asked quietly.

Rajax turned and watched Whitney. She didn’t meet his gaze.

“Pretty good,” Matthew replied trying to lighten the mood, “everything a growing astronaut needs. I’m sure Austin would kill for a juicy cheeseburger though.”

Austin let out air but said nothing. Rajax’s gaze was still locked on Whitney as she took small bites.

“That sounds good to me,” she replied, “I could go for one.”

Matthew noticed a few agents get up from their table and start towards them. Matthew kept his head down as Austin’s eyes grew wide. Rajax shifted his eyes to them and gripped Whitney’s chair. They stopped in front of her. Matthew watched as she continued eating.

“We have questions that demand answers,” one growled.

Rajax pushed his chair away and stood up, but Whitney held up her hand to him. She pushed her chair out and slowly stood to face them.

“And what might they be?” she asked coldly.

“You talked about unity, but then you push our people off the project. We want to know why they,” he jabbed a finger at Matthew and Austin, “are still here.”

Matthew watched Whitney match the agent’s stare.

“Don’t they deserve a right to be on this team?” she asked.

“It’s been almost a year since this all began; I would assume you’ve grown used to them. But yes, one of them is on my list.”

Matthew looked at her stunned. Austin dropped his food. Rajax’s eyes widened in surprise. She stepped closer to the agent standing nose to nose.

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“You may think I don’t make sacrifices of my own, but I do. If I were you, I would watch your tone. I don’t have to explain myself to anyone. Don’t expect me to do it again.”

Matthew saw the agents stiffen at Whitney’s words. They kept her gaze then left the hall. Whitney sat back down, returning to her food.

“Which one of us is it?” Austin demanded his anger rising.

“You,” she said bluntly.

“And when were you going to tell me,” Austin growled.

Whitney threw down her fork and looked up at them, her eyes full of exhaustion.

“I make decisions I don’t like. I had to think of what was best. You both barely passed your tests, but I need Matthew because he’s the only one capable of perfecting the virus.”

Her breath became erratic as her voice started to rise.

“Do you think my job is easy? I can’t play favorites all the time. I fight and fight for people and get slapped in the face in return. I told everyone from the beginning this was a volunteer position, that makes it subject to change. Do you know how many people I’ve had yell and spit their disgust on me today? How about any other day? There are some battles I wish I didn’t have to fight, but I don’t get my way. I push and push but, in the end, I must follow the orders I’m given. Go ahead, argue why you should be here! Tell me I’m wrong! Tell me why it’s my fault and I’m the one to blame. I’m your leader, not your punching bag.”

Whitney threw her plate across the table, splattering food in its wake. Rajax took a step back as she grabbed her chair and tossed it into the empty tables behind them.

“Tomorrow you will be expected to join the caravan home.”

Whitney stomped out of the room slamming the doors. Matthew looked at the food sprayed across the floor and tables. The janitor wheeled in his cart and looked around the room surprised. Matthew watched Rajax walk towards him and take the cart.

“I will clean this,” Rajax said as he pulled out the mop.

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Rajax started at their table as Matthew and Austin dumped their trays and receded back to their room. They walked in silence while Austin fumed next to him. Matthew pitied him. Austin was more qualified than he would ever be, but since he held the key to the mission's success, he was forced to leave his friend behind. Matthew slumped down on his bed as Austin threw his closet open and stuffed clothes into his bag. His anger turned to hot tears as he packed. Matthew watched, searching for words. Austin threw his bag onto the ground and sat on his bed holding his head. He breathed deep trying to calm himself. Matthew placed his hand on Austin's shoulder.

“If you're up for it, I might have an idea.”

CHAPTER 25

Rajax knocked lightly on a door as someone shuffled inside. After he finished cleaning, he searched for Whitney. He tried the women's sleeping quarters first, but no one had seen her. Rajax searched through the offices, gyms, and conference rooms throughout their section of the Space Center. Searching the bathrooms led to many awkward encounters that led him to the supply room he stood in front of.

Rajax knocked again, "Whitney?"

"Go away," her muffled voice answered.

"Whitney may I come in?" he asked again turning the knob.

A box thudded against the door.

"Go away," Whitney's tired voice yelled.

Rajax waited another moment before trying again, quieter this time, as he entered the closet. The supply room was small, an old dirty bulb giving off light. Two shelves stood in his way as he looked around for Whitney. She was in the back corner hugging her knees. He sat down a few feet in front of her, enough distance to dodge anymore boxes. Rajax could feel her dread seeping off in waves. Her sobs filled the air.

"I told you to go away," Whitney said splitting the silence as her sobs died away.

"I do not abandon those who are in need," Rajax replied.

She loosened her grip on her legs.

"It's just been a long day," she reassured him.

"That is not what I saw," Rajax said softly.

He scooted towards her, their legs touching.

"Will you look at me?"

Whitney was silent for a moment. She slowly picked up her head. Her blue eyes were bloodshot, tears staining her cheeks. Whitney's lip quivered slightly as she tried to catch her breath. Rajax wiped her cheeks and smiled.

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“I know it has been more than that,” he said softly. “I know you have carried a large burden for some time. You want everyone to have this chance. Sometimes... sometimes it takes the fighting power of only a few.”

“How do you know?” Whitney asked. “Your people had a large army- “

“-Whitney, when I say my people fought back, I do not mean a large army.”

Her eyes widened, “What do you mean?”

Rajax looked at the ground, “There was no time to form a large army. With the Xeno spread across our world we had to make do with the numbers we had. Many of our troops protected the cities and towns they were stationed at alone.” He looked at her, fire in his eyes, “But I know we fought to our last breath, and I would do it again. As we free my people more will rise. We do not have to be strong numbered, only strong minded.”

She smiled, “Maybe you should be their leader.”

Rajax shook his head and chuckled, “I do not care for your chain of command; I would not do well.”

Whitney laughed. Rajax watched as her face softened.

“It’s hard,” she admitted. “I carry around a lot of stress. I’m sure no one is surprised I snapped.”

Rajax leaned close, “I am sure everyone knows how deeply you care.”

Whitney looked in his eyes, “Do they know?”

“I know. And that is what matters most.”

Whitney squinted at the harsh light of the sun as she stepped outside. She was feeling better after her talk with Rajax. They left the supply room and sat in the cafeteria as she vented. He was patient and offered advice as Whitney ranted and complained. Rajax’s hand rested firmly over hers as they spoke. When she was done, exhaustion took over. Her burdens slightly lifted, Rajax walked her back to her room for some much-needed rest. She slept peacefully, her doubts fading until morning light. Now, Whitney stood outside the Space Center watching the caravan beginning to

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form. She glanced at her clipboard and turned to the doors waiting for the team. Arguing caught her attention and she looked over to see Mr. Jones running after the drivers yelling questions. Whitney breathed a sigh and motioned to a security officer to follow as she stepped between the reporter and the drivers.

“Mr. Jones,” she said evenly, “if you are going to get in the way of our departure then I must ask you to leave.”

“Where’s the free speech in that,” he threatened.

“You may stand behind the bars that are set up, just like everyone else,” she gestured to the aisle being built.

“Your barriers won’t stop me from finding out the truth,” he spat. “I plan to get a comment from every one of you, no matter who gets in my way.”

“Mr. Jones if you’re going to threaten me,” Whitney said as her temper rose, “then I’m going to have to escort you off this property and have your press badge revoked.”

“You can’t threaten me,” he yelled taking a hostile step forward.

The security guard stepped up placing his hand on his taser.

“I believe you threatened me first,” Whitney said holding her ground. “Now, you can either stand behind the barrier or I can have this fine gentleman drag you off the property. Those are your options.”

Whitney and Mr. Jones stood their ground for a few moments before they moved. He backed up slowly, grumbling as he stood behind the bars.

“Keep a close eye on him please,” Whitney said in a low voice.

The security guard nodded as she walked back to the doors. Her team started to file out the building. She instructed each member to their designated ride as the crowds began to grow. The discontent continued, Mr. Jones being the loudest, as she came to the end of her list. The last two items were the most difficult: get Rajax to the van without causing a scene, and face those who would be staying behind. She watched as the doors pushed open and two agents pulled out the large trunk with Rajax inside. Two

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security guards with their faces covered followed them as they stopped in front of her.

“Is he okay?” Whitney asked quietly.

A security guard nodded. Behind him the doors pushed open again and she watched Matthew and Austin walked towards her, the rest of the team staying behind following. She held her breath as they stopped.

“We’ll go out together,” she instructed, “once we get beyond city limits your van will take you—”

“We aren’t going anywhere,” Austin interrupted.

Whitney looked at him surprised.

“We talked about it,” Austin explained looking at the others. “you said this was always a volunteer expedition, so we volunteer to stay.”

“You were told there was not enough room. I have given an order to stay,” Whitney said firmly.

“And they are volunteering to defy that order,” Matthew smiled.

She looked at them, “You understand it will be difficult sailing?”

Austin nodded along with two agents and a doctor. The others stood silent. A scientist approached her.

“We will take our orders to leave,” he spat. “No reason to stay if we’re not wanted.”

Whitney nodded, “I’m sorry that’s how you feel. The van at the very end is where the rest of you will be riding. You will be taken back to Chora.”

He shoved past her, the rest following. She turned to Matthew and Austin smiling.

“Always the rebels.”

“This was Matthew’s idea,” Austin said proudly.

“You can’t leave either of us on the sidelines again,” Matthew put in.

Whitney acknowledged the jab at the past. She instructed the agents and doctor to find room in the other vans and she led Matthew, Austin, and Rajax’s guards down the sidewalk. Whitney

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fell behind the agents rolling the trunk, the security guards following behind her with Matthew and Austin at their heels. The protests began to get louder as they neared Mr. Jones. His discontent was spreading through the crowd around him. Whitney noticed a member staying behind gave him a sharp remark, but she couldn't make it out over the noise. As they passed the reporter he pushed over the barrier. He slammed Austin into Matthew as they fell to the ground. Whitney whipped around as he shoved her aside. The security guards tried to grab him as he knocked an agent down and pulled open the trunk.

Whitney's heart raced as he stared. Blood roared in her ears as she looked down at the open trunk. She blinked in surprise as a large space generator lay inside. Sound came rushing back as security tackled him to the ground. One of the guards offered her his hand. At his touch, Whitney noticed a familiar presence. She looked at him shocked, a large grin forming behind his mask. Whitney brushed herself off and marched towards the reporter as he struggled. Anger roared in her ears.

"Are you crazy," she shouted motioning to the trunk. "That is an experimental power source for the space colony. Your clumsiness and aggressiveness almost cost this whole mission."

The crowd died down and watched the scene.

"I thought—"

"—You thought what? That we were keeping secrets? The public is aware of this mission and the experimental value it has. If you pulled your head out of your ass, you'd be able to see that."

His face reddened as the crowd murmured to each other. Whitney jerked her head to the building as Director Chang rushed through the front door.

"I believe Director Chang has some choice words for you," she growled.

Security dragged him towards the building as the agents pulled the trunk into their van. Whitney let Matthew and Austin climb inside first. She watched Director Chang yelling at Mr. Jones, his face flushed. The security guard followed her inside as she sat down. Whitney turned to him as he pulled off the mask.

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“It is hard to breathe in that,” Rajax gasped.

Whitney smiled, “That was a clever scheme, even I fell for it. How did you manage to pull it off?”

Austin grinned from ear to ear as Matthew explained, “After discussing with the others about fighting to stay, we noticed some weren’t so keen on the idea. Many as you saw were threatening to shut the whole project down. I’m sure Parkson’s hand was in that. We knew we couldn’t take Rajax out the same way. We found a security guard almost the same height and build as Rajax and they traded spots.”

“I am glad you played along,” Rajax put in.

Whitney looked at them and laughed, “I didn’t have much of a choice, you almost gave me a heart attack. It’s good to know you three are prepared.”

“If I was supposed to go home what will happen now?” Austin asked.

Whitney paused for a moment, “There’s nothing they can do. The clock is ticking. There’s no time to worry about it now. Once we get out of Houston, the journey to Trem-NA will be within our reach.”

CHAPTER 26

Their journey to the Kennedy Space Center took seventeen hours. They stopped for gas and a small break before hitting the road again. Rajax noticed how different this trip was. The sights he saw outside his window changed as the hours past. The flatlands morphed into rolling hills and small mountains. The fields full of large prancing animals he enjoyed watching turned to fields of crops. Large cattle scattered the fields, reminding him of the Narmans from his home. The colors outside deepened into shades of green. Rajax watched the trees as they towered over them, awed at their strong statures. He noticed a change in the air. There was more excitement and confidence buzzing. The agents that sat with them took the time to get to know him on a more personal level. It felt good to discuss his home with them. Rajax's bond with these caring people grow.

As the day turned into night they carried on in silence. The stress of the coming day grew with each mile they passed. He watched Whitney pour over her pad in the dark, careful not to shine the light as the others slept. She rubbed her cheek from time to time in thought. Rajax smiled each time her eyes lit up to an idea as she jotted it down. He began to doze off as the van stopped, jerking him awake. Whitney opened the door and stepped out into the dark. His eyes squinted at the lights above him, leading to a tall building. Whitney nudged the rest awake and they slipped out of the van. Rajax followed Matthew and Austin closely as Whitney took the front and lead her team to a large group awaiting them. Rajax recognized General Hallock and Commander Daniel Evans as Whitney shook their hands.

“We thought you'd never make it,” Evans joked.

“You try secretly transporting an alien without causing a scene,” she laughed.

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“We better get you settled in,” General Hallock said gruffly, “it’s a big day tomorrow.”

Rajax followed as they were escorted inside, curious eyes beating into him. He was overwhelmed by the crowds as they entered. Many scientists and astronauts stood around, chatting and finalizing maintenance checks. They were corralled into an empty hangar set up with cots filing from one end to the other. It was filled with many people from different sides of the world. The room took notice of Rajax’s presence. Curiosity and interest spilled through their stares. Blood pounded in his ears.

“Wow,” Matthew whispered catching his attention, “there are quite a few people here.”

“More than the quota,” Commander Evans replied. “Each country was supposed to have a limit of fifty personnel. From what I can tell Egypt is the only one that followed through.”

“I’m not supposed to be here,” Austin told him laughing slightly, “but I wasn’t going to miss the fun.”

“You’re not the only one,” Evans replied. “I was the only one selected out of Orion Squad to join, but all my men volunteered. General Hallock isn’t one to shy away a larger fighting force.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” Rajax asked him.

Evans shrugged, “There won’t be a lot of breathing room, but what else can they do? Russia is already onboard NOVA; they have sixty-one in their company. President Semenov refused to call any of them back, a lot of us think it’s because they’ve seen firsthand what the Xeno can do.”

Rajax looked up as Whitney called her team over. He followed pushing through the crowd to a secluded corner at the end of the room.

“Tomorrow is a big day,” she announced once everyone was gathered. “Grab a cot, a meal, and get a good night’s sleep.”

With that the team dispersed. Austin laid down on a cot and pulled his blanket over his head. Matthew sat down on one next to him, rubbing his hands together. Rajax stood alone unable to move. The room was loud with people, emotions raging in his mind. The uncertainties, excitement, and anxieties pounded in his

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mind. His breathing shortened as he tried to move for the door. A hand grabbed his arm and Rajax turned around. Whitney pulled him through the crowd and led him out. The hallway was quiet, and he slouched against the wall catching his breath.

“Are you okay?” Whitney asked worried.

“Too many... emotions... hard to... concentrate,” Rajax managed to get out.

He placed his head against the wall soaking up the silence. His mind relaxed as Whitney sat close to him. It was comforting.

“When you’re ready they’d like to meet one last time,” Whitney explained after a few moments.

Rjax lifted his head to look at her, “They want me to join you?”

“With the politics and training out of the way, they need an expert on space travel. They want you to confirm everything is in order or it’s going to be a short trip.”

Rjax stood, “I am ready.”

“Are you sure?” Whitney asked as they headed out of the hall. “You still look stressed.”

“Once all the meetings and talking is over,” Rajax said, “I will feel much better.”

Whitney smiled, “Then let’s get to it.”

Rjax and Whitney met General Hallock and Commander Evans outside the meeting hall. They entered the room and Rajax was surprised by the many monitors set up. Germany and Egypt’s officials shined on one screen next to Russia’s President. Parkson and Secretary Williams lit up another. President Graves sat with his staff on the screen closest to him. The rest Rajax didn’t recognize, but Whitney greeted them each in turn.

As the meeting began, Rajax was rushed into debates and arguments from every side. The tall dark man on one screen he learned was Captain Briers, commander of NOVA. He fought with the other leaders complaining that there were not enough supplies to go around. Whitney explained NOVA was at maximum capacity with each country barely cutting back their teams. The leaders argued their choices, many agreeing on a strong military presence.

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Egypt argued to keep their team of scientists on board, the largest out of the four.

Russia and Germany agreed on keeping their doctors onboard. If a battle ensued, they would need medical assistance being so far from home. The pressure of deciding landed on Rajax. He tried to read the room of screens, but it was difficult. After a long silence he decided that all points were valid, and that the altered crew manifests would stay as is. Captain Briers put up a fight, but grudgingly agreed in the end. Rajax urged those who had doubts to offer any extra supplies they could spare.

As the meeting ended Rajax's head was swimming. He understood why Whitney took such care to see every side. They walked back to the hangar. It was silent as everyone slept, snores echoing off the walls. Rajax managed to find an empty cot and offered it to Whitney, the bags under her eyes beginning to show. As soon as her head hit the cot she was out. Rajax draped a blanket over her and searched the room finding another empty cot. He laid down carefully between two members of Egypt's team. As he drifted off to sleep Rajax dreamed of his home.

Soft murmuring woke Rajax in the morning. He opened his eyes to see the two Egyptians in hushed conversation peering at him. One noticed and nudged the other. They both watched as he sat up.

"I apologize if I startled you," he told them, "there were no other beds when I came in last night."

They exchanged glances surprised.

"I did not know you could speak Egyptian," one responded.

Rjax lifted his eyebrow, "I did not realize I was. I can speak a language after hearing a few words. That is how I was able to communicate when I first arrived."

They nodded impressed.

"We did not mean to disturb you," the other spoke. "We were discussing genetics."

Rjax cocked his head.

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“Since you were infected with the Xenos,” the first explained, “your DNA was altered. We were discussing different possibilities of the physical appearance of your people.”

“I wish I could be of service to your curiosity, but I do not remember what my people look like,” Rajax replied sadly.

Both offered their sympathies. They continued talking for a while discussing cultural beliefs. Rajax found it fascinating that this world was full of different, yet similar, people. Hunger beckoned Rajax to leave their debates while he entered the line for breakfast. Many around Rajax still watched him curiously as he grabbed his food. He spotted Whitney and Matthew eating together, Austin snoring next to them. Rajax sat down next to Matthew listening.

“In an hour or so we’ll start heading towards the lockers to get suited up and wait for launch,” Whitney was saying.

“How many rockets is it going to take?” Matthew asked.

“About ten. Each rocket can hold about fifteen personnel supplies willing,” she explained. “We received a surplus of emergency supplies last night thanks to Rajax.”

Whitney smiled at him. Matthew kicked Austin’s cot making him jump. He rubbed his eyes and looked around.

“You will miss breakfast if you do not hurry,” Rajax told him.

Austin blinked again, then jumped out of the cot and headed towards the line.

Matthew laughed, “He moves the fastest when food is mentioned.”

After breakfast Whitney along with the other team leaders, assembled their groups and handed out assignments for scheduled launches. Rajax saw that he along with Whitney and the other leaders would be part of the first launch. She introduced him to Kaiser and Ganim, the German and Egypt leaders joining them. They nodded to him politely. Kaiser looked rough around the edges with his dark hair and eyes. Ganim had a softer persona with her black hair flowing against her shoulders. Matthew and Austin were scheduled for the fourth launch. Staying close to Whitney, they filed out of the hanger and towards the locker room. Whitney

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and Ganim separated from Rajax and Kaiser to suit up. Rajax pulled at his jumpsuit, the material itching his skin.

They preceded to a waiting room and sat in silence. Whitney tied up her hair watching the door intently. Director Markus of the Kennedy Space Center greeted them to give final instructions on the launch. They were handed astronaut suits and Rajax watched as Whitney's eyes lit up. They stepped into each suit with help. She beamed making Rajax smile, her energy contagious. Before walking out to the launch pad, they placed their helmets on with the visors down. Rajax found it difficult to see through, but his safety was more important. They waited in anticipation.

The doors slowly opened, the light shining through on their team. Rajax was awed by the size of the rocket and the crowds around it. Many were cheering and clapping as they passed, quite different from the crowds that greeted them in Houston. In the distance Rajax spotted a second shuttle preparing for takeoff. Sending two shuttles at a time, NOVA's crew would be in space by the end of the week. Whitney stayed close as they walked. Rajax could hear President Grave's voice booming over the speakers, his historic speech sounding in every ear.

They reached the elevator and Rajax held his breath as they ascended to the cockpit. Whitney gripped the bar, her excitement thick in the air. Rajax savored her moment, his own doubts disappearing. For a moment, this would be her astounding accomplishment. They reached the cock pit, the pilot helping them inside. His team helped each member strap in. Rajax was nervous as he sat facing the sky. It was different from his first journey into space. His memories flashed before him of his last day on Trem-NA. The trauma he endured as he left his home's atmosphere. The fear he carried for so long. He would be there soon.

The cockpit closed around them sealing shut. Rajax could hear the countdown from outside over the roaring in his ears. He reached for Whitney's hand and grabbed it as best he could. The others followed suit, as a sign of unity and good luck. He tried to steady his nerves as the shuttle began to shake. The pilot called over the radio to ground control. Whitney squeezed his fingers

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tighter. As the countdown ended the thrusters erupted under them, sending the rocket high into the sky. Another sound echoed in his ears as they ascended. Rajax looked over as the second rocket burst into flames.

CHAPTER 27

Whitney watched as the second shuttle on the platform exploded. Thick black smoke obscured the sight. A flurry of chatter came over the radio.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

No one answered her.

“What’s happening,” she yelled the feedback loud in her ears.

“The second platform was sabotaged,” Director Markus answered her. “We’re assessing the damage now. Nonessential personnel are being evacuated along with the public and the sight is being shut down. We’re going to postpone the other launches until we find the culprits.”

Whitney watched as the stars approached, the thrusters breaking from the shuttle.

“What do we do?” she asked.

“There’s nothing you can do,” the Director explained. “Stay on course. We will report back to you when we have an answer.”

Whitney’s body rose against her straps as they entered space. She floated above her seat numb. Whitney tried to go over the names listed on the second launch manifest but could not think. The radio crackled, its silence nagging. The only sound was her heavy breathing. Rajax still grasped her hand as they moved closer to the moon. She could not enjoy the view.

The next three days dragged by. As the shock of the second shuttle exploding wore off, they began to roam about the cabin. Whitney kept close to the radio waiting for an answer. At the end of day two Director Markus contacted them. Protesters joined the excited crowds and snuck by security to plant bombs in the rocket’s thrusters. The police were able to arrest four of the five offenders, the last one still on the run. With the President’s approval they began the launches again. This time they closed off

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the public and doubled security. The third launch would meet them on the moon's surface the day after they landed.

As they reached the moon's orbit, they strapped back into their seats and prepared for landing. Below them lay the Space Station. Several housing cubes joined to form a large square with a landing pad in the middle. Whitney gripped her straps tightly as they landed. The door opened to a hallway as they walked out of the ship. The walls let out compression with a click. Whitney unstrapped her helmet and motioned for the others to do the same.

“Welcome to Armstrong Base,” she declared.

The door buzzed open as Captain Briers came to greet them.

“Glad to see you all in one piece. Let's get you settled in before heading to NOVA.”

“Where is it?” Rajax asked as they proceeded down the hallway.

“Building a ship that size needs to be done in stealth, as to not alarm the public,” Briers explained as they walked. “With camouflage technology we've been able to mimic the moon's surface. It helps that NOVA is in one of the largest craters on the moon.”

They stopped at a room and Briers flicked his badge in front of the door. It opened to a locker room with a waiting room attached on the side.

“This is where you will stay until we can get the communications hooked up for you. We're still having trouble on our end. Once it's up and running, they want to speak to you about the accident.”

Whitney changed into a new jumpsuit bearing the name NOVA. Each letter displayed a different nation's colors. Whitney sat rigid while she waited. Her anxiety clawed at her as they sat in silence. The others either paced the room or watched the stars outside. Only Rajax kept his eyes on the ground. She glanced at him as he stared at the floor, rubbing his neck in thought.

“Will they forgo the mission?” Rajax asked splitting the silence.

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“I highly doubt it,” Ganim replied. “If they were, they wouldn’t have sent the rest of the shuttles.”

“It’s probably to check on how we’re holding up,” Whitney assured him.

“Will they give us time to mourn?” Kaiser asked.

Whitney turned to him, “I will make sure it happens.”

They fell back into silence as the base around them carried on. Briers returned a few hours later. He motioned for them to follow. As she reached the door, he held out his arm.

“Not you.”

“Why?” she asked.

“They want to speak to you in private.”

Whitney looked at Briers puzzled as he shut the door. Around her the room dimmed and small lights glittered on the ceiling. She watched as they touched the floor forming the images of Director Markus and President Graves.

“Do I stand here,” President Graves was saying his back turned to her. “How am I going to see her if I can’t figure out how this thing works.”

“Mr. President,” Markus said softly nudging him.

Graves turned around and Whitney smiled.

“There you are,” he said. “I cannot for the life of me figure out these new-fangled things you have come up with.”

“My apologies,” Whitney said nodding.

“To the matter at hand,” Director Markus butted in, “how is your team holding up?”

“We’re anxious and worried,” she answered. “We arrived in one piece, but we want to know with the second launch casualties what that means for us.”

The Director and President exchanged glances. It was the President who answered.

“Do you know how we said one of the five saboteurs got away?”

She nodded.

“We believe it was a member of one of the teams.”

Her eyes widened, “How do you know?”

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“The way they got past so easily in the first place,” the Director replied. “Security is tight to begin with; we think someone is eager to see this mission unfulfilled.”

Whitney thought for a moment, “Someone tried to expose Rajax as we left Houston. I believe those cut off the team were to blame. I notified Secretary Williams and Director Parkson, but I didn’t receive a reply.”

The President agreed, “It’s likely.”

“Do you have the crew manifest?” Whitney asked. “I want to honor those killed in the crash.”

“They’ve been sent to your NOVA pad you’ll be receiving soon,” Director Markus told her. “We have already contacted their families.”

Whitney’s heart sank.

“I need to speak with Director Blake alone,” the President stated.

Director Markus nodded, “Anymore information you need will be sent to your NOVA pad. The shuttles should be arriving daily. We’ll keep you posted.”

Whitney thanked him as his image faded. President Graves looked at her grimly.

“I want you to be honest with me,” he said slowly. “In your time with Director Parkson did he ever seem, unstable?”

The question caught her curiosity.

“Parkson and I never saw eye to eye. In my opinion he wanted results faster than you can give him.”

“Did he give off any indication he would sabotage the mission?”

“Besides trying to keep my team away I don’t recall.”

“Did he ever threaten them?”

Whitney swallowed the lump in her throat, “He threatened me on more than one occasion. Those who stood in his way paid the price with their lives.”

“Would that include what happened with Patient Zero?”

“Yes.”

President Graves rubbed his eyes.

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“What’s happened?” she asked her heart racing.

“Director Parkson has been MIA since the first launch,” he explained. “When he didn’t show up for work Director Myer led a security team to search his office to find any indication where he was. She found your evidence against him and sent out an alert to find him. After that, several other Chora members went missing. We have searched for them but came up empty. The bomb used in the explosion; it was a Chora experimental design.”

Whitney’s heart stopped, “Are you saying his people planted the bomb and are possibly on their way here?”

“They might already be there,” Graves said solemnly. “Why didn’t you come forward with your evidence earlier? We could have stopped him.”

Whitney guilt rose. She tried to hide her shaking hands.

“I knew Parkson would do anything to have his way, but I didn’t think he would go this far. If he accompanied the mission to Trem-NA, the Naanans would suffer more than they already have. I thought the evidence I uncovered would scare him enough to back down. I planned to turn it in but...”

“But...”

“...If the other nations in Chora found out the mission would’ve been taken out of my hands. I was trying to do what I thought was right.”

“I understand. We cannot afford to have our confidence in this mission clouded.”

Graves shook off his despair, “Keep your head on straight and both eyes open, understand? I’m counting on you.”

“You have my word; I will stop them.”

The President nodded his approval.

“It’s time for me to go. I wish you the best of luck. Whitney; watch your back.”

CHAPTER 28

Over the next week the remaining shuttles arrived. Whitney and the other leaders worked together to delegate as the Armstrong Base crowded. Kaiser moved onto NOVA to help Russian leader Bykov find room for everyone. Ganim checked over the supplies, making sure everything was in order. Whitney stayed behind to welcome the shuttle crews. Rajax could join the rest on NOVA, but he decided to stay behind until everyone was accounted for. After Whitney's secret meeting, her mind was clouded and buzzed with distrust. Rajax stayed in case she was in danger.

Matthew and Austin arrived without any trouble. They continued to NOVA after a short stay, telling Rajax about the events that followed the explosion. Everyone was questioned thoroughly. The names hadn't been released, but many of the crew mourned as they searched for friends. Tension cracked in the air awaiting to see if the mission would continue. With the public cut off, protests formed outside. When they were leaving, President Graves was holding a press conference to ease the public's concerns.

With the last shuttle arriving soon Whitney watched the launch pad. Her mind spun replaying the past few days in her head. She watched everyone carefully, trying to remember if any of those under her command were big supporters of Parkson. A few agents he suggested were still with them, making her uneasy. Unification was important in the beginning, but now if they were a threat, they would have to be dealt with. With her head buzzing, she did not notice Rajax come stand next to her.

"Something wrong?" Rajax asked.

She jumped, "I'm sorry I didn't see you there. No, everything is fine."

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“Everything is not fine Whitney; you cannot lie to me,” he reminded her.

She sighed rubbing her eyes, “Curse your ability to feel emotions.”

Whitney looked around the empty hallway.

“I can’t discuss it,” she said quietly. “It’s something I have to deal with on my own. It was a scenario I prepared for but wasn’t expecting so close to the beginning. When it needs to be known I’ll inform everyone.”

“You do not need to carry this burden alone,” Rajax told her. “We talked about that.”

Whitney smiled softly at him, “I’m aware; but for security reasons I must.”

She returned her gaze to the landing pad as the last shuttle came into view. They watched as it landed, the crew filing in. Whitney smiled as the hall compressed and the doors slid open. She directed them to the locker room to freshen up and rest. When they were ready, they continued. Everyone joined Whitney in front of the furthest bay door. She eyed each of them, their faces showing only excitement. Rajax was the last to join them, thanking everyone he met on the way. Whitney smiled as he did, her distrust subsiding for a moment.

Rjax finally joined them, his face lighting up. Whitney scanned her palm on the door as it slid open slowly. A small buggy awaited them as they filed in. Whitney turned the key and raced down the tunnel. The sound of the engine echoed on the walls as they drove under the moon’s crust. The light at the end of the tunnel shone brighter as they approached. Whitney beamed proudly.

Above them loomed NOVA. Large space engines glowed in the back. Dots of people moved inside the large dome on top. The cannons slowly rotated and hummed. A large shuttle bay opened on the side, the last of the supplies being loaded. Its grey exterior lit up the clear shielding against the stars. Whitney stopped the buggy and hopped out.

“Welcome to NOVA,” she announced.

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The rest of the crew climbed out and headed into the bay awestruck. Whitney and Rajax followed, words escaping his lips. She looked around pleased and led him to the elevator.

“This is amazing,” Rajax breathed as they ascended. “I did not realize your people had this kind of technology.”

“We’re full of surprises,” she grinned.

The doors slid open as Rajax followed Whitney onto the bridge. It was alive with crewmen preparing for launch. They hurried past him pushing buttons and chatting over the radio. Rajax looked out the large dome at the stars. Earth was in the distance, brilliant and blue. Rajax looked around and found Whitney by the captain’s chair talking with Briers. A huge man stood next to them with his arms crossed. Muscles rippled under his skin as he tensely watched the room. His sleeves were rolled up, a large black bull tattooed under his shoulder. The black hair on his head was shaved. Rajax joined them feeling small.

“Once the earth is out of view we’ll be setting off,” Briers was explaining. “It’ll be bumpy at first, but once we get fully airborne it’ll be smooth sailing. We’ll be ready in less than thirty minutes.”

“Is everyone stationed and accounted for?” Whitney asked.

Captain Briers nodded, “We’re waiting for Kaiser and Ganim to join us before we officially start the launch process. They should be here soon.”

He turned his attention to Rajax, “Surprised?”

Rajax watched the bridge, “Your people never cease to surprise me. You should be proud to command such a unique ship.”

Captain Briers huffed, “Well let’s see if our ship still surprises you when we run out of supplies.”

“We’ll be fine,” Whitney assured him.

“You’re the alien,” the large man stated with his thick Russian accent.

“That is correct,” Rajax told him. “You must be Bykov.”

“I thought you’d be taller.”

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The elevator opened and Kaiser and Ganim stepped out. They took their place beside Whitney and Bykov. Rajax shrank back. Captain Briers hit a button next to his chair and the glass illuminated their image, an attention whistle sounding.

“Welcome aboard the Starship NOVA,” he announced proudly. “This voyage is the first of its kind, and we hope it won’t be the last. We all know what’s ahead of us, let’s make this count.”

He nodded to Whitney and she took his place, pulling out a pad.

“This journey, young in its phase, has claimed the lives of fifteen of our crew. We honor them as we prepare for our journey.”

She held up her pad and read off the names. Whitney paused as they held a moment of silence. She lifted her head to Captain Briers, who hit another button. Several color grenades exploded, revealing each color of the country’s flag.

“Their loss will not be forgotten,” she concluded. Rajax swore he heard a threat in her voice.

Whitney stepped back as Captain Briers took command, shouting orders to begin lift off. She stood by Rajax as the crew around them fired up the engines and started shutting down the force field. With the earth behind them, NOVA shone bright on the moon’s surface as it came alive. Rajax and Whitney grabbed hold of the beam in front of them as the ship rumbled. Captain Briers yelled more orders as the surface began to diminish under them.

“Come on baby don’t fail me now,” Whitney whispered to the ship.

The thrusters gave one more final push and they were completely airborne. Rajax’s feet came off the ground. Captain Briers called for the artificial gravity and they stood firmly on the bridge again. The engines whined as they lifted. Rajax watched as they entered the moon’s orbit.

“There you go,” Whitney said patting the bar.

“Helmsman,” Captain Briers called taking his seat.

“Yes sir?”

“Set a course for Trem-NA. Let’s test our new engines.”

“Aye sir.”

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NOVA shifted and hummed shooting out of orbit. The bridge rumbled as the stars whizzed past. The shaking eased and Captain Briers sighed.

“Well, we’re still alive,” he stated.

“Let’s keep it that way,” Whitney said coming to stand next to him. “How long do you estimate we can hold this speed?”

“If our simulations are right about a week,” he replied.

“That’ll take us almost past Pluto. Once we leave our solar system, we’ll try the advanced space engines your people have been working on. That’ll give the other engines enough time to recuperate. Let’s hope it’s not a one-way mission.”

“How long till Trem-NA?” Rajax asked.

They turned to him.

“About three weeks,” Captain Briers responded. “Give or take a few days. If this ship can withstand that.”

Rjax shifted uneasy, “You do not seem confident.”

Captain Briers glared at him, “That’s my nature.”

Whitney stepped back and pulled Rajax aside.

“Don’t worry about him,” Whitney whispered. “He’s a bit of a downer, but it keeps him grounded. You’ll get used to it.”

The elevator opened and Commander Evans stepped through with the shuttle leaders. They watched the stars around them in awe. Rajax noticed Evans looked stressed. He jerked his head to Whitney and Rajax. They followed him to a secluded spot on the bridge.

“You’re going to have to remind Bykov who’s in charge around here,” he said lowering his voice. “His people think they own the place.”

“What’s going on?” Whitney asked.

Evans sighed heavily, “I was working on sorting through the armory when they kicked me out. Apparently, it was none of my concern. When I tried to explain myself, they told me if they did not hear it from Bykov, it did not matter. Then when I went to see how the rest of our team was, I learned we have been put in the smallest living section. Each country was supposed to have two.

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According to the Russian team, Bykov allotted that one section be for leaders only.”

“Egypt has the smallest team,” Rajax put in. “It would make sense to give them one section.”

Evans looked at him darkly, “You would think.”

Whitney rubbed her forehead, the cloud she carried growing. Rajax noticed her mental burden weighing her down, physically making her slouch. Captain Briers called to the leaders as he gestured to a door at the back of the bridge.

“We’ll address it now,” Whitney said bluntly.

Evans looked at Rajax concerned as Whitney walked away. He knew Evans could feel the pressure rising inside her. Rajax stole another glance at the stars before following.

The room was small with a long table in the middle. Whitney sat down at the front near Captain Briers. Evans sat close by. Ganim and Kaiser sat on the opposite side next to Bykov. He sat across from Whitney watching her. Rajax took a seat beside Evans as the meeting began.

“To begin,” Captain Briers started, “we will go over the crew manifest to ensure it is accurate.”

He read off each nation’s crew manifest as the leaders nodded in agreement. Briers tallied the manifest and checked again. He tapped his pad on the table impatiently.

“I’m sure you are all aware that I specifically requested for the teams to be cut. Since we are well above the mark, supplies will be dangerously limited.” He turned to Ganim, “Do you have the complete list of our supplies?”

She pulled up her pad, “We have all the medical supplies we requested and twenty cases of ammunition for each weapon. We have enough weaponry for each crewman to arm themselves. The extra supplies we received has radios, emergency blankets, and other amenities. The problem is food and water; we don’t have enough for each member to have their daily requirements.”

She set down her pad as the air in the room became thick.

“How much would each crewmember get?” Kaiser asked.

“Two meals a day,” Ganim responded.

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“That’s not enough for my men,” Bykov’s voice boomed.

“*Our* men,” Whitney shot at him. “No one is going to get three meals a day. If we each have two, we’ll survive.”

Bykov glared at her, “And what about the water? Surely we cannot all have our required amount?”

“We’ll ration it,” she said returning his glare. “Some sacrifices need to be made, which some of our companions have already forgotten.”

The room buzzed with tension as Bykov leaned forward on the table.

“Are you accusing me of something,” he said slowly.

Whitney copied his motion, “I am.”

They stared each other down as the others sat uncomfortably. The liquid in Rajax’s hands began to swirl thickly up his arm. He pulled his sleeves down to not draw attention to himself.

“I want to know,” Whitney said hotly, “why my people have been shoved into a tight room when it was clearly stated we would get two sections. I want to know why you think having a section just for leaders is a good idea. I want to know why your people believe they are above everyone else. You may have been here longer, but this ship is my design, and I will decide what happens in it.”

Briers cleared his throat, “That’s not—”

Bykov stood gripping the table, “My decisions are for the good of this mission. Leaders need a place to themselves to keep a level head. Your people are the only ones uncomfortable with their situation. They should be grateful for what they have. My people answer to me, not to you.”

“I clearly outlined—”

Bykov slammed his hands on the table, “This is not a report! You don’t get what you want by typing it down. This is the battlefield, deal with it.”

Whitney shot up banging her chair against the wall, “We’re supposed to work together, not usurp the other because you’ve been here longer. I can live with not getting my way, but your treatment to the others on board is not kosher. Your people will

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have to live with the fact we are all here together, and if they cannot get in line with the rest of us, then maybe we'll drop you off at the nearest planet."

"You don't scare me with your weak threats," he roared.

"You don't frighten me Мудак," she yelled.

Bykov roared and jumped across the table grabbing Whitney. Rajax jumped from his seat first to stop him. The others tried to pull them apart as Bykov and Whitney punched and kicked. Rajax grabbed a hold of Whitney and pulled her out from under Bykov. With her rage focused on Bykov, Rajax saw clearly why she had been on edge. Whitney elbowed him in the ribs and jumped back into the fight. Briers caught a hold of Bykov who tossed him over the table.

"ENOUGH," Rajax boomed.

He grabbed Whitney by the waist and pinned her to the floor. Ganim, Kaiser, and Evans toppled Bykov as he tried to get up. The room was silent with only the sound of shortened breath. Bykov had a gash above his eye and a busted lip. Whitney's eye was beginning to swell, a deep cut on her cheekbone. Rajax didn't let go as she struggled to get out of his hold.

"Tensions are high," Briers said standing up, "but I will not tolerate this kind of behavior on *my* ship. Whitney is right. Bykov, you and your people have become uncooperative; fix it. Whitney: you can't pick a fight with the biggest bully in the room and hope it'll fix whatever damage has already happened. It's clear you both have some issues to work out. Keep them off my bridge."

Whitney went limp and Rajax let go of her. She stood up and glared at Bykov. He pushed the others off him and stood.

"United States can have another section," he muttered.

"Hope your eye doesn't scar."

Whitney turned to leave but Rajax stood in her way.

"Tell them."

She did not look up at him.

"Tell them or I will," Rajax said firmly.

"Tell us what," Evans demanded.

Rjax leaned over her.

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“Your anger is getting you nowhere,” he whispered. “Tell them or I will. I know what is wrong; I felt it.”

“Parkson orchestrated the bombing at the Kennedy Space Center,” she said after a few moments. “He murdered Patient Zero and seven members of Chora in order to test his bioweapon. President Graves believes his people may be on board. I’ve been asked to keep a watchful eye.”

The room processed the news in silence.

“Watch your backs,” Whitney said bluntly shoving past Rajax.

He let her go, feeling her emotions as she went. Whitney was hurt, embarrassed, and angry. Her guilt seeped through the pain. Rajax felt her resentment towards Parkson growing deeper with each moment. Under it all, she was lost and helpless; her anchors giving way. Her stress was at its breaking point.

CHAPTER 29

Over the next week, the air in NOVA became hostile. Word spread about Whitney and Bykov's fight. The Russian and United States teams refused to work with one another. Germany and Egypt kept to themselves, not wanting to get dragged into the arguing. Tensions grew as meals were cut, growling stomachs filling the silence at lights out. Rationing water throughout the day came difficult to some crewmen. Everyone was on edge as the days wore on. Cabin fever set in, everyday tasks draining.

Whitney and Rajax had not spoken since the fight. He kept his distance, unsure of how to proceed. Whitney's eye blackened into a bruise with her cheek stitched up. Bykov walked around with his swollen lip and eye. Rajax would pass Bykov in the hallway, mistrust in his glare. Since Rajax forced Whitney to tell the other leaders there may be saboteurs on board, they became suspicious of any unauthorized activity. The crew was taking notice when they were stopped and asked loaded questions. There were whispers throughout the decks, theories on why security was tight and their leaders on edge. Some said it was a fight for power. Others believed the mission's plan had changed. Rajax thought perhaps Whitney should have told everyone on her own time, but he knew she would have been lost by then.

Matthew worked with the other scientists on creating special radar to use on Trem-NA. Dr. Borag was the head of his department, his studies on advancing technology known throughout Egypt. Working day and night, they developed small devices for each unit to survey the planet and their surroundings. When he finished for the day, Matthew worked alone on the Xeno virus. Matthew kept his dealings strictly business avoiding the questions of distrust towards his other crewmen. He made it clear that he would not discuss it, claiming feeding the flames would

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ignite a deadly fire. He couldn't however keep his own paranoia from clawing at him.

Austin worked with Rajax to teach everyone Trem-NA's history. It was a strange task for him. Rajax muddled through drifting in and out as he tried to piece together broken memories. Each day Rajax's assurance faltered. Austin pulled him aside several times to assure him if Rajax could tell them the basics, the rest would follow. Rajax grudgingly agreed. He remembered Trem-NA had clusters of cities ebbing slowly out into towns and the countryside. Rajax remembered forests and jungles that inhabited parts of Trem-NA, including a small desert he said laid in the southern continent. There were three continents, separated by the large ocean. Each night Rajax went over the information, hoping to ignite a clear memory.

Whitney worked on putting together units to battle the different terrains. She only spoke to give orders, the rest of the time she stayed quiet and by herself. Bykov cornered her in the elevator one evening and they hashed it out. She moved her cot to the back of the living quarters away from everyone. Many of their team moved to the second section where there was more room. Only a handful stayed behind including Rajax, Austin, and Matthew. She could hear their whispers at night mixed with growling stomachs discussing the day's activities. She turned away from them as Rajax watching her. Guilt tore through her stomach.

On the eleventh day of travel the leaders were called to the bridge. Whitney joined them in the elevator as they ascended. She caught Bykov's eye and he grunted looking away. Kaiser and Ganim attempted to make lighthearted small talk. When they reached the bridge, Whitney stepped out and looked around. Pluto's brown surface lay in front of them as they entered orbit. Whitney stood next to Captain Briers as he watched out the window.

"Impressed?" she asked him.

Briers shrugged.

"How long before we can get the advanced space engines up and running?"

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“The other engines need to cool down before we can bring them online,” he explained. “All this impatience is getting on my nerves. Are you expecting something?”

“I hope not.”

An alarm sounded around the ship as the bridge crew burst into action.

“Spoke too soon,” she said running to a science station, “what’s going on?”

“Something is wrong with the engines,” Bykov yelled over the noise. “The advanced engines are coming online.”

“We’re not ready,” Captain Briers yelled. “Get me eyes down there.”

He leaned over a science station as they pulled up the video feed. The screens lit up with the startup process. Briers slammed his fist down and cursed under his breath.

“I’m going down there,” Whitney said running to the elevator.

“We don’t know what’s going on,” Briers explained, “if you’re still down there when the engines come on, there’s no telling what will happen.”

“It’s my risk to take,” she said as the doors closed.

Her heart raced as she descended, the elevator shaking as she neared the engines. The elevator jolted and stopped. Whitney pried open the doors as smoke filled the air. The elevator was stuck between two decks. She grunted and pulled the doors open enough to crawl through. Pulling herself up, she felt the wall for an emergency kit and grabbed a flashlight. Around her unconscious crew members laid on the floor. The smoke stung her eyes as Whitney tripped over a body. Steps echoed behind her and she turned ready to swing the light.

“Who’s there,” she coughed through the smoke.

A tall figure approached her and held out its hand. She noticed the blue skin and grabbed it as Rajax pulled her up.

“What are you doing down here?” Whitney asked.

“Briers told me you came to stop the engines from starting up. I have come to help,” he explained as they pushed through the smoke.

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Whitney coughed as they entered the engine bay, “I can do this.”

Rajax grabbed her arms and looked in her eyes, “Whitney; I am staying.”

She searched Rajax’s eyes, his sincerity clear. Her lungs erupted in another fit of coughing and she leaned over the railing. Their footsteps echoed against the metal floors as they searched for the stairs. The smoke thinned into a fog as they descended. Whitney looked around for the engine panels. The cage flooring below them shook as the engines revved. Holding to the safety bars, she moved around the room. Whitney ran to the first control panel and started the shutdown process. Rajax stood behind her, looking through the cloud of smoke. The engine whined as it came to a stop.

“Whitney,” Rajax whispered.

“What,” she coughed.

“We are not alone.”

Whitney looked around as the smoke started to thicken.

“I agree.”

Rajax stayed close behind as she slinked around the corners. Whitney took slow breaths as she watched for movement. Her heart raced as she reached the second engine.

“Bykov,” she whispered over the radio, “how are we looking?”

“You better pick up the pace,” he replied. “There are six more engines.”

“Get ready,” Whitney responded as she turned off the second engine.

Rajax stood in front of her, his senses heightened. Whitney pulled him closer to the engine as she banged on it three times. The power shut down, the light from Whitney’s flashlight shining in the smoke. Whitney pulled Rajax closer as electric bolts filled the room. Through the smoke and bolts of light, she caught an outline of a figure staggering towards them. The power whined back on and the figure’s outline shimmered and cut out, revealing the

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saboteur. Rajax went to tackle him when he was hit in the head with a pipe and knocked unconscious.

“Rajax,” Whitney yelled as she ducked the attacker.

She held her flashlight in both hands as she dodged the pipe, the attacker slinking back into the smoke. The other saboteur grabbed Whitney from behind. She buckled down and threw him in front of the pipe. His grip released and Whitney rolled to duck. She swung her flashlight, hitting the attacker on the back. Whitney stumbled back and over the railing as he swung again. The wind was knocked out of her chest as she fell. Whitney laid stunned. The attacker banged the pipe against the railing as he walked towards her. She tried to move but her head was spinning. The attacker kicked her stomach, moving Whitney onto her back.

She threw the flashlight at him. The attacker dodged it easily and laughed. He kicked her again and Whitney coughed up blood. She tried to stand but he pushed her off the second pier. She could barely move as the attacker walked towards her. The smoke started to disperse. Whitney looked at him and gasped as the face of Dr. Kaine looked down at her. Deep self-harm scars covered his cheeks, his crazed eyes bloodshot. He held the pipe above his head and swung down. Whitney closed her eyes. She slowly opened them as the pipe dropped from his hands. Looking up, she saw Rajax gripping Dr. Kaine by the neck. Blood was matted against Rajax’s head. Rage filled his eyes.

“Do not touch her again,” he snarled.

Dr. Kaine struggled before hanging limp. Rajax threw him to the ground and fell to his knees. Whitney watched as he crawled to her, the bump on his head swelling. He pulled her into his lap.

“Are you okay,” she coughed.

Her blood sprayed the floor. Rajax pulled her closer to his chest and breathed deep.

“I should be asking you,” he managed to get out.

Whitney watched black blood trickle down Rajax’s face and onto his jumpsuit. She leaned her head closer into his chest and closed her eyes. Bykov shouted over the radio in her ear but she couldn’t move. The noise around her muted as she fell in and out

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of consciousness. Flashes of images slipped through her mind. Engines shutting down. Bykov and his men reaching for them. The ceiling in the hallways. Doctors standing over her and Rajax. A mask being placed over her face. Whitney blacked out.

Rajax opened his eyes and squinted against the dull light above him. He turned to see Whitney on the bed next to his. An IV drip was attached to her with an oxygen mask covering her face. Her chest slowly rose and fell as the machine next to her beeped. Rajax tried to sit up, but his head spun. He laid back down and touched the bandage across his head. The curtain next to him slid open and a doctor smiled.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“My head hurts,” Rajax replied as she looked down at his chart.

“I’m not surprised,” she said setting it down, “you took quite a blow. You have a mild concussion and blunt force trauma to your head. You’ll be down and out for a few days.”

“Whitney?” he asked turning to her.

“She breathed in a lot of smoke,” the doctor explained, “and she has swelling around her brain from the fall. She also has bruised organs and a broken rib. The cut on her cheek opened back up as well. She’ll need to be kept here for a week or so until she’s fit for duty.”

Rajax watched Whitney as the doctor walked away. The bruise above her eye was beginning to fade, but the exhaustion behind her eyes was real. Rajax watched her for a while. The door opened and he heard familiar voices coming his way. Rajax turned in time to see Austin and Matthew walking towards him smiling.

“How are you?” Austin asked sitting in the chair next to him.

“I will manage,” he said looking at Whitney.

Matthew looked over at her, “She’ll be out for a few days. She could use the break.”

Rajax played over his memory from the day before. He furrowed his brow.

“What happened?” he asked.

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“That is actually a surprising story,” Matthew began, “apparently Bykov and Whitney planned this. After the fight he confronted her in the elevator and explained that some of the camouflage technology was stolen from Russia. After hearing about Parkson he put the two pieces together. They worked together in secret, planning a way to expose them. The switch to the advanced space engines was the perfect time. Shutting down the power and sending charged bolts of electricity through the ship, they were able to expose fifteen saboteurs.”

“Parkson?”

Austin shook his head, “He’s not on board.”

“They were all captured and thrown in the brig. It looks like Dr. Kaine is the head of this group.”

Rajax’s gaze darkened, “He tried to kill Whitney.”

“We know,” Austin said quietly.

“Dr. Kaine is sporting a very large bruise on his neck,” Matthew said looking at Rajax. “You almost killed him.”

Rajax was quiet, “I wanted to kill him. I almost did.”

“What stopped you?”

Rajax kept his eyes locked on Whitney.

“She would not have wanted me to.”

CHAPTER 30

Matthew and Austin left Rajax to rest as he fell back asleep. He dozed in and out as members of the crew circled through. He could hear Bykov talking with the doctors in low voices discussing Whitney's condition. Briers came by to check up on them, thanking Rajax for his help. Commander Evans stopped by keeping his distance. Through the visits, Rajax learned the saboteur's immune systems were damaged by prolonged exposure to the camouflage devices. Dr. Kaine refused to talk. He spewed threats and accusations. There was one discussion that frightened Rajax the most.

After careful examination, it was revealed the saboteurs had traces of Xeno DNA in their blood. The only conclusion was somehow Parkson and his team found a way to reanimate the dead cells and infuse them into their bloodstream. Some doctors and scientists theorized Parkson was attempting to make a human bioweapon. Hiding his men on board, they could infiltrate a hive and set off the weapon. It made Rajax sick. The process made the infected erratic: turning on each other, claiming there were voices, harming themselves to get the Xeno out. The doctors agreed they would not survive. It was only a matter of time. The clock was ticking for answers.

The good news that came out of their infiltration was the discovery of more supplies. Parkson's team camouflaged their own stash, enough for each crewman to have three meals a day for a small period of time. They contacted earth about Parkson's men and their situation. Many debated whether to send them back or let them stay. The final decision made was to heavily sedate the saboteurs and send them in a pod with enough supplies in case they woke. The Armstrong Base was sending a smaller craft to meet the pod and pick up the fugitives. President Graves informed NOVA that Parkson was still on the run but they were close to a

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breakthrough. When the advanced space engines were up and running, they lost contact with earth. They were on their own.

Over the next few weeks productivity around NOVA began to slow. The lack of food and water made everyone sluggish. Captain Briers ordered those who were not on duty to stay in their assigned section in order to preserve energy. Mechanics worked around the clock trying to patch leaks popping up on the lower decks. The advanced space engines were starting to degrade. Many believed they wouldn't make it to Trem-NA in one piece. At night doctors made their rounds assessing everyone's mental health. Several crew members became depressed, realization setting in that they might not see their families again. Support groups were created to help combat the loneliness easing some members worries.

Rajax helped Whitney adjust back to her duties when she was discharged. Her recovery had taken longer than the doctors expected. Rajax assumed it was her body's way of telling Whitney to slow down. When she awoke and listened to the events that occurred, she was silent. Rajax could see her stress ease. Her eyes still gave away the uneasy nagging feeling that followed her. She proved to Rajax she was a difficult patient. He tried to remind her to take it easy, but Whitney refused and pushed herself. Rajax admired her strength but she needed to reserve it. She insisted her weakness would weigh her team down; Whitney needed to be their guide. Every day she grew stronger and her confidence returned. Rajax admired Whitney's dedication to her team, who were overjoyed to see her. He knew how much she meant to everyone.

On day thirty-six of their journey one of the engines gave out. Captain Briers cut all power to nonessential systems as they came out of the star stream. Rajax was called to the bridge and they all fell silent as he entered. He turned to the dome and stopped. Three planets orbited a small star in the distance. Two shone green with life. The other faced away from them obscured. Rajax watched three small moons orbit around the planet.

"Trem-NA," he whispered.

They floated in empty space keeping Trem-NA in their view. Dr. Borag and his team of scientists worked around the clock

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mapping the planet from a distance. Captain Briers ordered emergency power on all decks, the darkness foreboding. On day forty-five of their journey they reached Trem-NA's solar system. Rajax was surprised how barren his planet looked from above. The continent they faced was brown and arid. The oceans ebbed the sides as if trying to fill the land with life. Rajax walked to the edge of the window and placed his hand on the glass. Whitney joined him.

"It looks so different," he breathed.

"It will be rebuilt," Whitney promised.

"Do we have enough power to get into orbit?" Briers asked his crewman.

"Yes sir," she responded, "but we'll need to give the engines a rest."

"Do not orbit the planet," Rajax said turning to him. "The Xeno will detect you."

"Then where should we go?" Briers asked. "We're running out of supplies and power."

Rjax looked at the three moons orbiting his planet. He pointed to the one closest to them.

"Land there. Storms cover the sky and there is fresh food and water."

"Are you sure?" Whitney asked him.

"I remember."

Captain Briers barked orders to head towards the moon. Rajax watched as it came closer, the skies thick with darkness. Lightning struck violently under the clouds. NOVA shook as they entered the atmosphere. Rajax and Whitney watched the stars disappear into the heavy rain. Hail beat against the dome and wind shook the siding. The dark clouds obscured their view as they descended. The radar cracked unable to form a clear image. A large rock plateau came into view and Briers shouted orders to land. The engines whined louder. As the landing gear creaked an engine blew, jolting the ship forward. Rajax grabbed Whitney before she struck the glass and the ship fell. They held tight as NOVA slid across the plateau before stopping by the edge.

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Whitney panted from the stress as the lights and monitors flickered around them. Rajax helped her up and they looked out across the landscape. Trees stretched for miles. They waved viciously in the wind. The canopy was alive with frantic movements streaming away from them. Shrill animal calls sounded in the distance. Rajax turned to the crew as they checked their stations. Briers slowly exhaled and released his grip from his chair.

“I hope you were planning a long stay. This ship isn’t going anywhere.”

“Is there any activity on Trem-NA to show we’ve been discovered?” Whitney asked looking over the helmsman’s shoulder.

“None,” she reported. “It appears we weren’t detected.”

“The Xeno have no use for this moon,” Rajax explained joining them. “It is far too small and with no suitable hosts. Many times, they leave the animals unharmed. Their only interest is intelligent life.”

“Were those animals in the trees?” Whitney asked.

Rjax nodded.

“Are they a threat?” Briers asked.

Rjax shook his head, “They will leave us alone.”

Briers turned to his station checking damage reports. Rajax followed Whitney to check Trem-NA from the astrometric bay. With the elevator out of commission they entered the emergency chutes. Whitney pushed the emergency lever and hopped into the hallway. Rajax followed her careful not to fall. They slinked through the hallway and into the astronomy room. Matthew worked alongside other scientists as they entered, their heads deep in the hologram emitter. Whitney tapped on the top and Matthew slammed his head against it.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “I thought you heard us come in.”

Matthew slid out rubbing his forehead, “Dr. Borag and I are almost done. We’re making the last adjustments now.”

Rjax and Whitney waited while they booted up the computer and adjusted the sensors. The room dimmed and a faded image of Trem-NA loomed above them.

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“I don’t know how long we can hold out,” Dr. Borag told them as he typed on the computer. “We’re losing power fast.”

“We’ll make it quick,” Whitney replied. “Can you get me the entire planet?”

Matthew adjusted the output. Trem-NA’s image twitched and rotated, the moons coming into view. Rajax’s heart sank as his planet floated above him. The large desert they witnessed on the bridge covered half the planet. On the far side the middle continent showed signs of greenery hanging onto life. The jungles and mountains hugged against the brown. Hills and flatlands were disappearing from the northern continent. The southern continent’s desert claimed the remains of the forests. Rajax studied the ocean puzzled.

“Are you sure this is accurate?” he asked.

“Unless you want to take a trip down there yourself,” Matthew said scanning the monitors.

“What’s wrong?” Whitney asked him.

Rajax pointed, “The ocean. It is not supposed to be that big. I remember seeing maps of Trem-NA; it was smaller.”

“Maybe it grew without any interaction for so long,” Dr. Borag suggested. “Do the Xeno’s have any use for it?”

“Not that I am aware of,” Rajax mumbled walking around the globe.

He stopped and pointed again, “There are supposed to be islands here, but they are gone.”

Whitney joined him, “Can we get a closer look on this location?”

Matthew huffed, “You may be barking up the wrong tree, but I’ll see what I can do.”

The image zoomed in scanning the surface.

“You might be onto something,” Matthew muttered. “There’s definitely something there... it could be islands... it’s hard to tell from this distance but I can’t get a clearer image.”

The hologram buffered as Matthew and Dr. Borag worked to compensate.

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“We’re going to lose the image entirely if we don’t shut it down,” Dr. Borag told them.

“Get me an image of the moon and send it to my pad if you can,” Whitney instructed. “We need to know what we’re up against.”

Austin wiped the sweat from his forehead and unwrapped his gloves. Around him the troops trained in the gym growing restless. They had been stranded on the moon for two weeks as repair teams worked around the clock. The moon was dark from the continuous rain making everyone uneasy. The downpour beat on the sides of the ship echoing throughout the decks. Many levels were without power as the repairs continued slowly. The slick rock face underneath made it difficult to keep equipment dry and still. Austin was grateful for the opportunity to keep himself occupied while his friends were tucked away with repairs and back up plans.

Commander Evans approached Austin after the incident by Pluto and offered him a space on Orion Squad. After working with him for so long, Evans felt Austin deserved a rightful place on his team. Austin eagerly accepted and worked day and night with his teammates learning advanced fighting and stealth techniques. The first week was rough but Austin persevered. Captain Briers tasked Orion Squad along with two other teams to collect food and water from the moon. Every night Austin came back to the ship drenched down to the bone, carrying a backpack full of colored fruits and jugs overflowing with water. The animals kept away as Rajax said. It was unnerving as they gathered supplies, beady eyes watching them from the shadows. The fresh food was welcomed, though the sour aftertaste made it difficult to eat.

Austin stood and stretched as he cleaned up his gear and placed it back in his locker. After a quick shower he dressed and headed for the mess hall. He squinted through the dim lights of the hallway towards the elevator. It opened on the next deck up and Austin inched down the corridor past a crowd gathered around the mess hall. Austin pushed his way in and let out a breath as he looked around the room. Matthew sat across from Whitney in a

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heated debate. Rajax sat a few spaces down watching. Austin grabbed a tray of fruit and joined him.

“Are they at it again?” he asked munching into the purple spiked fruit.

“They are in disagreement about the use of power,” Rajax explained not shifting his gaze. “Matthew believes they need more power for the astrometric bay to keep a closer eye on Trem-NA. Whitney agrees, but repairs need to be kept top priority to ensure we can escape and regroup if necessary.”

Austin dropped the fruit and coughed, the taste searing his throat.

“The purple fruits are very tart today,” Rajax said.

“Thanks for the warning,” Austin coughed taking a drink. “Is there really not enough power to go around?”

Rjax shrugged, “From what I understand, our descent cost us the landing gear and parts of the engines and power cells. Until they are repaired, we must pick a choose what to run. It does not help that the sun cannot shine through the clouds, the solar energy would be useful.”

“If I’m being honest this moon is starting to give me the creeps,” Austin told him biting into a blue oval fruit.

“You are not the only one,” Rajax said shaking his head. “My people would come to harvest the moon every few years, but we never stayed this long. Only the elitist of the Naanans were selected to make the journey; our few ships could not take us far. The moons are sacred to my people. Bedtime stories were told to children that if you stayed too long, you would become one of the Na-pongs.”

“Sounds more like a scary story than a bedtime story.”

“It was important to understand the moons are a gift, not to be taken advantage of. My people are fortunate to have three.”

Austin looked at Rajax curiously, “What do the Na-pongs look like?”

Rjax hesitated, “It is not something we talk about, but there have been some Naanans who have seen the creatures. They hide in the shadows, their glowing eyes watching. Some said they have

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spiked long tails and feet that help them travel through the trees. Their skin is bare and green...”

Rajax shook his head as if dispelling the image from his mind.

Austin stared at him, “You said they don’t cause a threat, right?”

Rajax nodded, “They only observe, but after a while they may become curious. I do not know how they will react the longer we stay.”

They were interrupted by Whitney and Matthew yelling at each other nose to nose.

“There isn’t anything else I can do,” Whitney yelled. “Take what power you have and deal with it.”

“If we don’t find out what we’re dealing with on Trem-NA, power will be the least of our worries,” Matthew shouted.

“Take it up with Captain Briers then,” Whitney growled. “If you won’t listen to me, maybe you’ll listen to him.”

Matthew threw his hands up and stomped out of the mess hall. Whitney sat back down in a slump and rubbed her forehead. Rajax nodded to Austin and they slid down to sit next to her. She looked up at them and smiled hiding her exhaustion.

“Austin, how’s training in Orion Squad going?” she asked.

“Not bad,” he told her. “Commander Evans tries to be patient but pushes me to the edge.”

Whitney nodded as he spoke, “I’ve been there.”

“And your job has kept you busy I see,” Austin pointed out.

Whitney rolled her eyes, “I’m still trying to keep everyone happy, but there’s quite a few departments and not enough power to go around. Pretty soon we’ll have to start shutting down entire decks to keep everything going. If the sun would shine once in a while it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“That is unlikely to happen.” Rajax told her.

Whitney shot Rajax a look.

“Not that I am trying to point out the obvious,” he stammered.

Whitney smiled slightly, “Matthew does have a point. We have not been able to get a clear view of Trem-NA. Maybe if we did, we could find something useful.”

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Austin scrunched his face as he set down the blue fruit, “And maybe food that doesn’t bite back.”

Rajax tapped his fingers in thought as Austin finished eating. Whitney pulled out her pad and started pulling up schematics. They sat in silence, trying to solve the problem on their own. Suddenly the mess hall became dark and the hum of the engines died. Austin groaned. Complaints echoed the room as Whitney tapped on her pad.

“What’s going on?” she asked pulling up an image of the bridge.

Austin and Rajax crowded around her.

“We had to shut everything down, the last engine was about to go,” Captain Briers’ silhouette explained. “We’ll be in the dark for a few days. We’re contacting each crew member now and having them stay in their living sections till we get this figured out.”

“Keep me posted,” Whitney said as pads chimed around the room. “Anything you want me to do?”

“You and the others need to stay with your units,” Briers instructed. “It’s going to get crowded and restless. Your jobs are to keep them out of my hair.”

CHAPTER 31

Whitney, Austin, and Rajax stayed close together as they fumbled through the darkness. The emergency chute was crowded with crew members. They slowly climbed down the ladders to their assigned deck. As they left the tube, the hallway exploded with complaints. Everyone shoved each other trying to get to their sections. Whitney pushed her way to Bykov, his Russian orders booming across the walls.

“Do you have to be the loudest?” she asked bumping into him.

He stopped yelling orders and looked down at her, “You try and get everyone’s attention then.”

Whitney smirked and looked around the hall, “How many of your people are inside their sections?”

He huffed, “No one can find their way in the dark. You think they would have least left the lights on down here.”

Bykov started shouting again as more and more people pushed into the hall. Whitney fumbled through the crowd and tripped into a German section. Kaiser helped her up and shook his head.

“It is getting too crazy around here,” he complained. “No one can hear anyone over Bykov.”

“Do you want to tell him to yell quieter?” she asked him.

Kaiser shook his head, “Let him yell. Maybe he’ll lose his voice and we won’t have to hear him the rest of this confinement.”

Whitney laughed and pushed her way back out into the madness. She lost sight of Rajax and Austin through the crowd of bodies. She pushed farther down, the crowd beginning to disperse. She stepped into Egypt’s section and looked around for Ganim. Whitney spotted her towards the back, moving cots for more space.

“Is everyone accounted for?” Whitney asked.

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Ganim looked up, “We have a few stragglers out in the hall. How long will this last?”

Whitney placed her hand on Ganim’s shoulder, “I know this isn’t easy right now. Frankly, I do not like it either. We have to keep everyone occupied until we get the power sorted out. Hang in there.”

Ganim sighed and nodded. Whitney maneuvered out of the room and slid into the last section. She spotted Evans and waved to him. He caught her movement in the lantern light and pushed to the door.

“You’d think we’ve never been through a blackout before,” he joked.

Whitney rolled her eyes playfully. She looked around spotting Rajax sitting with Austin and Matthew in the back. The cots were pushed close together forming a semicircle. She noticed others were doing the same.

She looked at Evans, “I need you to stay with the other half of our team and make sure everyone is comfortable. Can I count on you?”

“You just want to stay far from Bykov’s roaring,” he teased.

She smirked, “How’d you guess?”

Evans laughed and Whitney patted his shoulder as he joined the chaos outside. She looked around the room, trying to count everyone through the dim lights. Whitney stood on the nearest cot and whistled over the noise.

“We’re going to have to stay here until the power is back,” she began, “so get ready to know your bunkmate a lot better. To give us more room there should be a way to convert the cots into bunk beds. I know you all have a lot of questions, but as of right now I do not have any answers. I will update you as I get them.”

“Are we allowed to leave this room?” one agent asked.

“You can leave,” she answered, “but you must stay on this level.”

There were a few muttered complaints as they moved cots around, but no one said much as they settled down. The lanterns gave off an eerie glow as the day turned into night. Without power,

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temperature on the deck decreased as the night dragged on. Many curled together in blankets to keep warm, pushing the bunk cots together. Rajax helped Whitney as she and the other leaders passed out extra blankets. As they returned to their beds, Whitney pulled her blanket around tightly. She looked at Rajax. He was trying to calm his shivering. She scooted closer to him and wrapped her blanket around him. Rajax looked at her, his eyes scared. Whitney stroked his hair as Rajax tried to calm down. They curled up next to each other and tried to sleep. She set her head on his shoulder, taking in the moment.

The next week dragged on in the dark. Captain Briers' crew worked tirelessly to fix the engines. Repairs were coming along, but it would be awhile before they were fully operational. Whitney helped keep her team occupied by playing card games and doing exercise drills to pass the time. The other teams joined in on the fun as their spirits rose. Each department designed a game for friendly competition. Despite their confinement, everyone was enjoying the break. Rajax helped with translations for those who wanted to learn their friend's language. Whitney worked alongside the other leaders, getting to know them personally and learning their team's strengths and weaknesses.

On the eighth day of darkness the lights flickered on and the teams sighed in relief. Whitney, Rajax, and the other leaders headed for the bridge as everyone went to the mess hall for dinner. Concern filled the air as they climbed towards the bridge. The room was exhausted with crewman hunched over their computers. The air thickened as they reached the conference room. Captain Briers stood facing away from them hunched over a screen while his bridge officers stood around him. He dismissed them and turned to the group; his stare was cold.

“You better sit down for this one,” he said tightly.

Rajax's anxiety rose as they sat. Captain Briers pressed a button on the table and an image of the moon lit up.

“This is where we are,” Captain Briers explained pointing to the northern part of the moon. “This is where we are staying.”

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The room looked at him.

“Are you saying we’re stuck here indefinitely?” Ganim asked.

“What I’m saying,” Captain Briers replied dryly, “is that we don’t have the means of getting off the ground anytime soon. The engines need an overhaul and the landing gear is taking longer to fix because of the wet surface. As of this moment the mission is shot.”

Rajax’s stomach drop.

“Are you sure?” he asked desperately. “We have come all this way; we cannot turn back now.”

“There may be a way,” Kaiser said thoughtfully, “but it is not ideal.”

“I don’t know if that would work,” Whitney told him. “At least here we’d have a chance.”

“What way,” Rajax demanded.

Captain Briers muttered under his breath and pulled up a schematic of small shuttles.

“We developed these shuttles to put troops on the ground without giving away our position. The problem is we are stuck on the moon. They would have to leave the atmosphere, head for the planet, reenter the atmosphere, and land. They weren’t built for taking that kind of pressure.”

“It’s a one-way trip for our teams,” Bykov explained. “That is if they land.”

“With no back up from NOVA,” Briers added.

Rajax looked at the shuttle image as the room waited for an answer. The circumstances were not ideal in anyway. If they stayed on NOVA, they had a chance. If they left, they might not return. Trem-NA was within Rajax’s grasp, he could not abandon them now. His planet could not survive without immediate intervention.

“What I have learned from my time here,” Rajax began, “is that your people are driven to finish a mission. With every obstacle that has been presented you have found a way to cope. Your people have an impressive way of adapting. I understand the decision at hand is a difficult one, but I would not ask you to make

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that sacrifice if you were not already willing. I have asked a lot from you, but please consider my last request. If you are willing, I would like to continue the mission.”

Whitney smiled at him as the others nodded. Only Briers seemed unconvinced.

“I think you’ll find we are willing,” Whitney said proudly.

CHAPTER 32

NOVA came alive with activity. Whitney and the other leaders gathered everyone in the mess hall, explaining the predicament and choices they were facing. Each leader asked their team to step up if they wanted to stay behind. No one did. Since then excitement filled the air. Troops stocked the shuttles with gear as scientists packed their equipment. Some were staying behind to monitor the teams from NOVA while a handful joined the mission. Doctors joining the ground teams went through rigorous training, hoping their expertise would not be needed.

The day finally came for launch. Rajax opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He could hear Austin snoring from a few cots down. Matthew tossed and turned on one side of him as Whitney slept on the other. Rajax turned and watched her blanket rise and fall. He heard her crawl into bed late last night. Rajax smiled at her as the lights kicked on and she groaned, pulling the blanket farther over her head. Matthew huffed and sat up rubbing his eyes. Rajax looked around the room as it started to stir.

“Could not sleep?” Rajax asked Matthew as he folded his blanket.

Matthew breathed out, “I’ve gone over my program several times in my head and in my computer simulations. Honestly, I don’t know if it’ll work until I look at the Xeno’s system.”

Rjax nodded. Matthew worked day and night on the virus. Its perfection was in its final stages. Until they were able to look at a Xeno hive they were shooting in the dark. Matthew kicked Austin’s cot and he jolted awake. Rajax gently shook Whitney as she pulled her blanket closer. He shook her again. She rolled over and looked at him, her eyes squinting in the light. Sitting up she looked around the room. Whitney rubbed her eyes and looked at Rajax smiling.

“Today’s the day,” she said groggily.

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“Will you be awake in time,” Rajax grinned.

She pushed him playfully. The teams cleaned and packed up the last of their bags. They entered the mess hall to grab breakfast before taking off. Rajax and Whitney joined the other leaders sitting with Captain Briers. They finalized last minute details as everyone sat down to eat. Rajax was grateful for the MRE. The moon’s fruit had been a nice change, but the sourness would not be missed. Austin and Matthew sat at the table next to them eating in silence. Reality set in around the room. This might be the last time they were all together. The liquid in Rajax’s hand pricked at his skin as the emotions in the room turned solemn. As breakfast finished Captain Briers stood on a table calling for attention.

“Now I’m sure you are eager to get on with our main objective,” he began, “but let me remind you that NOVA is not in any shape to give backup support. Though at this point, I do not think that would stop you. I was recently reminded we are a driven race, adapting to whatever is thrown at us despite the odds. I must say, I am proud to be your captain. But I am not one for speeches. Head off to your shuttles. Good luck.”

Briers stepped off the table as the room erupted with applause. Rajax joined in as he looked at the crew around him. He felt pride. They gave up everything to be here. Rajax hoped it would not be at the cost of their lives. The leaders and Whitney led their groups to the shuttle bay. As they entered the hangar Rajax was impressed. Ten shuttles laid side by side close together. Bykov took the lead and started calling names and pointing to shuttles. Rajax was called to Shuttle One along with Austin and Matthew. Three Egyptian scientists joined them with Orion Squad. Whitney stood next to the shuttle directing them to their seats while Commander Evans started the engines. Rajax strapped himself in as the shuttle hummed to life. Captain Briers stood alone in the bay saluting.

Whitney sat next to Evans turning controls. The hanger bay door opened. Rain poured in and the rock before them was slick and dark.

“Are we going to make it?” Rajax asked.

“It’ll be bumpy,” Evans replied. “Hold on tight.”

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Whitney looked out at the rock before them, “Here we go.”

Whitney held her breath as they flew out of the bay. The shuttle slid across the rock. Before they reached the edge, she pulled up. Evans helped her even out as they reached the atmosphere. Rain beat against the window obscuring their view. They climbed higher, the shuttle’s temperature beginning to rise. Whitney glanced back at the group. Everyone was holding on tight to the person next to them as they reached the outer atmosphere. She and Evans stabilized the shuttle as they burst through the clouds. The group squinted their eyes as the sunlight shined through the windshield. Whitney breathed a sigh of relief; they survived the ascent.

Whitney turned towards Trem-NA as Evans hit the engines. The shuttle shot forward as she adjusted their altitude. They headed towards the shadowed part of the planet, near the edge of the middle continent. There was a large jungle untouched by the Xeno where they would begin recon.

“Are all the shuttles behind us?” Whitney asked Evans.

He looked at the radar, “Shuttle Ten is leaving the atmosphere. I hope they can keep up.”

“When did you learn to fly a shuttle?” Matthew asked from the back.

“Evans and I designed them back at Chora,” Whitney explained. “These are made of the latest jet technology and the technology we got from Roswell.”

“At least this time we made it off the ground,” Evans laughed. “The first one we tested shut down halfway through the flight.”

“What happened?” Rajax asked.

“We got it off the cliff side and it shut down,” she explained. “We had to parachute out of the back before it crashed. We got stuck in the woods below for a couple days before they could find us.”

“Didn’t you sprain your ankle because you were determined to climb up the cliff,” Evans brought up.

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She smirked at him, “Didn’t you lose dinner one night because you assured me the trap would work.”

“In my defense it did work, only not very well.”

Whitney laughed and turned to the window. The dark side of the planet grew as they coasted towards the atmosphere.

“Hold on tight,” she told everyone.

They entered the atmosphere and slowly descended into the darkness. The shuttle shook violently. Heat poured in as clouds flew past. Whitney and Evans worked together to adjust controls. They burst through the clouds and attempted to slow as they neared the shore. Parts of the outer hull peeled off as they hit the sand. Everyone lurched forward in their seats. They slid across the beach rolling to a stop. Whitney let out a gasp and looked around. The shuttle landed upside-down; the windshield caked with dirt. Outside other shuttles landed around them. She released her strap and braced herself as she hit the window. Evans landed beside her with a thud as the others slid out of their seats. Rajax landed with ease. He helped Whitney up and she went to the door. She pulled on the emergency lever and with Rajax’s help they pushed the door open. Sand slid in as they climbed out. Several shuttles lay on their sides strewn about the beach. Whitney watched the last shuttle crash. She rushed towards the wreckage. Whitney grabbed the emergency lever and pulled the door open.

The Egyptian scientists climbed out coughing. Fire erupted inside as they rushed to put it out. Whitney spotted Ganim inside passed out at the controls. She jumped over the fire and grabbed Ganim pulling on the straps. Whitney took out her knife and started cutting. She could hear Kaiser and Bykov outside shouting orders as they tried to get the fire under control. Whitney got Ganim’s straps off and pulled her across her shoulder. She tried to get through the flames, but they pushed her back.

“We can’t get out,” Whitney yelled.

“Take cover,” she heard Rajax instruct.

Whitney looked at the window at Rajax holding a large boulder. She pushed Ganim under the seat as he slammed down, the window beginning to crack. After several tries the boulder flew

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into the shuttle. Whitney pulled Ganim out and pushed her up to Rajax. She went to climb out when the fire hit a fuel cell and erupted. Rajax grabbed her arm and yanked Whitney out before the shuttle exploded. They rolled down the sand and panted, the teams around them forcing the fire out. Doctors raced around helping the injured. Rajax gripped Whitney tightly.

“Are you alright?” he asked with fear in his eyes.

Whitney coughed, “I’m fine. What about everyone else?”

“There are quite a few injuries. We need to hide the shuttles before we are discovered.”

“Agreed,” Bykov said approaching them. “We can fly slowly into the edge and cover the shuttles with greenery. We’ll have to lay low for a while.”

Whitney nodded, “Anyone who isn’t helping put out the fires can move the shuttles. We need to hurry.”

She pointed to the horizon as small rays of light entered the sky. The teams worked quickly as they covered up the charred shuttle and pushed the others into the jungle. Whitney helped direct as the sun shined brightly. Austin helped the doctors move injured into the shuttles and Matthew helped cut greenery to camouflage the camp. Whitney watched the sky for any signs of Xeno movement for several hours. The sky was clear except for the occasional cloud.

Rjax left the camp to study the beach from the jungle line. Carefully he walked looking in every direction. He soaked in the moment, feeling the sod and sand beneath his feet. It was not a dream; he was finally home. Rajax watched the sky turn into deep colors of blue as the sun began to set. The three moons rose into the sky as he reached the camp. Hidden by the dark, the shuttles gave off an eerie glow. Rajax found Whitney talking quietly with Bykov and Kaiser at the edge of camp. As Rajax approached he picked up their conversation.

“We can’t sit here and wait for them to show up,” Kaiser was saying. “We should move deeper into the jungle to avoid detection.”

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“How do you suppose we get the shuttles and the injured out of here?” Whitney asked. “The jungle is too thick and most of the injured can’t be moved.”

Bykov stood silent and looked at Rajax, “Any suggestions?” Whitney and Kaiser turned to him.

“The shuttles cannot be moved deeper into the jungle. The camp can be moved farther in.”

“I don’t like that,” Whitney protested. “We don’t leave our injured.”

Rajax nodded, “I understand. If we leave the injured with a few men to guard it will draw less attention.”

Whitney looked unsure, “Where do we go? Do we head deeper inside to make a camp?”

“Making a camp would draw attention,” Bykov put in. “We should start recon. That way our people will be spread out. We can decide who will be staying with the injured in the morning.”

Whitney and the others agreed. They turned to camp but Rajax held Whitney back.

“How are you feeling?”

She shrugged, “I didn’t breathe in too much smoke.”

“Whitney,” Rajax said softly, “I think you should stay behind with the shuttles.”

“Why?” she asked defensively.

Rajax hesitated, “It is dangerous here—”

“—And I already told you that’s not going to stop me,” she interrupted.

“Whitney, I do not want to lose you,” Rajax’s voice cracked.

She stopped for a moment and studied his face.

“You won’t lose me Rajax. I am not going anywhere. I’ll stay close to you, alright?”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

CHAPTER 33

Matthew woke the next morning to light shining through the shuttle. He rubbed his eyes and sat up stretching. With one shuttle gone and two being used for injured, the crew crammed into the remaining shuttles to sleep. Austin laid next to him curled in a ball while Whitney slumped against the hull. Rajax rested his head neatly on her lap. Matthew stood and inched his way through towards the door and pushed it open. The fresh air was welcoming as he looked around.

The jungle floor was covered with patches of light from the rising sun. Vines covered the thick trees. Giant leaves dripped with morning dew. Large flowers opened their long petals. Pale colors shined in the light. The air was still. Matthew stepped out and walked towards the shuttles with the wounded. He slowly opened the door as a doctor shot up from sleep.

“Sorry,” Matthew apologized, “I wanted to see how everyone was doing.”

“No, I apologize,” the doctor said smoothing his clothes, “being here has me on edge.”

Matthew looked at the injured asleep on tarps. Ganim laid in the back. Her head was wrapped tightly, and her chest lifted slowly up and down.

“Is she going to make it?” Matthew asked quietly.

The doctor shrugged defeated, “No one really knows. She might pull through. The rest will be well in a few days as long as we’re left alone.”

Matthew noticed the doctor’s paranoia and pushed away his own. He left and stood in the clearing as others began to wake. Many were stretching and quietly chatting. Matthew saw Rajax heading towards the jungle. He watched Rajax run his fingers on each tree.

“Still can’t believe it?” Matthew asked.

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Rajax turned to him, “I keep expecting to wake up from a dream.”

Rajax climbed a tree and reached for a bundle of brown pods. He yanked the bunched and it dropped at Matthew’s feet. He picked it up as Rajax slid back down.

“Try one,” Rajax encouraged him, “they will keep you full most of the day. We ate them when traveling long distances.”

Matthew looked at the pods unsure and bit into one.

“It tastes similar to a coconut,” he told Rajax pleased.

They returned to camp as everyone crowded around Bykov, Kaiser, and Whitney. There was a buzz in the air.

“Shuttle Ten’s team is grounded,” Whitney was explaining, “so we’ll need volunteers to stay behind while the rest do recon.”

“The best thing to do is have Shuttle Four stay here,” Kaiser explained. “There would be enough doctors to tend the wounded and troops to keep them safe. Do you agree?”

The Shuttle Four leader stepped forward, “We will stay behind.”

“Now,” Bykov said drawing in the dirt, “we are camped here at the edge of the jungle by the beach. The best course of action is to have the eight remaining teams branch out. The doctors from Shuttle Two will accompany each team. With Shuttle Two having the smallest number of troops, we will split you in half to cover the jungle line. The rest will branch out from this spot. We will travel six days: three out, three in. That should give the injured enough time to recover and give us a handle on what we’re up against.”

“Do not engage the enemy,” Kaiser spoke up. “We need to access what kind of power they have before we’re discovered. We’re on our own, make every bullet count.”

“No fires,” Whitney put in. “keep hidden and stay out of sight. Do not draw any unnecessary attention.”

They turned to Rajax.

“Anything to add?” Whitney asked.

Rajax motioned to the pods Matthew carried, “These will keep you full for most of the day. They are found in the trees. Everyone should memorize what it looks like. The water is fine to

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drink. Do not engage the wildlife.” He paused, “If you come across any remains please bury them.”

The teams dispersed. Bykov showed the shuttle leaders where to go. Whitney grabbed backpacks and handed them to Matthew and Rajax. Matthew watched as she pulled her hair into a ponytail. Her hands shook slightly. Evans passed around camouflage paint to each member. Austin and Matthew wiped it on their faces while Rajax hesitated. He declined and rub mud on his skin instead. Swinging his pack onto his shoulders, Matthew followed Rajax into the jungle. Their group followed close behind. Evans nudged Matthew and handed him a pistol which he placed in his pack. He handed a weapon to each teammate but Rajax declined.

“I would rather fight my own way,” he explained grabbing a fallen limb shaped like a staff.

They walked in silence for several hours, scanning the jungle and skies. The canopy thickened as they walked. Several strange animal sounds echoed in the distance. They crossed over small streams and climbed up steep hillsides. Rajax slowed his pace so the others could catch up. It made him restless. As the hours went by, he found himself easing into the landscape. The others trudged on behind him panting to keep up.

Before the sun set Whitney made them stop and rest. The scientists collapsed from the walk taking a breath. Whitney leaned against a rock as Rajax scouted out an old den in a hillside. Evans and his team looked around while Matthew pulled out equipment to scan the area. Rajax dropped his pack in the cave and collected water for everyone as they rested. The heat of the day was beginning to wear on them as they sat in silence. Beeping sounds from the radar plucked the air as the sun disappeared.

As night crept up the air grew still, and the sounds of the jungle stopped. Matthew turned off the equipment and everyone froze. Rajax’s skin crawled as he stood and looked around in the dark. The light from the moons barely shone onto the floor masking any sign of life. Evans and Whitney ushered everyone into the cave as Rajax continued to look out. A twig snapped in the

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distance. A green light approached. Rajax pushed everyone farther back into the cave as the light crept closer. His heart pounded in his head as the outline of a Xenon came into view. Its tall lanky figure with jagged limbs walked past the cave and looked around. Another came into view as they clicked to each other. They held out a small rod and hit it against the ground. Pinging echoed in the jungle.

Rjax's heart stopped as he recognized it. The device was used to sense changes in the area. Any stone moved; any leaf broken; it was their way of hunting for stragglers. Rajax pushed the group farther back as the Xenon turned towards the cave. He grabbed Whitney's arm tightly as the rod headed towards the ground. A roar sounded above them and a large Na-roin leapt onto the Xenon. Its large paws clawed at it as shrilled clicks filled the air. The other Xenon began attacking the Na-roin's back, stabbing its jagged elbow violently. The Na-roin roared again and threw the Xenon off its back. It stood on top of the dead Xenon, its fangs dripping white blood onto the ground. The creature shook its head and roared again, its mane glowing orange. In the light Rajax could see scars across its side. Half of its tail was missing. The Xenon dodged its attack and stabbed it again, this time sliding its elbow down the Na-roin's spine.

The Na-roin collapsed onto the ground with a thud and the Xenon released its grip. It picked up the rod and its companion. The Xenon walked back into the jungle. Rajax waited until he was sure the Xenon was gone before creeping out of the cave. The Na-roin growled as he approached. The light from its mane began to dull as Rajax sat down next to it. Its breath was jagged and weak as Rajax stroked its mane. Whitney came and stood next to him, staring at the creature. It growled at Whitney and she took a step back. Rajax took Whitney's hand and helped her down, placing it in front of the Na-roin's nose. It sniffed her hand and licked with its large pink tongue. Whitney smiled and brushed its mane as it began to purr, orange vibrating from its mane. Its breathing staggered, the large black eyes beginning to glaze. Rajax hugged its large head, tears streaming down his cheeks.

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The Na-roin looked at him and breathed out its last breath. Rajax buried his face into its mane. He sat still until the sun began to shine through the leaves. Rajax rubbed his eyes and sat up taking one last look at the creature. He could see how skinny it was. Ribs jutted through its chest. Its grey skin was cracked and dry. Whitney sat beside him sadness in her eyes. Austin and Matthew helped Rajax as he dug a large hole and place the Na-roin inside. After it was buried, they continued in silence. The sky clouded and rain drenched the team. The caked paint and mud washed away as they continued through the dense jungle.

By midday they came across a large ravine with no way across but through. Rajax climbed into the gully first testing the ground. He grabbed a thick vine and attached it to a tree on the other side. Slowly, the others followed him into the ravine. The trek across the mud slowed them down as they tried to climb up the other side. Evans made it up first and turned to help the others. Whitney was the last one into the ravine. As she reached the other side Whitney stopped. Rajax watched as she pointed down the muddy bed to a wall of water flowing towards them. They tried to climb but the mud gave way. Rajax grabbed Whitney as the water washed over them. He tried to stay above the flood and grab for a support. Whitney tug away from him as she grabbed onto a tree root. He pulled closer and gripped the root as the flood pushed on them.

After a time, the water died down. As it slowed to a trickle, Rajax let go of the root dropping to the ground. He looked up at Whitney clutching the root. She was shaking from the shock, unable to move. He climbed back up to her and pulled her hands away. Whitney opened her eyes looking at him. Rajax smiled at her and helped her onto his back. He climbed down the root and helped her onto the soft ground. Whitney sat stunned catching her breath as the rest of the team caught up with them. She was still shaking but insisted they keep going. The rain eased as night fell. They were able to find a small canopy of overhanging trees to take shelter as food was passed around.

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Whitney was shaking long after the night had taken hold. Rajax wrapped her in an emergency blanket to keep her from catching hypothermia. He held her tight as the night dragged on. There was no sign of any Xeno's in the area, but the dead silence of the jungle kept everyone on edge. Rajax fell asleep right before dawn appeared in the sky. Whitney stopped shivering but her body was warm and clammy. The doctors looked her over and gave her something to help with the fever and suggested they take it easier today. The downpour slowed everyone down.

They continued later in the day going at a slower pace. Rajax took up the rear as Evans took the lead. Whitney insisted she was fine but after a few hours Rajax had to carry her on his back. Matthew and Austin took their bags and dragged them along. As night signaled the end of the third day, Rajax let Whitney down. She looked better. Their team took a beating and their recon was coming up short. Rajax thought they would never find anything until Evans woke him in the middle of the night.

Evans led him from the bushes where they camped and towards a green light in the distance. They approached a line of trees and stopped looking across a barren section of the jungle. A dome glowed in the distance. Rajax watched as the edge opened and shut as drone ships zoomed in and out. Xenos skirted around the outside of the base like ants. Evans cocked his head and they retreated to camp. They hunkered down until the sun began to shine. Rajax barely slept.

The doctors looked over those feeling under the weather and gave the okay for them to travel. They ventured out and sat around the tree line watching the hive. Whitney handed Rajax a pair of binoculars to get a closer look. With the coming light activity did not stop. Drones hurried in and out with guards tracing the perimeter. A small dome lay beyond the hive. Their group eased back into the safety of the jungle.

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“Can we get inside?” Evans asked quietly.

“With all the traffic around the hive not likely,” Whitney whispered.

Rajax watched their group. Many tried to hide their fear.

“What about the small dome?” Austin asked.

“It’s not guarded very well; do you think it’ll have anything?” a doctor asked.

“It is where the power comes in,” Rajax explained. “It is from the main hive and has to be regulated daily.”

“If I can get inside, I can look at their systems to perfect the virus,” Matthew said.

“We should report back before we do anything else,” a soldier suggested.

“I need to look at the system,” Matthew defended.

Evans pulled Whitney and Rajax aside from the group, “What do you think?”

Whitney thought for a moment, “We cannot miss this opportunity. If we split up half can head to the small dome and the rest can take pictures and schematics.”

“My team can do recon,” Evans volunteered.

Whitney nodded, “Rajax, Matthew, and I will go. Get as much information as you can and start heading back to shore. We will regroup at the ravine. If we don’t show up by tomorrow morning keep going.”

Evans began to protest, “Whitney I’m not—”

“—Daniel, you will go without us. Understand?”

Rajax watched Evans and Whitney. He hesitated then nodded in agreement. She waved Matthew over.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“Only my pad,” he answered, “it’ll keep our travels light.”

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Whitney took their packs and hid them under the brush. They left the group and skirted the edge of the clearing towards the dome. Rajax watched the Xeno activity as they inched their way around. They ducked deeper into the brush as they neared. The sun rose high into the sky as they stopped halfway. They took a few hours to rest waiting for night. As the late afternoon arrived, they crawled on. Scout ships flew above them as they inched closer. They slowed their pace to avoid detection. By nightfall they reached the edge closest to the small dome. Rajax counted five Xeno guards rotating the dome in a clockwise motion. They timed each rotation bracing themselves.

Rjax dashed out of the jungle and slid into the dome. He worked quickly to pry the door open before a Xeno guard turned the corner. Rajax slipped inside. The Xeno's footsteps faded and Rajax held the door slightly ajar. Matthew ran across the open space and tripped. He pulled Matthew inside and held his breath. After three rotations he cracked the door for Whitney. She sprinted towards them and ducked inside. Rajax shut the door behind her and breathed out an uneasy sigh of relief.

Matthew was hard at work next to a large screen copying the data. His fingers typed quickly, sweat running down his forehead. Rajax kept close to the door watching the room and outside. Whitney crawled over to the power cells to get a better look. The large tubes hummed harmonically lighting up in unison. The minutes ticking by seemed like hours as Matthew worked. Whitney leaned over him to check his progress. Matthew shoved her away as he continued to stare at the screens. Rajax pulled Whitney over and pointed at the guards. More were starting to rotate around the dome as the moons entered the sky.

Whitney pulled Matthew away and jerked him towards the door. Rajax insisted they leave together, the rotations short and erratic. They dashed out of the dome. Rajax shut the door behind them and sprinted towards the jungle. Whitney and Matthew motioned for him to get down. He sprawled out on the ground near the jungle as a Xeno turned the corner. Rajax's head pounded as he watched Whitney and Matthew, silently begging them to let him

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get up. He heard the Xeno stop and scan the jungle. It took a few paces forward towards Rajax. His heart stopped as Whitney's face turned white. A call from another Xeno caught its attention. Whitney and Matthew grabbed Rajax and pulled him into the jungle before it turned back. The Xeno took one last look at the jungle line and continued its patrol.

Matthew, Whitney, and Rajax crept their way through the jungle under the moonlight. They made it back to their supplies as the moons rose higher in the sky. Matthew tucked the pad in his jumpsuit after sealing it tightly in a waterproof bag. He managed to get enough data to test the virus. From what he saw the Xeno systems were far more advanced than they realized. Matthew did not let it worry him as they crept through the darkness. He tripped over stumps and roots trying to keep up with Whitney and Rajax. Whitney tried to get Rajax to slow down but the encounter with the Xeno spooked him. She stopped to catch her breath as Rajax ran on ahead. Matthew caught up with her as Rajax left his sight.

"How are we going to catch up?" Matthew asked in a hushed whisper.

"I can't keep up with him," Whitney gasped keeping her voice down. "He's too fast."

Behind them a twig snapped. A green glow lit up the night and they ducked for cover. Matthew and Whitney pushed themselves deeper into the earth as footsteps came closer. He held his breath as a Xeno stopped in front of them. Whitney buried her face in her arm to control her gasping. Clicking noises echoed through the night. Matthew watched as the Xeno hit the rod on the ground, pinging reverberating through the trees. Another Xeno came and stood next to it as they moved the rod in the air. Matthew and Whitney pushed themselves deeper into the foliage as it turned towards them.

The roar of a Na-roin rang through the night and the Xeno's stopped. They began clicking frantically as it sounded closer. They took off towards the dome as the roars sounded against the trees. Matthew and Whitney stayed still as the footsteps died away. They

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stayed down as more footsteps approached. Whitney muffled a scream as something grabbed her leg. Matthew aimed his gun at their attacker. He dropped it as he saw Rajax drenched in mud helping Whitney up. Matthew swore he saw a Na-roin's mane morphing into Rajax's neck.

"Come on," Rajax whispered.

Matthew grabbed his gun and followed as they ran through the growth. Whitney stopped and gasped again starting to sway. Rajax picked her up and urged Matthew on. They ran through the growth till they came across a mud wallow. Rajax put Whitney down and started caking her in mud.

"This will help," he said as he smeared mud on her jumpsuit.

Whitney grabbed his arms and steadied him, "Rajax calm down."

"We were almost caught several times; I cannot jeopardize my people. I cannot let you get captured. We need to stay safe; we need to stay hidden—"

"—Rajax," Whitney said firmly, "we are okay. We got away; they are not coming back. We are far enough away that we can stop and rest. If we run it'll cause a bigger stir and give away our position."

Matthew watched as Rajax looked at him and back to Whitney. He slowly nodded and Whitney let go. She wiped the mud from her clothes and smeared it on her face.

"We can travel for another hour but then we need to rest until morning."

Matthew smeared the mud on him as Rajax sat in silence. Whitney caught her breath and led the way back. Matthew walked in the middle as they trekked on. After an hour they found shelter under thick bushes and Whitney passed out. Matthew leaned up against his pack and as Rajax took watch. He was still shaking from the encounter and kept darting his eyes back and forth. Matthew dozed a few hours before switching shifts with Rajax. He curled himself up against Whitney and closed his eyes. The jungle around them began to lighten as the new day sprung forth.

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Matthew let Whitney and Rajax sleep for a few hours after sunrise before continuing. Whitney looked better and kept up as they trekked on. Rajax apologized for his actions the night before. Being so close to the Xeno brought up awful memories and he was afraid of being captured again. When Rajax saw the Xeno patrols approaching, he covered himself in mud and mimicked the sounds of the Na-roin in order to keep the Xeno's at bay. Matthew asked about the mane but Rajax avoided the question. Whitney stayed quiet as she pulled ahead. Rajax asked Matthew not to discuss it further with anyone. Matthew knew what he saw. He proposed Rajax's new ability surfaced from the high stress. The ability could benefit them in many ways. Hundreds of questions flooded his mind, but Matthew kept quiet. He assumed Rajax was not prepared to admit his unique abilities the Xenos forced on him saved their lives.

Night darkened the sky as they reached the ravine. Their group was nowhere to be seen. They braced the mud reaching the other side and continued through the night. Rajax slowed to Matthew's pace, the lack of sleep beginning to catch up with him. Whitney pressed on. The night sky opened to more rain and they stopped to take shelter under a small canopy of leaves. They pressed against each other to keep warm as they slept, too tired to keep watch.

The sun rose on the fifth day as they opened their eyes. Rajax climbed a slippery tree to grab brown pods to eat. They kept up a fast pace and by the afternoon they rejoined Evans. He admitted they waited till the afternoon to continue. Evans talked quietly with Whitney as they walked. The scientists were eager to go over the data Matthew acquired. They whispered quietly asking him questions. He gave short answers and promised to discuss it later. Matthew rested against his pack as they reached the cave from the first night. His mind raced, hoping their near miss was worth it.

The next morning the sky clouded as they trekked the last stretch. There was apprehension in the air of meeting with their teammates. Matthew was at ease being far away from the Xeno. Rajax still looked uneasy from the encounter. He kept close to

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Whitney as they walked. The sky continued in gray as the early afternoon came. Hushed whispers sounded as they approached camp. Whitney went further on ahead with Rajax at her heels. She waved a greeting to Kaiser as a bomb fell from the sky.

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Whitney's breath left her body as she slammed against a tree. Her ears were ringing as she tried to stand. The ground was covered in smoke and dirt. She heard muffled yelling as she regained her balance and ran towards the shuttles. Rajax followed behind her, a deep gash in his shoulder. The rest of her team reached the safety of the shuttles. Her ears began to clear as she looked around.

"What's going on," she yelled as another bomb dropped in the jungle.

"They came out of nowhere," one of the German commanders yelled. "One minute the sky was clear; the next radar went crazy."

Another bomb exploded outside rocking the shuttles.

"How long can we stay here?" Whitney asked over the noise.

"Not long," the commander replied, "we need to get airborne and out of here."

"Our only option is the deserted areas of the planet," Rajax yelled as the shuttle shook again. "But that would mean having to outrun the Xenos fast enough that they would give up the chase."

"How likely is that scenario?" Evans asked as he waved more soldiers inside.

"Unlikely."

Rjax's reply was drowned in the sound of another bomb dropping in front of the shuttle. It slid backwards as everyone fell to the ground. Whitney stumbled up and looked out the windshield. High above needle shaped ships formed a circle, slowly flying towards each other as they dropped their payload. Whitney looked outside as the remaining soldiers dived for cover. Kaiser lay where the first bomb landed, his eyes glazed over. His team lay around him unmoving. Whitney pushed away her sorrow to focus on the remaining troops. Soldiers were spilling through the trees. They helped others along as bombs dropped. Evans called out Orion

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Squad to help. Whitney watched as Austin followed, terror in his eyes.

Whitney fell outside into the chaos as a bomb dropped next to the shuttle. Rajax jumped on top of her as another dropped close to Kaiser's team. She spit out the dust and dirt as Rajax helped her stand. Slipping into the shuttle next to them, Whitney grabbed the nearest commander.

"Can you fly this thing?" Whitney asked her.

The commander was shaking at the carnage around them, "Yes ma'am."

Whitney pointed outside, "Get as many people as you can and take off. Get back into orbit and get back to NOVA. We will try to give you a head start. Wait for my signal."

The commander nodded and started up the shuttle. Rajax helped Whitney out as she urged soldiers inside. They ran through the smoke to the shuttles holding the injured. Half the doctors were patching up burns while the others were trying to calm patients with missing limbs. Whitney held her breath as she pushed past her horror and grabbed the nearest doctor.

"We need to get the wounded out of here and onto the other shuttles. I need this one and the next for a distraction."

"Some can't be moved," he explained. "What about the dead?"

The doctor gestured over to bodies covered with tarps.

"They stay here."

"We cannot abandon them," the doctor gasped.

"There isn't enough room and it'll make the Xeno think we have people on board."

Whitney's stomach churned at her words. The doctor looked at her shocked and hesitantly agreed. Whitney instructed Rajax to help move the injured as she gave the news to the next shuttle. They worked silently as she started the autopilot. When the shuttle was emptied, Whitney helped carry half of the dead inside. Her heart sank as they laid the bodies on the floor. Shutting the door behind her, she headed back to the first shuttle. The last of the

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wounded were being moved. She slammed her hands down on the controls as they flickered.

“Dammit!”

“What is wrong?” Rajax asked running up to her.

“The flight plan is too badly damaged,” she explained, “the autopilot is offline. We’ll have to use one shuttle.”

“I’ll fly it,” a voice from behind said.

They turned around to see a Russian soldier propping himself up on a stretcher. His foot was missing and the bandage on his chest was red with blood.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Whitney protested.

“I was not asking,” he told her, “I was volunteering.”

“Out of the question. I will not let you stay here.”

“You cannot stop me.”

He pulled himself out of the stretcher and fell into the pilot chair.

“I can fly this. Let me help.”

Whitney stared at him, tears beginning to form. The shuttle shook as the bombs dropped faster. He looked at her determination in his stare.

“If I do not make this sacrifice, we will all die.”

He took off his dog tags and placed them in her hand.

Whitney’s heart broke as Rajax pulled her out of the shuttle. It rose shakily in the air. They fell to the ground and Whitney watched as the two shuttles lifted out of the jungle. Rajax pushed her into the closest shuttle as the bombs stopped. The Xeno’s focus turned to the distraction. Their shuttle flew out of the jungle away from the attack. Whitney gripped the chain to the dog tags so tight her knuckles turned white. Explosions sounded in the distance. Her body went numb as they flew, her adrenaline fading into shock.

Rjax sat down in the pilot seat next to Evans as they attempted to reach the clouds for coverage. He looked back at Whitney, who sat with her knees to her chest. The shuttle shook violently as they continued up. Alarms started to blare, and Evans shouted out commands to Rajax as they coasted above the clouds.

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The remaining shuttles trudged on behind them, unable to make the climb. The shuttle with the wounded faded into the sky as it escaped back to NOVA. They headed across the ocean to the desert part of Trem-NA. Everyone sat in silence patching their injuries. Rajax checked his arm, the pain beginning to show. He ripped off his sleeve and Evans checked his wound.

“It looks deep,” Evans was saying as he wrapped a bandage around it. “But whatever caused the wound isn’t inside your skin. Once we land the doctors can do a better job.”

Rjax looked around at their battered teammates. His heart skipped a beat.

“Where is Matthew?” he asked.

Austin’s eyes widened. Whitney looked up from her despair.

“I don’t know,” Evans said quietly.

Rjax watched Whitney as Austin tried to comfort her. She did not respond to him. Whitney stared blankly ahead. Austin tried to hold back tears. Their pain radiated throughout the shuttle.

“Will she be alright?” Rjax asked Evans.

Evans looked over at Whitney. Concern filled his gaze.

“We’ve been in rough spots before,” he said quietly, “but nothing like this. I have fought in combat enough times to know that look. She’ll recover soon enough, but what she’s feeling right now will never go away.”

Rjax’s memory flashed of his days in combat. Naanans fell around him through the smoke and bombs. He roared at the Xeno, their figures haunting. His memory faded back to the present.

Rjax looked at Evans as his concern grew to pain.

“You care about her.”

Evans smiled slightly. Austin walked up to them his hands shaking. He was trying to control his emotions.

“I can’t get Whitney to say anything. She won’t let go of the tags.”

Rjax stood, “Let me try.”

He scooted past the others and crouched down in front of Whitney. She did not look at him as he put his hands on hers. Guilt washed over Rjax in waves. Despair followed close behind fear

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and shock. The scenes of the assault blurred in her mind. Rajax steadied himself as the liquid in his hands moved like mud up his arms. He gently pulled Whitney's fingers one by one till he got hold of the tags. Whitney grabbed them back unwilling to let go. Rajax slid them out of her grip and tucked them in her front pocket. He looked at her hands, chain imprints bruised the palms.

"I am here with you," Rajax whispered. "It is going to be alright. I need to know if you are hurt."

Whitney stared at him her breath tight. She shook her head slightly. Rajax squeezed her hands in acknowledgement. He sat down next to her and pulled her close. She stayed rigid as the shuttle flew farther across the sea. The air thinned as they went. The damage the shuttle received knocked out many key systems. Rajax was lightheaded as they flew on, knowing they would need to reach the continent soon. Evans called him up to the front and he left Whitney, who fell into a forced sleep.

"How much further till we reach the desert?" he asked as Rajax approached.

Rajax looked out at the clouds below them, "We would need to fly lower in order to see."

"The shuttle isn't going to like that," Evans said gesturing to the console, "but we're going to lose power soon if we don't do something."

Rajax took his seat as he and Evans steered the shuttle down, signaling the others to do the same. The clouds beating against the window broke into a vast blue sea below.

"I don't see land anywhere," Evans muttered.

"Are we going the right way?"

Evans smacked the navigation, "We better be. If we hit the water the shuttles will collapse."

Rajax and Evans turned as an explosion sounded behind them. The radar began screeching as twenty dots lit up the screen. Rajax looked out the windshield to see Xeno ships approaching. Evans swerved the shuttle as a torpedo shot past their hull. Everyone jolted awake and held on as they weaved in and out, dodging the endless assault.

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“Do we have any weapons?” Austin asked as the shuttle hull began to bend.

“Only the one in your hand,” Evans yelled as they dodged another torpedo.

Whitney crawled to the front and gripped onto Evans seat, “Can we submerge the shuttle to make it a difficult target?”

“This thing is falling apart we’ll drown,” Evans grunted as they swerved again.

A gust of air shot through the shuttle door. Evans and Rajax tried to slow the shuttle as they descended to the water. The Xeno ships in front of them filled the sky with smoke. Rajax braced himself as a torpedo hit their engines. The controls blacked out as they fell towards the sea. The shuttle creaked and groaned. Pieces flew into the air. Evans yelled for everyone to grab parachutes as the back broke off. Several soldiers flew out before he could finish. Rajax held tightly to his seat as he handed Evans and Whitney their chutes. Austin and the others held on to the seat straps as tight as they could to avoid flying out. As everyone strapped on their chutes the shuttle began to creak again.

The glass shattered forcing Rajax and the others out the remains of the shuttle. Rajax’s body went limp as they fell towards the sea. He searched for Whitney through the wreckage next to him but there was no sign of her. Above him the Xeno ships continued their assault on the remaining shuttles. Rajax watched the water approach. He tried to grab his parachute string to slow his descent. Pulling fast, the chute opened knocking the wind out of him. He breathed heavy looking around for any signs of the others. In the distance he could see other parachutes as they landed in the water. To his horror, a Xeno ship skimmed the water shooting pulses in its wake. The wreckage below broke into bits. He heard screams as the teams tried to take cover. Through the noise he heard a familiar voice. Rajax looked over and saw Evans yelling at Whitney as she dangled from her parachute. Strings were knotted in pieces of debris making her speed towards the water. Rajax yelled to get her attention but with no avail. As she neared the water, a Xeno ship sent another pulse through the wreckage aiming higher. Whitney

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was caught in the blast and ripped from the parachute and into the chaos. Without thinking Rajax unhooked his chute and dived down into the dark water below.

CHAPTER 36

Rajax tried to keep his senses as he hit the water. Around him wreckage floated towards the depths. He swam farther down looking for Whitney. His lungs tightened as he pushed through debris. A plate above Rajax hit his back and he gasped. Expecting his lungs to fill with water, Rajax was surprised how easily he could breathe. His neck ridged up as gills formed. Strength returned and he shot through the water like a bullet. Pushing past a large fracture of a hull, Rajax spotted Whitney. She floated suspended as she sunk deeper. Rajax pushed off the hull for greater speed and grabbed Whitney before a shuttle fell on her.

Whitney's mouth opened slightly as Rajax pulled her towards air. They reached the surface hiding inside a charred piece of shuttle. He pushed on Whitney's stomach and she coughed up water. She went limp in his arms as Rajax pulled her closer. Her eyes would not open, and blood seeped out her ears. Rajax heard a Xenos ship heading towards them. He urged Whitney to hold her breath as he dived under. Rajax swam deeper before turning his gaze upward. Debris and bodies floated high above.

Whitney began to shake losing the air in her lungs. Rajax started for the surface when he noticed a small light far below. Risking Whitney's life, he swam towards the light as it grew brighter. It was shaded under several rocks by a canyon wall. Rajax gripped Whitney tighter as he swam through the passageway. Climbing over rocks, Rajax pushed through the tunnel. He could not explain it, but he knew the light meant hope.

The shimmer of a surface caught Rajax's eyes and he pushed Whitney up first before emerging. He coughed as he pulled Whitney onto the shore. Her body lay limp next to him as he pumped on her chest. Rajax begged her to breathe. Several minutes seemed like hours before Whitney coughed up more water. Rajax turned her onto her side as she gasped for air. He looked around

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the cavern. Jagged rocks smoothed into the ceiling dark and grey. Rajax caught movement out of the corner of his eyes and pulled Whitney into his arms. Tall figures slinked out of the shadows staying in the dark.

“Help,” Rajax rasped. “Please... the Xeno... please help.”

The figures stepped back and began to disappear. Rajax pulled himself up into a standing position.

“Help us,” he begged.

The figures stopped staring at him. One stepped forward slightly.

“Who are you?” the voice demanded.

“I am Rajax of Trem-NA.”

The voice stepped forward into the light. A tall blue figure stood before Rajax. Her long black silver hair flowed across her torso. The large eyes shone in the same color looking at him shocked. Her head was round with flat features. She wore a white jumpsuit with metallic scaled armor across her chest, arms, and feet. The middle of the chest armor bore a diamond symbol with three circles in the middle. It was the same symbol Rajax remembered from so long ago.

“I am Tressam of Trem-NA,” she spoke. “Welcome home.”

Austin opened his eyes surprised by the calming light above him. Whitney laid on a bed next to him. Their team lined the room. They looked beaten; covered in bandages and tattered remains of their NOVA jumpsuits. Austin looked around at the blue walls and orbs lighting the ceiling. The last thing Austin remembered was falling out of the shuttle to the sea below. His chute tangled in knots when he hit the water. As he struggled under the chute, the strings tightened around his arms and legs. He blacked out as water filled his lungs.

He heard movement next to him and looked to see Matthew. Austin breathed a sigh of relief as tears filled his eyes. He was shocked by the shape Matthew was in. His left eye was bandaged tightly, a blackened bruise forming. He was covered in scrapes and a deep cut sliding down his arm. Austin looked down at his own

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body. Bruises formed on his arms from the parachute rope. A hum sounded on the other side of the room and Rajax appeared from behind a door. Austin locked eyes with him and Rajax walked to his side.

“How are you?” Rajax asked.

Austin looked him up and down confused. His NOVA jumpsuit was gone and replaced with tattered leather shorts. Bright beaded necklaces hung from his neck woven tightly together. Painted on his chest was a diamond symbol with dots. Rajax’s wounds were healing quickly, the scars fading.

“What’s going on?” Austin asked. “Where are we?”

Rjax sat down in a chair next to him, “We are in a sunken Naanan city.”

“How did we get here?”

“My people can explain.”

Austin’s eyes widened, “Your people?”

Rjax smiled, “There are many of my people here. They helped save the survivors from the Xeno’s assault. While everyone has spent time recovering, I have been able to be with my people again.”

“Rjax,” Austin paused trying to process, “that’s—that’s great!”

Whitney stirred catching Rajax’s attention. He ran to her side as she opened her eyes. She looked around and jumped out of bed slipping. Rajax helped her into a sitting position.

“It is alright Whitney,” Rajax reassured her, “we are safe now.”

She looked around the room and back to him, “What happened? I remember falling... there was debris... I hit the water...”

“Debris was stuck in your chute,” Rajax explained. “You were hit with a Xeno disrupting pulse and fell into the water. I fished you out and found this place.”

“Those figures,” Whitney said slowly, “are they your people?”

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Rajax nodded, “They have many questions for you. I can take you to them when you are ready.”

Whitney slipped off the bed steadying herself, “I’m ready now.”

“Whitney you need to rest.”

“I have had enough rest,” Whitney protested. “I want to meet your people.”

Austin slipped out behind them, “I’m coming too.”

“No,” Rajax said firmly.

They looked at him stunned. Rajax picked Whitney up and placed her back in bed.

“You and your people have suffered many injuries and casualties. You need time to process and rest. Our medical staff will have you well enough to meet with our leaders in a few days.” Rajax looked at Whitney, “Please, rest.”

Austin watched Whitney as she hesitated. She looked around the room and quietly agreed. Rajax left them to recover. Austin was unable to get back to sleep. They laid in silence listening to the sounds of others turning in their beds. Matthew coughed grabbing their attention and Whitney crawled out of bed. She pulled herself over to Matthew as he opened his eye. He pulled back slightly as Whitney wrapped her arms around him and cried. Matthew looked at Austin surprised. He returned Whitney’s hug, relaxing into her grip. During the confusion on the beach, Matthew was pulled into a separate shuttle as they took off. Bykov was in the middle of teaching him the controls when they were shot down. His voice shook as he recounted the helm exploding in his face and getting caught in-between pieces of the hull. Matthew touched his eye gingerly. He clutched his chest tracing an outline.

Austin looked at his friends. Their mental wounds were exposed in ways he never thought possible.

Rajax returned several days later to take Whitney to meet the Naanan leaders. He led her out and into a glass hallway. Whitney looked around in awe as they walked, several hallways jutting beneath them. The sea laid beyond a thick shield with creatures

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swimming past. Rajax led her to a clear tube and it chimed as they stepped in. They descended into the heart of the city. Naanans were scattered through the large courtyard. Whitney moved closer to Rajax as curious eyes fell on her. He led her to a large door on the other side and it slid open as they approached.

Bykov sat with Evans at a large oval table. Several Naanans sat on the other side, dressed in long blue robes. Whitney sat next to Bykov as Rajax took a seat next to a Naanan woman dressed in armor. She noticed Bykov's arm was in a sling and Evans had a deep gash on his neck.

"Now that you are here," the Naanan in the center began, "I would like to extend a welcome to you all."

Whitney nodded in respect.

"The matter at hand," the Naanan woman next to Rajax growled, "is who are you and what are you doing here. What have you done to Rajax?"

"We didn't do anything," Whitney answered her. "That is how he recovered from the Xeno."

"Yes," the lead Naanan said, "Rajax has already explained his escape from the hive to find help. Tressam; you will remember that you are here as a guest."

Tressam huffed and stared at Whitney with distrust.

"Now," the lead Naanan continued, "why have you come to Trem-NA?"

Whitney sat forward and explained finding Rajax and the events that followed. She told how they helped Rajax through his recovery and the assessment of the Xeno as a threat. Bykov took over and told of Patient Zero and the knowledge that they were the next intended target. Whitney explained NOVA to them as the Naanans listened intently. She described the lengths they went through to deliver aide. When they finished the Naanans sat whispering quietly in their language. Whitney shifted in her chair looking at Bykov and Evans uneasy. The lead Naanan looked at them concerned.

"That is a lot of trouble to go through to aide a people you have never met before. Why?"

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“We were the next target,” Evans answered. “What else was there to do but stop the invasion.”

“There was also the opportunity to offer assistance to those in need,” Whitney put in. “Our people are interested in helping others and expanding our knowledge of other worlds.”

“But that is not all you are looking for is it,” the lead Naanan stated. “I feel you do not all share this insight.”

Bykov leaned forward, “We were promised if we could liberate your people, we could take pieces of Xeno technology.”

“Rajax has already informed us,” Tressam interrupted. “But what makes you think we will agree to that?”

Bykov looked at her, “I trust a man at his word.”

“It is a topic we will discuss later,” the lead Naanan said shooting Tressam a look. “For now, your injuries need time to finish healing. We are in the process of sorting out better accommodations. Your aid is appreciated, and we would be glad to discuss it when you are ready.”

The lead Naanan rose and Whitney stood along with the others to show respect. Tressam pulled Rajax’s arm. Her glare bore into them. He followed and Whitney clenched her teeth. Bykov slumped down in his seat and looked at Whitney.

“I have seen better introductions,” he stated.

“Look,” Whitney said crossing her arms, “we need to be respectful as to not get thrown out on our faces. Do you want to face the Xeno with nothing but the shirts on our backs?”

“They were all supposed to be hosts,” Bykov shot back. “We weren’t prepared to meet a group of refugees.”

“Is that a problem?” Whitney asked accusingly.

Bykov stood leaning over her, “I’m saying it’s easier when you have the upper hand. Now we have to deal with more politics.”

Evans moved between them, “Arguing with each other isn’t going to solve anything. We need to focus at the issues at hand. We need a headcount of who is left and assess our injuries.”

“Our focus should be those who are having a hard time adapting and healing,” Whitney agreed.

“That would include me,” Evans said pointing to his wound.

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“You’re better off than some of us,” Bykov snapped.

Whitney looked at him as he pulled his arm from the sling. His hand was gone.

“I was stuck in the middle of two pieces of shuttle,” Bykov said quietly placing his arm back. “My only option was to cut off my hand in order to get back to the surface.”

Whitney nodded her sympathy, “Matthew is missing an eye. He’s not handling it well.”

Bykov shrugged, “Casualties happen, it’s part of the job.”

Whitney clutched the dog tags in her pocket.

“Do you think they trust us?” Whitney asked changing the subject.

Evans shook his head, “I can’t tell. There is going to be a lot of uphill battles. They might think we’ll be more of a burden.”

“You could be right,” Whitney replied. “All I know is that we’re going into this mission with less than when we started.”

CHAPTER 37

Rajax took one last look at Whitney before the doors shut behind him. He pulled his arm out of Tressam's hold and stopped.

"I need to talk to them."

She scoffed, "Why? You are with your own kind now."

"Why do you not trust them?" he asked.

Tressam looked at him evenly, "They do not trust each other. Why should I trust a people who cannot get along?"

Rajax was about to protest but she held up her hand, "I understand our situation. The aid they are offering is generous, but I do not agree with their demands."

The lead Naanan stepped up, "Tressam, we do not always agree. Do you expect a people who have come so far and lost so much to agree on what is best for them?"

She huffed, "Chancellor they have nothing to offer but manpower. We have plenty of that."

The Chancellor shook his head, "I think they can offer more."

Tressam walked away muttering under her breath. The Chancellor turned his focus to Rajax.

"Forgive her," he said sadly, "I believe she is having trouble with your sudden appearance. You were numbered among the lost. Given your history I believe she is hurt by how different you are."

"I do not remember her though."

"But she remembers you. Do you see my point?"

Rajax nodded. Tressam and her soldiers began rescuing the NOVA crew as Rajax and Whitney were taken inside the city. He was separated from Whitney as doctors rushed her off to the hospital wing. After an intense interrogation, the Chancellor and his counselors agreed that he was in fact Rajax. With his memory gone, the Chancellor helped Rajax remember their last attempt at survival. The last remaining Naanans took to the seas hiding in boats. The Xenos put a swift stop to their attempts developing a

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disrupter pulse. Several soldiers worked in secret carving out the city in the underwater canyon as a refuge. As the Xeno consumed Trem-NA, several Naanans escaped to the city. Many leaders and soldiers helped the last few survivors before the Xeno captured everyone.

Rajax was part of the unit sent out to help others to the city. Tressam told him he was the commander of their team. They fought the Xeno off together to ensure Naanans got to safety. Rajax was overrun in the last battle. According to their records he was the last Naanan to be taken. Tressam and the other soldiers took time to recon the Xeno's actions for the first several years. She came into her own and was determined for Rajax to return to his warrior-like behavior.

“Chancellor,” Rajax began, “I know I do not have all my memories. I know I am different from the person I was then, but I am still me.”

The Chancellor smiled, “We know that. It is why these people trust you. You are true to your goal. Many of your companions share your desire but you must realize some are not pleased.”

“I am aware, but you must make sacrifices in order to meet the same goal.”

The Chancellor nodded thoughtfully, “Wise and interesting words. Where did you learn that?”

Rajax smiled, “I learned it from them.”

Over the next week the rest of the NOVA crew recovered. Naanan medical technology was advanced despite their lack of resources. Wounds were healing quickly, scars fading day by day. Whitney and the others were kept separate from the Naanans to help with the adjustment. Bykov grew restless as they showed little interest in hurrying along with the mission. Whitney tried to explain to him that they have been hiding for hundreds of years, a few days was nothing. She kept herself busy helping others recover. They sat and talked with her trying to understand what was going on. Many were upset their friends were gone and some found it difficult to function with the loss. Bykov worked with many to use their new handicap as an advantage. Whitney tried to

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offer comfort and encouragement, but her own memories of the ordeal floated in the back of her mind. She and Bykov held a ceremony for those who had fallen in the recent attack. They lost thirty-five members of their team including Kaiser and Ganim. Rajax watched from the back of the room as they lit candles and held vigil, each giving a testament of the dead's bravery. He watched as Whitney told of the Russian soldier's bravery to help them escape, her face smeared with tears.

Rajax spent all his time with the Naanans. Tressam gave him a tour of the city. She was proud of their accomplishment. The walls of the city were made with a strong clear shield offering a look at the sea before them. Several levels were laid out connected by tubes and hallways. Many of the main rooms such as living quarters and recreational areas were carved deep into the rock. The tunnel Rajax found was used for checking on the stability of the shielding from the outside. Rajax also learned the ocean's growth was caused by the city. With Tressam's early recon they learned the Xeno had little interest in the oceans. Scientists designed a device to enlarge the seas to give their planet a fighting chance. The Xeno believed it was a natural phenomenon.

He learned the Naanans monitored all activity on the surface. When their shuttles reached the atmosphere the Naanans worked day and night to determine who they were. As the Xeno began destroying the shuttles and the fighting led to above the city, they sent armed teams to the tunnels. Finding Rajax and Whitney was by mere chance, if the fight continued any longer the city would have shut down until the Xeno left. As Tressam boasted about their accomplishments, Rajax was unsure if his people would want to liberate their planet.

Rajax tried discussing his newfound adapting abilities with the other Naanans. Tressam grew angry, accusing NOVA of altering Rajax for their own gain. The Chancellor was concerned and sent the best Naanan doctors to work. Rajax learned his people were able to detect the emotions and strong thoughts of others. However, there was no manifestation on their arm like Rajax. His ability to shift parts of his body was absent among his people as

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well. Rajax's heart sank as the Naanan doctors explained the ability was left over from the Xenos. They proposed if the cocooning process had not been disrupted, Rajax would have reverted to his original Naanan state.

After being in the city for three weeks the NOVA teams were becoming restless. Bykov's request to use the gym was approved, allowing their team to regain their strength. Many Naanans came and watched curious of their new companions. Whitney and Austin formed a smaller group to help those who were still coping with their new disabilities, including Matthew. The damage to his eye was great, forcing the Naanans to remove it entirely. Matthew was one of the last to recover. He found his lack of perception difficult. The Naanans offered to replace his missing eye with a robotic one but he turned them down. Austin suggested a glass eye which Matthew scoffed at. He walked around with a large patch, the permanent scars jutting across his eyebrow and cheek.

Rajax was asked to help the Naanans familiarize themselves with their new neighbors. He helped answer questions and tried to encourage them to talk to Whitney's team personally. Many were skeptical. Tressam fed the flame of distrust. She made it clear at any chance she got that there was more to these 'friends' than met the eye. Rajax slowly became more and more frustrated with her. He looked to Whitney for guidance, watching how she handled the more aggressive Naanans that approached her. Many looked to her as the leader now, Bykov and Evans second-in-command. Bykov spent little time trying to understand the Naanans and more time training. Evans worked to bridge the gap. The few moments Rajax was able to get alone with Whitney were fleeting. Tressam made it clear Rajax did not have to have any contact with them. He was home now, with his own people.

Rajax and Tressam walked the courtyard as the light changed to midday. He was happy to see many of the NOVA crew out with his people. He hoped this was the new beginnings of friendship. The scientists sat with a few Naanan scholars, discussing theories and theology. Soldiers were showing others different fighting

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techniques. The Naanan children grouped together closely watching from a distance.

“They have made themselves at home,” Tressam stated annoyance curling her tongue.

Rajax let out a breath, “I do not see what you have against a people who have sacrificed much to help us.”

“Outsiders always want something more than they can bargain for,” she spat.

She stopped and looked at him, a tinge of sadness in her eyes.

“You used to think the same thing too,” she said quietly. “Our unit was our family, and those outside it could not be trusted.”

“I do not remember,” Rajax said. “I have grown, I have changed. Relying on others and requesting help for the opportunity of trade in return is not a bad thing.”

Tressam turned to the courtyard hiding her pain, “But what do they have to offer that we do not already have? The only trade I see is that we get our planet back while they get the technology that has destroyed it.”

“That is not the case,” Rajax explained. “They can have only what we decide.”

“But is that enough?” she asked. “Look around you Rajax. This is far more than anything they could dream of. Once you get a taste of...”

Rajax was not listening. He caught sight of Whitney across the courtyard walking with Matthew and Austin. They were looking over Matthew’s pad as he gestured with his hand. The group of Naanan children came running up to Whitney giggling and shouting. Austin and Matthew continued to walk as she bent down and smiled at them. The smallest child reached out and stroke her hair giggling. Whitney moved her hair so they could all take a turn. Rajax smiled as they jumped around her asking questions left and right. She tried to answer them as she smiled and laughed at their enthusiasm. One adult Naanan called to the group and they waved goodbye to Whitney. The smallest of the group tripped over the others and fell. Whitney helped her up and brushed her knees as she rubbed her eye. Rajax beamed inside as

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Whitney picked her up and bounced her back to her mother who smiled and thanked her.

“... And that is why we need to make sure we stay on the upper hand of this partnership,” Tressam finished.

Rajax looked back at her as she frowned.

“Are you listening to me?”

“I am sorry,” Rajax apologized, “I was not. Whatever your fears, I am sure if you took the time to look past the agenda you will find they can be trusted.”

Tressam looked at him crossly and then over to Whitney. Her annoyance came in waves as she turned her gaze back to him.

“You should know better than to get attached,” she growled. “She will leave once their mission is over.”

“You do not know that for certain,” Rajax defended.

“Do I,” Tressam sneered. “Have you asked her? Or are you so blinded by her ‘good nature’ that you assumed it would be the same once we have our planet back?”

Rajax looked over at Whitney as she caught up to Austin and Matthew. They stopped to watch a large Na-hal swimming by.

“You would understand if you remembered,” Tressam whispered in his ear. “Perhaps you should recover your memories. I know our doctors have offered and you have declined. What are you so afraid of?”

Tressam walked away leaving Rajax with his thoughts. It was true; the Naanan doctors found they could recover his lost memory. But did he want it? The Naanan he was before was not the same as he was today. Tressam made it clear. His nature was different from before, not only his outward appearance. Rajax walked quickly towards the tubes before anyone could grab his attention. His mind raced as he ascended. Would he understand Tressam’s position if he recovered his memories? He lived without them for so long, were they necessary? Rajax walked quickly deep in thought. He looked up finding himself standing in front of the medical bay. Rajax’s limbs shook as he walked in. A Naanan doctor turned to him surprised.

“I want to regain my memories.”

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That evening a meeting was called. Matthew followed Austin and Whitney into the amphitheater. He looked around at the sloping seats as they reached the ground where the Naanan leadership sat. Whitney motioned towards the front and he followed. He apologized as he bumped into a Naanan on his left. Austin sat down next to him looking out at the sea in front. Matthew was amazed that the Naanans survived this long underwater and that the creatures in the oceans paid them no mind. He looked behind him to see the Naanans and NOVA crew sitting amongst each other. Some formed tight groups to sit with their own. The Chancellor stood and everyone went silent.

“We are here to discuss our common enemy. For hundreds of years the Xeno have ravaged our planet and people. Long have we waited in hiding for a chance to take back what is ours. Our friends from their distant planet and galaxy have come to give the aid we so desperately require. It is time to take back what is ours and free our brethren. The floor is now open for discussion.”

One Naanan stood in the back of the hall.

“Why can we not stay here where it is safe,” his question echoed the room. “We have been able to sustain the oceans creating more and more water. We will be able to live here without their knowing for years to come.”

“How long before your device gives out?” Dr. Borag asked. “Our scans of the planet have confirmed the disappearance of islands and parts of the mainland. Would you be able to shut it down? What if your entire planet floods?”

“Our device will sustain us,” the Naanan answered, “even if it breaks beyond repair. The safety it has given us will hide us from the Xeno for generations to come.”

“And when your planet is picked dry, how do you expect to recover from that?” Bykov asked standing. “Your resources are limited. Leaving the enemy above you ensures your demise.”

“We have lived free of the Xeno’s grasp till you showed up,” Tressam shot at him.

Matthew looked at Whitney as she stood.

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“Whether our arrival alerted the Xeno of your existence or not,” she said evenly, “the fact remains that without the mainland your people will have a difficult time recovering.”

“They are the lost,” Tressam glared at her. “They do not come back the same.”

Rajax stood staring Tressam down, “Are you saying that those who are taken do not deserve to be saved?”

The hall erupted in low whispering. Tressam glared at him. Matthew noticed the anger behind Rajax’s stare. His demeanor was different, his body shaking slightly.

“What I am saying is that since your arrival, it is obvious you agree more with what they want than what your people need,” Tressam shot back.

Rajax looked at Tressam coldly, “I am different yes. But you must understand, the years I spent fighting the Xeno have changed me. They have changed you. I know what it is like to have no free will over my actions. I fought for years to obtain enough to search for help and it almost cost me my life. You did not watch as the Xeno Queen tortured our people for her own amusement. I could not cry out to our people to be strong. I lived with the fear I would be next. The Xeno Queen and her kind are the real enemy. The enemy you are trying to fight does not exist. These people have come to help, they have not come to fight you. Their fallen brethren laid among our own long before we arrived.”

Tressam was taken aback and looked at him surprised. The murmurs began to die around them. Matthew stood drawing attention.

“Instead of debating the ethics of who is right and what is fair,” he said trying to gain courage, “I would like to point out that we have a plan.”

The Chancellor and his advisors leaned forward in their seats.

“During Rajax’s time with us we were able to use our technology to get a better look at the Xeno on a molecular level. The dead tissue showed us its complexity but also its weakness. We can transmit a virus that detaches the Xeno from its host

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without the adverse effect it had on Rajax. It would require attacking a hive for it to succeed.”

The room silenced as they looked at him.

“This was the plan you devised before you came?” the Chancellor asked Whitney.

She nodded, “That is correct.”

“But how will we know if it will work?” A Naanan asked.

Matthew pulled out his pad, “During our recognizance on the mainland I was able to attain a look at the Xenos’ power and network. With help, I believe I can make the proper changes to my prototype for it to be a success.”

“Why are we hearing about this now and not earlier,” Tressam challenged him.

“Because I didn’t want to give false hope. This information cost the lives of several members of our team. I had to know it was worth it.”

The Chancellor and his advisors talked quietly together. The air grew hot as Matthew sat down. Austin gave him an encouraging nod. Tressam was staring at him sizing him up. Matthew ignored her disdain.

The Chancellor stood, “This plan requires sacrifices on both sides. Attacking one hive at a time will decrease our chances of success. Once we attack our secret is lost.”

“We would have to work quickly,” Matthew explained, “if we aren’t careful, they’ll adapt.”

The Chancellor looked around the room, “Are there any other plans to liberate our people?”

The room stayed silent.

“Very well,” he nodded. “As your Chancellor I feel it is beyond my duty in this matter to decide your fate. Yes, we have prospered here for years attempting to build a fighting force. But I miss the sun. I miss the moons as they floated in the sky. I miss our home. Are we willing to risk our lives one more time?”

The Naanans stood. They lifted their hands and beat the diamond symbol on their chests in unison.

“Then it is settled,” the Chancellor agreed.

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He waved Whitney forward and she joined him on the stage. The Chancellor held out his hands and she followed placing their heads together.

“Our people thank you for your help. We are happy to call on your aid.”

CHAPTER 38

Matthew breathed out a sigh as the room began to empty. He and Austin waited for Whitney as she talked with the Chancellor and advisors. Rajax joined her on the stage, beaming with pride. Matthew glanced a look at Tressam who was glaring at Whitney.

“She seems grateful,” Austin scoffed.

Matthew looked at him, “What do you expect? Tressam’s spent her whole life trying to protect her people and someone else swoops in to do it for her. I’d be annoyed too.”

Austin lowered his voice, “I just don’t think she likes Whitney.”

Matthew looked at Tressam to Whitney and back, “I agree.”

Whitney left the stage and rejoined them. Her eyes were beaming with hope.

“The Chancellor said he’d get the best scientists to work with you,” Whitney explained to Matthew as they walked up the stairs. “He’s impressed by our resilience. Tomorrow we will start working together to familiarize ourselves with each other’s technology. We’re going to try to contact NOVA and hopefully—”

She stopped as they reached the top. Tressam towered over them, annoyance in her blackened silver eyes. She looked straight at Whitney.

“I do not care who you are,” she threatened. “I do not trust you. If you step out of line, you can be sure I will be there.”

Whitney matched her glare. Matthew and Austin looked at each other unsure.

“I have fought bigger bullies than you,” Whitney warned, “I’m not afraid.”

Tressam grabbed Whitney’s shirt and yanked her off her feet. Whitney grabbed Tressam’s grip to steady herself but did not flinch. Matthew and Austin took a step back as a small crowd stopped to watch.

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“We shall see,” Tressam growled.

She dropped Whitney and stormed out of the room. Whitney regained her balance and smoothed out her shirt.

“She gets lovelier by the minute,” Austin said sarcastically.

Whitney pulled herself together and continued out. Matthew looked back at the stage, the Chancellor and his advisor’s eyes fixed on them. Rajax looked at him lost on what to do. One way or another, Tressam was going to be a problem.

Rjax entered the great hall as familiar music danced across the walls. He looked around and smiled at the scene. Naanans were dressed in bright fabric shorts and dresses. The beaded necklaces clacked together as they danced. Many of the NOVA crew joined in. He noticed some of the crew dressed in Naanan attire while others wore the necklaces the Naanans gave them. Rajax watched a group of children run past him wearing tattered uniform jackets and hats. The scene of two people he cared so much for coming together lightened his mood.

An old Naanan woman approached and handed him a flowered headband. Rajax thanked her feeling honored. Not many flowers grew in the city and those that did were held for special ceremonies. Rajax was comforted to know that despite their situation, the Naanans kept many of their traditions alive. He walked through the hall looking at the large tables of food. The farmers worked all day to pick the best fruit and vegetables to bring to the event. Piles of baked sea creatures lined the end of the table, filling the room with sweet aromas. Rajax watched the Chancellor and his advisors talking with Bykov. He looked at the stump where Bykov’s hand use to be. Rajax admired his bravery. Laughter across the hall caught his attention as the group of children squealed with excitement.

Whitney entered the hall dressed in a bright orange Naanan dress. Her hair was pulled back into a braid with shells woven in the locks. The Naanan children crowded around handing her necklaces and smiling. She thanked each of them as they beamed proudly. They ran past her and towards Austin and Matthew

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handing out more necklaces. They took them carefully as a child asked Matthew about his eye. Rajax watched Whitney as she smiled at the children then turned her gaze to the hall. His heart softened as she looked in awe of the culture his people preserved. She caught Rajax's gaze and smiled warmly. He moved through the crowd to her.

"You look beautiful," Rajax said softly.

Whitney blushed, "Your people are a vibrant race. They take great pride in their work."

"As should you. Look around: we would not be here if it were not for your determination."

Rjax and Whitney stood close together as the crowds thickened. He pulled her to the center of the hall closest to the dancing. Naanans urged them to join in. Rajax fumbled as he tried to remember the moves. Whitney laughed next to him as they stepped on each other's toes. His heart felt right as he danced beside her. The music died as the Chancellor stood on a small podium. Rajax and Whitney moved towards the edges of the crowd. He turned to her reaching for her hand as Tressam approached.

"Rjax," she said bluntly eyeing Whitney, "it is time."

Rjax looked back at Whitney as Tressam pushed him through the crowd. She smiled at him as she disappeared behind the Naanans. He let Tressam lead him towards the podium. Watching their confrontation earlier that day, Rajax was discouraged. He admired Tressam for her tenacity and outspokenness, but her distrust and paranoia troubled him. He wondered if he would have ended up the same if he was not taken by the Xeno. Pushing the cloud away Rajax stepped onto the podium.

"Tonight," the Chancellor's voice boomed across the room, "we gather in friendship and to honor one brave soldier." He motioned for Rajax to kneel. "Rjax of Trem-NA, tonight we honor your sacrifices in the war against the Xeno. We honor your bravery as you fought off the enemy to bring us to safety. We honor your courage as you fought past your aggressors to discover

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aid for your people. We honor the sacrifices that have been made in order to bring you home. Tonight, we honor you.”

The Chancellor lifted a small blue crystal necklace. The advisors took the beaded necklaces off Rajax’s neck as the Chancellor placed the crystals.

“We are honored to have you,” the Chancellor smiled.

The room echoed the Chancellor’s words and Rajax stood turning to the crowd. The Naanans beat their chests while the NOVA crew clapped and cheered. Rajax was overwhelmed by the wave of emotions pulsing off the crowds. The liquid in his hand danced up his arm in delight. Emotions of pride and appreciation washed over him. The Chancellor patted Rajax’s shoulder as the music began again. He saw Whitney at the back of the crowd smiling ear to ear. He smiled back grateful for her encouragement.

As the evening played on Rajax searched for a moment to be with Whitney alone. After the ceremony, Tressam introduced him to soldiers and civilians he saved. Rajax did not recognize most of them but they were happy to see him all the same. Many asked him questions as they ate. What was earth like? How were the people? Anything he did not understand? He tried to answer all the questions as best he could, explaining he had little contact because their world was so different. Everyone asked the same question: did it feel strange looking different from his people. Rajax greeted the question with the same answer: he was happy to be alive.

Finding a moment out of the spotlight, Rajax stood at the edge of the crowd watching the dancing. He looked around for Whitney spotting her by the end of the room. She was looking out at the sea. The corner was hidden from prying eyes with only the sea creatures for company. Rajax moved through the crowd quickly and walked up next to her slowly. She was watching a Na-hal swim by, its trills echoing across the shield.

“Your world is beautiful,” she said quietly turning to him. “I’m glad I have the chance to see it.”

Rajax smiled, “Once we rebuild on the surface, the world will be alive again with wonder.”

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He looked at Whitney, her eyes glittering by the light of the sea. Rajax's hands shook.

"Whitney," he said turning to the Na-hal, "may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

Rajax steadied his breathing, "If I asked... would you stay here with me?"

He looked into the warmth of her blue eyes.

"Are you asking me?"

She moved closer to him.

"If I was?"

Rajax held her hands. Whitney smiled softly.

"I will stay with you."

Rajax's heart skipped a beat. He lifted the flowers off his head and placed them gently on her hair.

"Whitney Blake of Earth," he whispered, "I am honored to have you."

He cupped her face in his hands, leaning down. She placed her hands on his chest as they touched foreheads. He closed his eyes.

"I love you."

"I love you," her voice warm with affection.

Rajax pulled her closer and pressed his lips against hers. The music from the room muffled as they held each other in that moment. He wrapped his arms around her waist pulling her tight. Whitney slid her hands onto the back of his neck. Rajax kissed her softly soaking up the moment. They had waited so long to be away from the world; to be with each other. Rajax felt her love soak into his skin, finally free. As the party dragged on in the room next to them, they stayed wrapped in each other's arms. The days ahead were filled with uncertainty. They could not waste another moment.

CHAPTER 39

Austin flinched as the Naanan doctor scanned his arm. With the last night's ceremony leading to a new day everyone was on high alert. Commander Evans and Orion Squad took the opportunity to tech the Naanans their way of fighting. Tressam agreed to work with them showing no mercy. Many of their troops were visiting the medical bay by the hour with torn muscles or broken ribs. Evans butted heads with her complaining she was intentionally taking out her frustrations on his team. She argued back they were too slow and clumsy.

The Naanan doctor cleared Austin to return to his duties and he thanked him. He left the bay and looked down. The halls below him were teeming with activity. Austin straightened up and headed for the tubes. Being able to see everything going on below made him sick to his stomach. Austin made his way to the courtyard and found Matthew debating with the Naanan scientists. Whitney was talking with Bykov and Evans. They were waving their hands in frustration as she tried to calm them down. Austin guessed the union they shared with the Naanans yesterday was beginning to strain. Tressam's mistrust and hard headedness was spreading, making matters worse.

Austin watched as Rajax entered the courtyard and smiled at Whitney. She smiled warmly back to him before returning to Bykov's ranting. Rajax spotted Austin and walked towards him.

"How is training the Naanans going?" he asked.

"Most have caught on quickly," Austin explained, "others not so much. They insist we're slow and should be learning their way."

"They or she?"

"Tressam," Austin sighed. "The others who aren't sure take their time, but they'll get it eventually. She's the only one sending us to the medical bay."

Rjax rubbed his forehead, "I am trying to be patient."

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“So are we,” Austin said pointing to Evans and Bykov, “but our patience is running thin.”

Rajax looked up, frustration on his face.

“I believe it is time I have a talk with Tressam.”

Rajax entered the training room and looked around. Tressam was on the mat with a soldier. They circled each other, the soldier breathing heavy. A crowd formed around them watching. Rajax noticed many of the NOVA members were bruised or limping. He folded his arms and watched. Tressam let out a roar and charged the soldier. The soldier dodged Tressam’s blow and knocked her to the ground. She roared again and kicked the soldier in the stomach, the sound of ribs cracking in the air. He hit the mat hard in a daze. Tressam jumped up and lifted the staff over her head.

“ENOUGH,” Rajax’s voice boomed through the room.

Tressam stopped, her weapon inches away from the soldier’s head.

“Everyone out,” Rajax yelled. “Now!”

Tressam took a step back as the soldier staggered up. His teammates lifted him to his feet. Slowly the room emptied. Tressam stood on the mat glaring at him. Rajax grabbed a staff and joined her, his anger rising.

“We need to talk,” he said sternly.

Tressam shrugged and walked the mat, “What about?”

“About the way you have been treating the NOVA crew.”

She laughed, “It is not my fault they are slow and weak.”

Rajax let out a breath of frustration, “Your quarrel is not with them. It is with me.”

She stopped and looked up at Rajax, “How so?”

Rajax circled her gripping his staff tighter, “I underwent the procedure to have my memories returned to me.”

Tressam turned to him, “And did you find all you were hoping for?”

Rajax stopped and took a fighting stance. Tressam sneered and held up her weapon.

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“I found,” he said as they sparred, “that you know more about me than you led on.”

“How so?”

“I know,” Rajax grunted, “that our unit was a force to be reckoned with. We were violent, tearing into anyone we thought was an enemy. What you failed to mention to the Chancellor was the way we went about saving Naanans. We killed anyone infected or who slowed us down. We leveled entire towns to ensure the Xenos did not escape. There is much blood on our hands.”

Tressam grunted as Rajax jabbed her back. She knelt on the mat catching her breath.

“And do you remember,” she panted, “that those ideas were your own?”

“I remember.”

Tressam jumped up stabbing at Rajax violently as she pushed him up to the wall.

“The blood on your hands runs thicker than mine. You carried out those orders yourself. The Xenos feared us, they feared you. But look at you now: pathetic, weak, no warrior spirit inside.”

Rjax roared and pushed her back fighting her blows.

“I have enough spirit left. I decided to grow. You wanted me to remember my past and I have. I must live with the knowledge I slaughtered hundreds of my own people. I am no better than the Xenos.”

He pushed Tressam to the ground and held her down. Rajax leaned in close.

“But that is not what you wanted me to remember, is it?”

Tressam looked at him deeply, “Do you remember the time we spent together each night?”

“I do.”

“And does that change your feelings towards the Earthling?”

“It does not.”

Rjax watched the hurt in Tressam’s eyes turn to rage. She roared throwing him off. He grabbed for his staff as she lunged at him. Rajax dodged each blow, her anger taking over. He knocked her down swinging the staff against her neck. Tressam dropped to

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the ground dazed. She swung at him again. Rajax grabbed the staff out of her hand easily. He dodged again as she jumped attempting to hit his stomach. Rajax grabbed her torso and swung her across the mat. She slid and slammed her head against the wall. He tossed the weapons aside and towered over her.

“Well,” she challenged him, black blood seeping out of her mouth. “Get it over with.”

Rjax tightened his fists as he calmed his anger, “I am not that man anymore. You will have to come to terms with that on your own. If you cannot work with the NOVA crew, I will remove you from this mission.”

He left Tressam on the mat in her grief and anger. Rajax stopped and looked back, menace in his gaze.

“If you try to hurt Whitney, I will kill you.”

Matthew rubbed his eye and looked down at the circle screen. He worked for the past few days with the Naanan scientists perfecting the virus. Their systems helped speed the process along. The scientists left to join the other Naanans at dinner. He looked out at the halls below, scattered figures leading down to the bottom. The door sounded behind him and he turned with his good side to see Whitney walk in. She held two plates of food and smiled.

“I figured you could use some company,” she said setting a plate in front of him.

“Is it sour?” Matthew asked eyeing the fruit.

Whitney shook her head, “They cook the sourness out.”

They ate for a few moments in silence.

“How’s it coming along getting in contact with NOVA?” he asked.

Whitney swallowed her food, “We’re having trouble getting through the storm clouds which is expected. It’s hard to test when the Xenos are patrolling the area.”

“How’s Rajax?” Matthew asked watching Whitney turn red.

“He’s happy to be back with his people,” she said not meeting his eye. “He’s more at ease.”

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“I guess I should have asked how you two are doing,” Matthew pried.

She looked up at him, “That’s classified.”

“You could have fooled me,” Matthew smirked.

Whitney dug in her pocket and pulled out a box. She slid it over to Matthew.

“I have a gift for you,” she said changing the subject.

Matthew looked at the box and opened it. Inside laid a glass eye, the iris deep brown. He looked up at Whitney.

“I had the Naanans design it specifically for you,” she explained. “It won’t be the same, but it’ll give you your perception back.”

Matthew hesitated. Whitney leaned forward.

“I know this is hard for you,” she said gently. “I’m trying to make it right.”

Matthew carried the glass eye over to a blank screen. He slipped off his patch revealing a dark hole with deep cuts jutting from it. He carefully popped the eye in and looked at his reflection. The scars stood out against his new eye. Matthew turned his head to the left studying it closer. He looked at Whitney.

“Well?”

She smiled, “Good as new. Over the next few days, the eye will seep into your nerve senses and help gain some of your vision back. They added a few enhanced features: detecting life signs, energy spikes, structural integrity; stuff like that. I don’t know all the science behind it, but it’s better than your patch.”

Matthew looked back at his reflection smiling a bit. The view screen next to him buzzed, a muffled voice talking through the static. Whitney jumped up while Matthew tried to clear the signal.

“Hello,” she said looking through the static.

“Bla—ke—” the voice crackled.

Matthew adjusted the sensors and a distorted image of Captain Briers appeared.

“Briers?” Whitney asked surprised.

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“Director Blake,” his voice cracked in the image. “Is that you? We have been getting this signal from the planet. We weren’t sure who it was.”

“It’s us,” Whitney said relieved, “there’s a lot to tell you—”

“Better make it quick,” he interrupted, “we can’t hold this signal for long.”

“To summarize we’re completely out of supplies and the shuttles are destroyed. We found Naanan survivors living under the ocean. We are working with them now to complete the virus and continue the mission. Can you send us any supplies?”

Briers shook his head, “We’re still grounded. We received the shuttle of survivors from the beach assault. They told us what happened. You have caused quite a stir down there. The Xeno’s ships have been patrolling the solar system. Luckily Rajax was right, they cannot detect us. We cannot offer any support; you are on your own. We’ll try to send data we’ve collected from monitoring Trem-NA.”

Whitney nodded as the image fractured again. Matthew tried to compensate for the static as the screen blackened. Whitney sat down as Matthew fidgeted with the screen. A few Naanan scientists returned and helped Matthew as he explained the problem. After a few hours it was clear the signal was lost. A small data stream had accompanied the transmission. Matthew watched Whitney as she tapped her knuckle on her mouth in thought. She stayed in the lab looking out into the city below. He left her be as he worked to decode the data.

Rjax entered the lab after the Naanans left to sleep. Matthew motioned over to Whitney. He watched as Rajax put his arm softly around her. They spoke in hushed whispers as Matthew worked. He glanced at them from time to time, as they motioned with their hands to one another. After a while Whitney sat back and looked over at Matthew.

“I’m still here,” he said looking up from his screen.

“What do you think we should do?” she asked.

Matthew shrugged, “Briers didn’t say he couldn’t lend help, it was that he wouldn’t. With the Xeno running around out there they

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would not last long. The data he sent is helpful, but it is broken and fractured. It'll be hard to piece together.”

Whitney nodded her head sadly.

“Let us discuss it more tomorrow,” Rajax suggested, nudging them both to the door.

Matthew followed them down the hall and into the tube. They descended to the living quarters and Matthew waved goodbye as he entered his room. He opened the door and saw Austin snoring away along with two other soldiers. Matthew slumped down on his bed attempting to sleep. He touched his new eye surprised at how heavy it was. His mind raced going over the virus. It was almost complete. The only thing standing in their way was getting the Naanans to agree to the small manpower they had.

Whitney wrapped her towel around tightly as she stepped out of the shower. The cold sea water stopped spraying as she hit a button. She could hear Bykov and Evans on the other side of the door beginning to wake. She dressed quickly before they barged in, wishing she had different roommates. The door opened as she finished pulling her tank top on.

“Sorry,” Evans apologized covering his face, “you’re usually up and out by now.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she told him pushing past, “You and Bykov need to learn to knock.”

Bykov was sitting in his bed pulling on his boots with his hand.

“Maybe you should request other sleeping arrangements,” he said looking up at her. “I’m sure I can think of someone that wouldn’t mind.”

Whitney’s skin grew hot, “I mind my own business, you should too.”

“It’s obvious,” Evans yelled from the bathroom.

Whitney shrugged them off and headed out the door. She breathed a sigh of relief as she left their teasing behind. The hall around her was alive with activity. Soldiers were heading out to

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train. Their few scientists and doctors hurried off to the Naanan labs. Evans opened the door behind her and stepped out.

“You know I’d never say anything,” he assured her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she lied.

Evans grinned, “You may be able to hide it, but he can’t. I have known since the first time I met him. And I know you all too well.”

Whitney glanced at him, “There’s nothing to tell. You’ve been spending too much time with Bykov, he’s rubbing off on you.”

He shrugged, “Keep your secret if you’d like.”

Evans pushed her shoulder playfully and yelled to his men. Whitney watched him leave, her face hot. She caught sight of Rajax as she walked towards the tube. He smiled warmly down at her as they proceeded to the main courtyard. Rajax moved closer as more people pushed inside. She felt his fingers trace her hand. Her heart skipped a beat. Whitney looked up at him. Rajax seemed different, brighter since their time together alone. They exited the tube and Rajax led the way to the main court. The Chancellor and his advisors were deep in debate as they approached.

“Ah, there you are,” the Chancellor said cutting off the debate. “I trust we are making progress?”

Whitney shook her head, “I trust word has spread we made contact with our ship?”

He nodded, “Yes but the signal was lost after a few minutes. We have not been able to raise them since.”

“Captain Briers from NOVA was able to inform me that they cannot lend us aid,” Whitney told them. “The Xenos have been patrolling the solar system. They are stuck on a moon but haven’t been detected.”

One of the advisors looked concerned, “I hope they are faring alright.”

Whitney looked at her, “I understand the superstition surrounding your moons and we mean no disrespect by keeping NOVA grounded there. I know the captain will make sure no permanent damage is done. Matthew and the other scientists are

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clearing up the data stream he was able to send. It contains NOVA's scans of Trem-NA."

"If they cannot lend aid what can we do?"

"Do we still have our weapons?" Rajax asked.

Whitney and the others turned to him.

"Not very many," one advisor answered, "only what was brought before we closed the entrance."

"I came up with an idea last night," Rajax explained, "if we combine NOVA and Naanan technology it should give us enough power to strike."

"The issue we are facing," the Chancellor said looking at his advisors, "is we are not going to have enough of a force to take the mainland and save the city."

"We need people here to keep the city alive in case the plan does not work," the other advisor retorted.

"The obvious choice is to leave the women, children, and those unable to fight," Whitney said. "Then leave the minimum amount of manpower to keep the city going."

"But if you are captured by the Xeno," the advisor interjected, "they will know we are here."

The Chancellor shook his head, "You see our dilemma. Our fear of being discovered has plagued us so long we are finding it difficult to change. We have attempted before to reclaim our home, but we cannot get past the front gate."

Whitney nodded, "I recall everyone agreed to this plan. If they believe we can do it, it is our duty as leaders to trust. Sometimes... the people know what is best for their leaders before they realize it."

"Then it is agreed," the Chancellor decided. "We will continue to push past our doubt and put together the weapons as Rajax has perceived. We received word this morning that the virus is complete. It is time we showed the Xeno we are no longer afraid."

CHAPTER 40

Rajax stretched as the lights in his room faded on. The past few days blurred in his mind. Morphing the Naanan and NOVA weaponry together was easier than expected. The Naanan staffs were cut down to size and formatted with energy pulses Matthew and the NOVA scientists designed. Their army trained in unison filling the air with determination. Each soldier was fitted with a white jumpsuit and armor. The Naanan scientists worked hard to incorporate camouflage technology into the design that did not cause adverse effects.

Rajax dressed quickly patting the armor. The diamond symbol of his people shined in the light. Rajax looked in the mirror, confident at the face staring back. For so long he felt out of touch. Being back home, no matter how much of it was gone, felt right. Many Naanans joined him as they reached the dining hall. Rajax's heart softened at the sight. His people and those he came to call friends were finally one. He joined Whitney, Austin, and Matthew at a table. Rajax was pleased to see Matthew's glass eye was working well for him. The scarring around his eye was jarring but Matthew did not let the staring bother him. He looked at Austin stabbing at his food with his hands. He was grateful for the lively friendship he had given him. Watching Whitney smile with them made his heart begin to hurt.

"Thank you all," Rajax said out loud.

They turned to him.

"I am forever grateful for your friendships," he told them. "I wanted you to know."

"We're getting out of this alive Rajax," Matthew retorted, "don't make your farewell speech just yet."

Whitney squeezed his hand fondly. Rajax pulled Whitney into a hug and Austin jumped over the table. He wrapped his arms around them as Matthew joined in. They hugged each other tightly,

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their friendship stronger than ever. Tressam cleared her throat grabbing their attention.

“Are you ready?” she asked them.

They followed her towards the back of the city. The joyous conversations turned to silence. Tressam pushed a rock on a large wall and it slid open with a creak. Dust covered the floor as Tressam led them into an old cavern filled with small oval pods. The orbs of light slowly flickered on and buzzed as they shone. Tressam wiped off the closest pod and placed her hand on a small pad. A door in the back opened lighting the inside. She waved Rajax and Whitney in.

“These pods can hold four passengers. Each team is taking a Naanan to drive and a scientist to distribute the virus,” Tressam explained.

Rjax sat down in the pilot seat. He brushed the dust away looking at the console.

“Do you remember how to drive?” she asked him.

“I think so,” Rajax muttered.

He placed his hands on a small orb in the middle and the pod sputtered. He let go letting it drop to the floor. Tressam and Whitney gripped the sides of the pod.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Tressam said annoyed.

She climbed out as Austin and Matthew climbed in. The door slid shut and they sat down. Rajax watched as their army filed into the pods. Whitney placed a hand on his shoulder watching. Rajax could feel her fear and anxiety pushing through her composure. He squeezed her hand as the view screen lit up with the Chancellor.

“We wish you good luck.”

The doors to the bay closed in front of them as a large creak sounded behind. Rajax turned the pod shakily to face the noise. The large cavern opened as the sea rushed towards them. Rajax braced himself as the water pounded against the pod. It stayed steady against the waves. When they were completely submerged, Rajax placed his hands on the orb and pushed forward after the other pods. They broke through a cave in the canyon towards the

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surface. Sea creatures swam out of their way as they reached higher.

Rajax squinted his eyes as they broke through the surface. The sun was beating down on the sea, the sky bright before them. The pod hummed as camouflage covered the hull. Rajax watched the screen as more pods jumped out of the sea. They turned towards the shore and flew silently along. Several pods broke from formation heading to different sites on the mainland. Their secondary pod followed silently behind them. They flew several hours before reaching the shore. He slowed down, the pod behind following suit.

They landed softly on the beach beside the waves. Rajax drove the pod into the water crashing against rocks. A few pods flew overhead driving further inland. Rajax checked the radar again, looking for any Xeno ships. The skies were clear. It made him uneasy. They stayed in the pod till nightfall playing games to pass the time. Rajax did not understand Matthew and Austin's frustration as he won game after game. Whitney laughed as they argued. Together they watched the sunset.

When the stars entered the sky, they left the pod and headed inland. The lack of cover made Rajax nervous. Matthew used the data they received from NOVA to navigate to the nearest hive. They walked in single file, watching the land and sky. The team of Naanans in the secondary pod walked several paces behind them. The moons rose as they reached the hive. They laid down on the hillside watching.

"Where do we need to plant the virus?" Rajax asked quietly.

Matthew pointed to the small dome, "That's the best place."

"How will we know if it works?" Whitney asked.

"You'll know," Matthew said gravely.

"The second pod is standing by to offer aid," Rajax said pointing behind.

"Let's go," Austin urged them. "This sand is itchy."

Rajax scoped the landscape again and waved them forward. They slinked around the hive, careful not to draw attention. The sand muffled their footsteps as they neared. Rajax flattened on the

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ground as they reached the perimeter of the dome. Several Xeno guards marched around it. Rajax swallowed his fear as Whitney pressed closer to him. She aimed her weapon off in the distance. Her breath tightened as she pulled the trigger. The energy pulse sailed silently through the night until it reached the hill beside the hive. It erupted into fire drawing the attention of the Xenos. They ran towards it clicking frantically to each other. As they left, Rajax and Matthew bolted to the dome. They pried the door open and Matthew went to work. Rajax's heart raced as Matthew tapped his pad. The power cell hummed violently turning black. Rajax pulled Matthew out of the dome and ducked as it exploded. Explosions shot through the ground until they reached the hive. Rajax pulled Matthew to his feet and they ran, joining Whitney and Austin. The air erupted with shrill screaming. Rajax grabbed his head trying to block it out. Whitney grabbed his arms to pull him up, but he could not move.

The sound echoed in Rajax's memory of his escape. Hearing the noise again paralyzed him. Hands brushed his face. Whitney stared at him full of fear. She was yelling at him but Rajax could not hear her words. Rajax let go of his head and she grabbed his arm pulling him away from the smoke. They reached the hill where they first spotted the hive. Rajax turned to see the flames crackle against the frame of the dome. Matthew watched through his binoculars and pointed over at the edge of the hive. Several Xenos were running away from the fire. They grabbed at their heads. The bodies dropped. Green cocoons covered the ground. Rajax's heart stopped. They waited, the silence deafening. The cocoons glowed and cracked sending shards across the desert. One by one the Naanans stood looking at the destruction terrified.

"It works," Whitney breathed.

Rajax, Whitney, Austin, and Matthew worked to free hives as they moved inland. Their secondary pod cared for the Naanans who were freed, helping them recover enough to join the fighting. Naanans who needed extra care were taken back to the underwater city. Reports came in every night of more and more hives being

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liberated. The Xeno was quick to adapt. Each time Matthew keyed in the virus he made various alterations. The Xenos were also beginning to catch onto the attacks. They moved their power cells into the hive, making it difficult to infiltrate.

Each night they checked each other over for wounds. Whitney obtained a long scar across her back from a Xeno attempting to stab her with its elbow. Austin's shin was seared from a burn he sustained trying to run away from a hive as it exploded. Matthew's shoulder was punctured from being stabbed when he was caught uploading the virus. Rajax's chest and back were covered in scrapes and cuts from close hand-to-hand combat. Each time the Xeno grabbed him he feared it would be the last. Many hive liberations resulted in killing the Xeno and its host. Rajax suffered each night from flashbacks of his life before.

Other pods had similar troubles. Some were unable to move again because of their wounds. Every night Whitney listened as the radio cracked, checking for updates on her teams. The armor and jumpsuits were severely damaged, their stealth jeopardized. Each night they rubbed off mud and dirt. On the days it rained, they were able to take out two or more hives. Whitney would sit outside in the downpour feeling the drops slide down her skin. Rajax could tell the constant battles were taking a toll on his friends. Austin barely cracked a joke. Matthew snapped more and more. Whitney became distant. Rajax knew the fighting was dragging him down. He became careless, trying to keep as many Naanans alive as possible.

A ray of hope came as Evans called over the radio. The scientist in his group managed to alter the weaponry to stun the Xeno instead of killing it. Rajax and the others followed the instructions muffled over the radio. The next few hives were easier to take, giving them strength. Rajax only hoped they were closer to the end. Their hope faded as communications were cut.

After months of working inland they met up with Tressam and Bykov's pods. Their teams were worse for wear, but everyone was alive. All secondary pods were disbanded, leaving the Naanans to take shelter in the destroyed cities still standing. The

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last time Tressam heard from the underground city, they reported sending extra troops to protect Naanans sheltered on the surface. After much discussion they decided to travel together. The greater fighting force would give them an advantage. Whitney learned from Bykov that seven pods were unaccounted for, including Daniel Evans. Rajax sat with her as she listened, her dismay rising. He held her close that night as she sobbed in his chest. The loss was becoming too great for her to bear.

Three days passed before they stopped on the edge of a valley. They looked out to see several small hives forming into a large dome in the center. It was the Xeno Queen's hive. They watched the valley for days. All was quiet down below leaving the group more paranoid than relieved. Their best course of action was to reach the main hive and take it out once and for all. If they attacked the smaller ones as they went, they might never make it to the Queen. Tomorrow they would begin their final assault.

CHAPTER 41

Rajax watched as the sky above him turned to night from the door of the pod. The trees they sheltered under stirred in the wind. They hid in a small valley close to the main hive. Around him the group was restless, counting supplies and weaponry. Tressam was seeing to the last of the wounds making sure they were healing. She walked to him and began the scan.

“Everyone looks ready to go,” she said as she moved.

“That is good.”

“Has Matthew been able to pick up any activity?” Tressam asked.

Rajax shook his head. He looked up at Matthew sitting on the edge of the rise. Matthew gazed intently through the binoculars into the valley far below.

“The power output is the same,” Rajax explained as Tressam wiped medicine on his back. “There is still no activity outside. It is as if—”

“—They are expecting us,” Tressam finished.

Rajax nodded worried. He watched Whitney climb the rise. She sat down next to Matthew whispering. He shook his head as she talked. Rajax climbed the slope and joined them.

“Matthew you have to eat,” Whitney was whispering.

“I’m not hungry.”

“If you don’t eat, you’ll be useless to us,” Whitney insisted.

“Whitney is right,” Rajax interjected. “If you do not rest, you will not perform your task properly tomorrow.”

Matthew hesitated as Whitney slowly reached for the binoculars. He let her take them. His good eye gave away his fear.

“There’s something not right about this,” Matthew insisted.

“I know,” Whitney agreed. “But we can’t let that stop us now.”

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Rajax laid down next to Whitney as Matthew climbed down the slope. They watched the hives down below as the moons rose high above. Below the teams huddled together as the night air turned cold.

“Matthew is right,” Whitney said quietly turning to Rajax. “this feels too easy.”

Rajax nodded in agreement. He looked at their people below. Tressam watched them. She tried to hide the hurt in her eyes as she turned away.

“Whitney...”

“Yes?”

“...If you knew of my life before would that change anything?”

She looked at Rajax then to the valley below, “Why do you ask?”

“The person I was before was not someone I am proud of. I would not want you to think less of me.”

Whitney sighed heavily and watched Austin and Matthew below.

“As you know,” she began, “I abandoned my friends to get this job. I left my sick mother behind to pursue knowledge of the unknown. What did my actions give me in return? A toxic work environment with a man who would rather see me dead than succeed. A rocky relationship with Austin and Matthew who are brothers to me. My mother barely spoke to me when I visited her. She felt betrayed. I abandoned her in her time of need... just like my father. The last years of her life she spent in resentment towards me, no matter how much I tried to make it up to her.”

Whitney’s eyes clouded, “I have made grave mistakes which cost the lives of many. Whatever happened before you arrived on Earth does not define who you are.”

Rajax watched as if a weight lifted off Whitney’s shoulders. She looked at him carefully.

“We all have blood on our hands one way or another. How we decide to atone for it is what matters.”

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Rajax woke the next morning to dim light shining in the pod. Whitney stirred next to him as he slipped past her and outside. The camp was silent in the morning sun. He looked at their battered crew, sleep deprived and exhausted. Rajax hoped they would have the strength to get through today. He walked around the trees searching for food. They needed strength now more than ever. He found a small bush of string fruit hiding in the brush and picked it clean. Tearing the last of his uniform on his chest, he tied the bundle together and brought it back to camp.

Everyone was beginning to wake. Austin took a long swig of water while Matthew started filling the last of the supplies into packs. Tressam and Bykov were checking over the team again. Whitney pulled at her fingers anxiously as she watched the camp. Rajax handed out the fruit. They ate in silence as the sun continued to rise. Above them the sky buzzed. They ran into the pods and shut the doors. The woods crunched around them as familiar voices called. Rajax opened the door to see four teams walking towards them.

They welcomed the familiar faces surrounding them. Many of the pods grouped together as the hives upped their efforts to dispel the assaults. They found their way to the main hive watching and waiting. When they spotted Rajax's team they knew it was time. Several pods surrounded the valley waiting for orders. Whitney, Rajax, Tressam, and Bykov drew their infiltration plan in the dirt. While the pods around the valley caused a distraction, they would take their teams through the hives. Once they maneuvered the maze, they would infiltrate the main hive. There, they would separate into three teams searching for the main power source to transmit the virus or kill the Queen; whichever came first.

Quietly the team watched the hives from above. Rajax dug into the mud and painted a diamond with three dots on his chest. This was the moment he had been waiting for. Tension covered the air. Rajax crouched close to Whitney as she watched the valley below.

“It's too quiet,” she whispered.

Rajax nodded in agreement, “It is unnerving.”

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Tressam crouched down next to them, “Everyone is in position; we are waiting for the signal.”

Rajax breathed in and pointed his weapon. He shot off two rounds, the sky erupting in green smoke. Around them the pods opened fire drawing out the Xenos from below. Rajax and his team slid down the hill crouching behind rocks as they went. At the bottom of the valley Austin shot cover fire as they raced into the maze of domes. They waited for everyone to cross before continuing. They skirted the shadows as Xenos rushed around them. Keeping out of sight they pushed farther inside. Rajax’s heart raced as the domes towered over, losing his sense of direction. Whitney followed close behind him scratching an X at every turn marking a trail. They stopped on the edge of a dome as Xeno drones marched around the hives ahead.

“We must be getting closer to the Queen’s hive,” Tressam whispered. “There are more Xenos here.”

“How are we going to get past them?” Bykov asked.

Rajax watched the Xenos march oblivious to their presence. He searched for any break in their cycles but there were none.

“We are going to have to fight our way through,” Rajax said at last.

He looked behind them.

“If we spread out,” he instructed, “we can lure them through the other domes before returning here.”

Bykov waved his team back. Tressam moved her group farther down signaling to Rajax they were ready. He looked at Whitney. Sweat covered her forehead and she was breathing hard from the adrenaline.

“Are you ready?” he asked her quietly.

She nodded determined.

“Stay close,” he whispered.

Rajax aimed his weapon at the siding above the Xeno and shot. They turned their attention to the noise and came racing towards them. Rajax pushed them back as Bykov’s team drew the Xeno further down. As the Xeno passed, Matthew and Austin raced forward with Whitney and Rajax trailing behind. They

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swerved out of weapon fire as more Xenos came pouring out of the hive. Austin and Whitney fired while Rajax covered Matthew. He turned to head back but they were surrounded. Bykov and Tressam's shots echoed in the distance.

Rjax gripped his weapon and slammed the panels next to him. Whitney covered him as the Xenos surrounded them. He cracked a hole in the dome, motioning everyone inside. Austin and Matthew jumped through as Rajax pulled Whitney in. She pulled the pin on her grenade and they ran, the blast knocking them over. Rajax covered his head and looked around the dust. The hive was dark, the lights inside the walls burnt out. The halls were empty. He helped Austin up as Matthew staggered next to him. Whitney was bent over on her knees. Rajax ran to her.

"I'm sorry Rajax," Whitney panted. "I didn't see another way of getting out of there."

Rjax looked at the dust as it started to clear.

"You did what was best for everyone," Rajax assured her. "I would have done the same."

The dust settled around the Xeno bodies at the opening. Rajax tried not to think about the loss of Naanan life that laid before them. He could see the guilt on Whitney's face. Austin scanned the hallways and looked around puzzled.

"Something's not right," he said looking down at his pad.

"What do you mean?" Matthew asked.

"The only Naanan life signs that are showing up is Rajax and the other Naanans in the teams outside."

Matthew tapped the side of his head and looked around, "I'm picking that up too."

"What are you saying," Whitney urged him.

"These Xeno's don't have hosts."

Through the dust Rajax saw the green ooze covering the doorway.

"That is impossible," Rajax argued. "The only Xeno that does not require a host is the Queen."

Whitney looked behind her, "Can she form into several Xenos at once?"

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“No,” Rajax explained, “she is one being.”

Matthew was leaning down analyzing the substance with his eye. He jumped back as the ooze bubbled and seeped together.

“This strand is different,” Matthew said backing up. “They’re evolving.”

“Run,” Rajax yelled pushing them forward.

They raced down the dark hallways as the Xeno entities regained their shape and chased them. Rajax led them as they weaved back and forth through corridors of darkness. He searched the walls with his hand trying to find an opening. His grip gave way and he rushed everyone inside the small room. They pressed themselves against the wall as the Xenos ran past. Steadying his breathing Rajax looked at Matthew.

“What do you mean evolving?”

Matthew scooted forward and transferred his analysis onto his pad.

“The genetic code all the Xenos share has been altered. Key functions that would require a host are gone.”

“How is that possible?” Whitney asked.

“The Xeno Queen must be experimenting with DNA to make a more formidable force. Keeping empty shells close makes sense. They only know one order: protect the nest. Without having to rely on finding a host every time your guard is struck down; they simply rebuild themselves. You also won’t have the distraction of a host trying to break free.”

“But the Queen is only able to alter the Xeno enough to survive any environment as she does with the scouts and guards,” Rajax insisted. “It is a time consuming and difficult process.”

“This DNA strand is very complex; it is the only conclusion.”

“If Matthew’s right,” Austin said slowly, “what’s to stop her from making all the Xenos that way. She could level civilizations in a matter of hours.”

Rjax shook the thought away as footsteps closed on their position.

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“We need to move and find the main power or the Queen. That is all we can focus on right now. We can discuss possible atrocities later.”

Rajax inched down the hall while the others followed behind. Whitney brought up the rear behind Matthew as he tried to map the hive. Austin stayed close to Rajax marking each turn in case they needed to double back. The Xeno patrolled the dark hallways searching for them. With the power out, it was slow going for both groups. Rajax turned a corner and entered a large bay and stopped. His heart pounded loudly as his memories flashed. The last time he was in this room he was escaping the Xeno’s grasp. The bay was still. The floor echoed their steps as they inched in. Matthew waved everyone over. They huddled behind a large pod for shelter.

“I’ve got a map,” he barely whispered. “I’ve analyzed our movements coinciding with the Xeno’s. My eye is having trouble getting an accurate reading. There are strange energy fluctuations blocking the signal. I believe the power room is a few floors up. There’s a large cavern at the very top of the dome.”

“That is where the Queen will be hiding,” Rajax said coldly. “Should we split up?” Austin asked.

Before they could answer him, the room burst to life. Light flooded the room blinding them. The clicks and angry screeches of the Xeno assaulted their ears. Rajax shot blindly as he forced his eyes to adjust. The pod where they took shelter was pushed over, Xenos crawling around them. Whitney covered Matthew as he ran with Austin close behind. Rajax backed himself up against Whitney as they shot at the oncoming hoard. They were pushed deeper into the bay as the Xeno’s formed a green ocean of movement. Rajax shot faster as the wave approached. He looked back to see Matthew and Austin at the end with no way out. Whitney looked around them and jerked her head to a panel.

“I’m going to open the bay,” she yelled.

Rajax yelled at her as she sprinted across the floor. The Xeno formed a barrier between them as he tried to fight them off. Rajax darted his gaze from Whitney to Austin and Matthew. A rush of

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cool air pushed the hoard back as the bay door opened. Whitney took this chance to run back to Rajax. He reached out his hand as her fingers grazed his. She was lifted in a sea of Xenos holding tight to her arms and legs. Rajax shot at them as more came up behind. Whitney struggled attempting to pull herself free.

“Rajax,” she screamed as her head sank into the Xenos bodies.

He roared and ran at the sea. Firing his weapon Rajax began clearing a path inside to search for Whitney. The Xenos behind him cracked him on the head and he fell. Rajax’s head was swimming as the hoard dispersed. Austin and Matthew called his name, but he could not respond. Rajax laid on the floor heartbroken.

CHAPTER 42

Matthew watched as the Xenos ebbed out of the bay, Whitney lost in the collective. He stood numb as Austin raced towards Rajax and checked him over. His legs moved like jelly as he slid to the floor. Austin looked over at him.

“Don’t go loopy on me Matthew,” he shouted. “Get over here and help.”

Matthew pulled himself together and walked to Rajax’s side. He laid on the floor blood swelling on the back of his head. His eyes drifted in and out of reality as Austin patched him up.

“This should stop the bleeding,” Austin said as he pressed a compact on Rajax’s head, “the impact looks like it was meant to slow you down.”

“Whitney,” Rajax breathed, “we must save Whitney.”

“We will,” Matthew said attempting to find his strength, “once we get to the power room we can find out where she’s been taken.”

Rjax staggered up, Austin bending under the weight.

“I am going now.”

“You can’t,” Austin protested. “You need to rest before you go anywhere.”

Rjax turned to them menace in his eyes, “I am going to find Whitney. Then I am killing the Queen.”

A chill went down Matthew’s spine.

“Look,” he said slowly, “I know Whitney means a lot to you, she does to all of us. But this was a trap, do you want to play into it?”

Rjax glared at him, “I made a promise to Whitney that I would protect her, and I will do that at the risk of my own life.”

Matthew looked at Austin for support.

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Austin sighed, “If that’s what you want to do, we can’t stop you. But we need your help to the main power so we can transmit the virus.”

Matthew watched as Rajax steadied himself. He tried to breathe evenly as he led the way out of the hangar. Matthew followed Rajax down the hall as Austin brought up the rear. He slid his fingers across the wall trying to get his bearings. Rajax was moving fast in front of them, carelessly slipping in and out of rooms. He stopped at the edge of a hallway and waited for them. Matthew’s new eye began to twitch as he watched blips of lines begin to form. He grabbed Rajax’s arm to steady himself. Austin helped Rajax pull Matthew into a dark room as more Xenos passed.

“What’s wrong,” Austin whispered.

Matthew shook his head. His vision blurred into darkness. A high-pitched beeping filled his ears.

“My eye,” Matthew groaned as he held his head, “it hurts.”

Rajax looked around the room and started rummaging through drawers. Austin pulled Matthew farther away from the door as more Xenos passed. His head swam as he tried to adjust to losing his sense of sight again. Rajax found a rod and smacked it against his hand. It glowed green and he examined Matthew’s eye.

“What do you see?” Matthew asked the glow blinding him.

“The Xeno must be interfering with Naanan technology,” Rajax said moving the light up and down. “Your eye is shorting out.”

“Can you get it out before it does more damage?” Austin asked.

Rajax thought for a moment, “This is going to hurt.”

A surge of pain shot through his brain. He flinched violently.

“Do it.”

Austin helped Matthew pull the strap from his pack into his mouth and he bit down. Rajax carefully began to scoop the eye out of his head. Matthew muffled a scream. Austin held his legs down as he shook. Matthew felt the pain leave his body as Rajax stepped back. Matthew breathed a sigh of relief and slumped down to the

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floor. His heavy breathing filled the air as Austin looked over his face. Rajax wrapped up the eye in a cloth and stuffed it in Matthew's pack.

"My people should be able to repair the damage once you return to the city," Rajax whispered.

Matthew breathed heavily, "I don't know if I want it back."

"You mean 'us', right?" Austin asked Rajax.

Matthew looked at Rajax. His face was clouded.

"If your eye is malfunctioning," he said carefully, "then we are nearing the main power room. I must leave you now to search for Whitney. The two of you have a better chance of surviving than I do."

"Rajax you can't be serious," Austin argued.

Matthew looked at the hurt in Rajax's eyes. He knew what had to be done.

"Rajax is right," Matthew agreed. "We have the virus. It is the only thing that will ensure the Naanan's freedom. Rajax can keep the Queen occupied long enough for us to transmit it through the systems. Whitney would have wanted it that way."

"You can't be serious," Austin hissed. "Is this really what she would have wanted?"

Matthew turned to him with his only eye, "She knew the risks. As do we."

Austin hesitated then sadly nodded. Rajax helped Matthew off the floor and looked out into the hall. He handed Matthew the glowing rod.

"Take this, it will help light your way. Be safe and good luck."

Matthew watched as Rajax looked at them one last time before running around the corner into the darkness.

Austin watched Rajax turn the corner out of sight. Matthew stood next to him, his eye eerily shining in the glowing light. He looked down at their map and urged Matthew on. They carefully slinked around in the darkness. Austin's anxieties rose as they ventured farther into the hive. The Xeno patrols picked up the

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closer they got to the main power room. He slowed his pace as Matthew lagged. Austin pushed him up against a wall as a Xeno patrol passed. He grabbed Matthew's arm and led him through the empty hallways.

"I don't need help," Matthew protested quietly.

"Shut up cyclops."

Matthew mumbled curses under his breath as they moved through the maze of hallways. Austin stopped at the end of a hallway and carefully looked around the corner. Several Xeno guards stood outside a large room. Blinding pulses of light casted shadows in the hallway. Austin squinted his eyes and turned to Matthew.

"We found the main power," he whispered.

"How many guards?"

Austin looked again quickly, "Too many to count."

Austin watched as Matthew darted his eye back and forth in thought. He bent down and pulled out his pack. Matthew dug through it and pulled out a grenade.

"This'll work."

"Is it going to take out the Xeno system too?" Austin asked.

Matthew scoffed, "We're not that lucky."

Austin took the grenade from Matthew and looked back down the hallway. The Xeno guards stood unmoving. He took a breath in and pulled the pin tossing the grenade down the hall. It bounced off the walls grabbing the guard's attention. They held their weapons high watching the grenade. Austin pushed Matthew back as the hall exploded. They ran through the smoke tripping over crumbled remains of wall. Austin grabbed Matthew's pack before he fell into the hole in front of them. Below, Xenos flooded the hallways. Austin jumped over grabbing onto the doorframe. He urged Matthew over, his eye full of fear. Matthew jumped as Xenos rounded the corner. Austin grabbed his arm and threw Matthew inside.

"Better work fast," he yelled as weapon fire exploded in the hallway.

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Matthew reached inside his pack and pulled out his pad. Austin threw another grenade expanding the hole in the floor. He looked over at Matthew typing away furiously. A Xeno blast grazed Austin's arm and he fell to the ground. He hid behind the doorframe as he wrapped up the wound.

"What's taking so long," he demanded over the noise.

"You try working with one eye and a highly advanced system that keeps changing," Matthew growled. "I'm working as fast as I can, but the Queen is faster. I need more time."

Austin threw their last grenade into the hall shaking the room. He steadied his breath and rolled in front of the doorway. The Xenos fired rapidly into the room. The smoke blinded him. He grabbed a Xeno gun from the broken hallway and fired into the haze. Austin looked back at Matthew; his outline hunched down in the corner. He watched as Matthew pulled out a knife and started stabbing the cylinders of light.

"Rajax wherever you are," Austin prayed, "you better hurry."

CHAPTER 43

Rajax slipped through the hallways. He evaded the Xeno guards at every turn. Higher into the hive he climbed, Whitney's scream echoing in his ears. The patrols dispersed as he reached the higher levels. Rajax walked the halls holding his weapon tightly. The hallway lights flickered on and off as he crept. Low humming filled the air as he rounded the last corner. He aimed his weapon at the parasite sitting in the empty room. She tapped her dainty fingers on her throne of bones. Skulls of fallen races littered the floor, slowly carving into the walls and seat. Her light green tendrils of hair flowed down her body, her white almond shaped eyes watching Rajax. She smiled coldly at him.

"Hello Rajax," her sultry voice filled the air, "I have been waiting for you."

Rajax's weapon was knocked out of his hand as Xenos rose from the floor. Their arms formed into large blasters fixed on him.

"Perhaps we can talk this out," she said coolly rising from her throne.

"There is no talking to filth like you," he spat.

Her eyes hardened.

"Is that what I am?" she asked as she slowly walked towards him, her long dress draping the floor. "Filth? Scum of the earth? Vile creatures? I have heard these accusations before."

She stopped in front of Rajax staring into his eyes, "These words do no harm."

The Queen turned and walked towards her throne.

"You have been a thorn in my side for quite some time now Rajax."

"Then why did you keep me alive," he challenged.

She tapped her fingers on a skull protruding from the arm rest, "Curiosity."

Rajax was taken aback.

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“You fought so fervently against my reign,” she continued, “killing my children and your own kind. I have not seen such a fighting spirit in thousands of years. The grave steps you took to ensure I would not succeed intrigued me. I am surprised you have not drowned from the blood on your hands.”

The Queen turned to Rajax staring at him carefully.

“You and I are not so different.”

“I am nothing like you,” Rajax growled.

“Are you sure?” she asked him. “The planet I originated from usurped my kind to benefit their pathetic lives. I fought alongside my brethren until I was able to escape their grasp. I returned to free my kind and kill those who stood in my way. Tell me Rajax, does this story sound familiar?”

“My story is different,” he insisted. “When I kill you, I will be at peace. I will not let my revenge come against those who are innocent.”

“You have already let your revenge dictate who will survive, and who will die.”

With a wave of her hand the Xenos morphed into the floor. She stood in front of the throne hands tucked neatly behind her back. Rajax watched as the wall next to the Queen formed a cocoon. An outline of a figure appeared, and his heart lurched as Whitney hung suspended inside. Tendrils bound her hands and feet, one protruding from her mouth. Her eyes were glazed over.

“What did you do to her,” Rajax demanded, his heart on his sleeve.

“She is not dead if that is what you are asking,” the Queen said simply. “I am merely extracting information.”

“For what purpose?”

“To understand why they have blindly followed you into a battle they cannot win.”

The levels beneath them shook. Rajax grabbed hold of the doorframe. The Queen looked around displeased.

“Perhaps this is a common trait among the people of Earth,” she continued as the dome shook again. “They follow others blindly based on their own personal emotions. Take this female

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earthling for example. She is so blinded by her righteous ambitions it is almost laughable.”

“Her cause is just, and so is mine.”

The Queen’s icy laugh filled the room, “Your kind are all the same. No matter how noble you perceive your desires to be, there will always be those you harm along the way. I am doing the galaxies a favor in eradicating this notion of thinking. That is what I have done for thousands of years and will continue to do long after Trem-NA and Earth have turned to ash.”

Rajax roared charging the Queen. With a wave of her hand her Xenos dragged Rajax to the floor pinning him on his knees.

“My people and the people of Earth will not stop. They will end you. I will end you,” Rajax threatened.

“Oh, I think not,” the Queen said as she circled Rajax. “Do you really believe I have not planned for this resistance? Every step you have taken I have allowed. I let you live because I knew how vital you would become. I gave you to a younger Xeno in the hopes you would try and win over its trust. I put you in a position for an easy escape. I allowed you to leave knowing you would return. It took some time yes, but here you are. To my delight you brought gifts for me as well. The information I have gathered from the attacks have helped to create my children without the need of a host. The process to aid my few children in adapting was strenuous, but no longer. Face it Rajax, all the actions you have taken since your capture have been of my design.”

Rajax’s mind swirled. His heart thudded inside his head.

“No. That is not possible.”

The Queen turned her back to Rajax and looked up at Whitney.

“I will admit, there were some surprising actions you took along the way. Especially your connection with this earthling.” She turned her head slightly eyeing Rajax, “A very deep connection.”

With a flick of her wrist, a tendril shot through Whitney’s chest. Rajax screamed in pain as the cocoon cracked, Whitney falling to the floor with a thud. The Queen pushed Whitney with her feet.

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“How tragic,” she said shaking her head, “she had so much potential.”

“I will kill you,” Rajax roared as he fought against his restraints.

“As you have said,” the Queen sighed with a dismissive wave of her hand.

She stood in front of Rajax, her eyes hard.

“Now, I have let you live out your fantasy of saving your people. I have learned all I need from this earthling and the attacks you have led against my children. It is time for you to come home. Join me Rajax, let us become one again. The warrior spirit burning deep inside you can finally be released. You can reach your full potential at my side. If you will submit, we can rid the galaxies of injustice. If you submit, I will save the earthling.”

Rjax looked at Whitney’s lifeless body on the floor. Her tangled hair covered her face. Blood seeped out of the puncture in her chest. His stomach dropped as he looked at the Queen.

“I will never submit to you.”

She grabbed Rajax by the throat pulling him off the ground as the Xeno’s released their hold. He struggled under her grip gasping for air. The Queen threw him to the floor placing a foot on his chest. The Xeno’s around grabbed his arms and legs holding Rajax down. She leaned in close.

“Perhaps you need a larger ultimatum.”

Her eyes glowed brightly as her hair danced. She lifted her head screeching. The walls shifted as Xeno forms exited the wall. Sunlight entered the room and the Queen turned. Her army raced down the sides of the dome into the fighting below. Rajax was released as the Xenos underneath him followed their Queen’s command. He crawled to Whitney and held her limp body in his arms. His heart sank as he watched the scene from above. The hives disintegrated into Xeno forms around their scattered troops. Screams from below raked his ears.

“You can put a stop to this Rajax,” the Queen’s sultry voice echoing in the empty chamber. “Join me and I might spare their lives. Admit it Rajax. I have won.”

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Rajax looked out into the carnage below. His heart weighed heavy in his chest. He looked down at Whitney. Her body was still. The tattered remains of her white jumpsuit stained red with blood. Tears dripped from his eyes.

“You can stop this,” the Queen’s voice echoed in his ears.

His hands shook as he looked outside. Waves of Xenos flooded the valley, his people lost in the wake.

“I am sorry,” he barely whispered to Whitney as he pulled her body close to his heart. “This is not what I wanted for you.”

Rajax felt Whitney’s staggered breath against his cheek. He looked down at her body. Her chest slightly rose and fell. In her darkest hour, she clung onto life. Her blood stained the painted diamond symbol on Rajax’s chest. His face hardened. Gently setting Whitney down, Rajax plunged his hand into the floor pulling out a long beam. He stood turning to the Xeno Queen. Her eyes widened as Rajax swung the makeshift staff back and forth gripping tightly.

“My people will never surrender,” he yelled courage emanating from his chest, “and neither will I.”

The Queen glared at him. She waved her hand and a tendril shot from the floor. It formed into a spear.

“Very well.”

The Queen charged Rajax and he roared. He dived under her blow knocking her off her feet. Rajax scaled the throne as she threw tendril spears. He jumped from above as she rolled out of the way. They circled each other attempting to strike a killing blow. The hive shook underneath their feet as they fought. The Xeno Queen caught Rajax off guard and threw him to the ground. She waved her hands as tendrils shot up from the floor strapping him down. One flew through his thigh and Rajax yelled in pain. The Xeno Queen stood over him, the ends of her hair turning into spikes.

“I have no need for a host,” she breathed heavily, “but I will take you as one if that is the only way your kind will learn. I have done it before; I will do it again. You have failed Rajax of Trem-NA, and you will live with that forever.”

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Rajax closed his eyes as the Queen lunged forward. Her blow never came. He opened his eyes and watched as she staggered backward. Her tendrils spasmed against her head. She screeched as they pulsed violently and pulled on her skull. They fell to the floor in a shriveled heap. Rajax pulled his body free as she fell to her knees.

“That is not possible,” she screeched, white blood pouring down her head.

“My friend has succeeded in transmitting the virus,” Rajax said limping menacingly towards her.

The Queen pulled herself onto the throne ripping out a serrated spine.

“It does not matter.”

She lunged at Rajax. He ducked and rolled to the ground holding his thigh. Pulling on the staff for support he lifted himself up. Rajax backed away dodging each blow as the Queen swung. Rage flooded her eyes. She slammed Rajax in the stomach and he staggered to the ground. The Queen laughed as he tried to stand. She dug the spine into his wound. Rajax fell to the ground. The Queen grabbed his neck, her blood dripping onto his cheeks.

“I have more power than you could ever imagine. No one can kill me,” the Queen sneered.

Her eyes widened and she gasped as Rajax plunged his hand into her chest, his fingers morphed into spikes.

“I can.”

Rajax pulled his hand out, the Xeno Queen’s heart in his hand. She fell to the floor in a sickening thud. The hive began to shake violently as the floor under him collapsed. He held tightly to the staff pulling himself up. Whitney laid near the edge unmoving. Rajax grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the deadly fall. He checked her wound; the bleeding had not stopped. Ripping Whitney’s jumpsuit Rajax bandaged her chest and his thigh as the floor creaked. Holding tightly to the staff and Whitney, Rajax braced himself as the floor dropped.

He hung suspended, the Xeno Queen’s body falling into the darkness. Rajax slung Whitney over his shoulder and climbed. His

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serrated fingers helped him grip to the cracked sidings as he reached the top. He laid Whitney down carefully and looked down below. Rubble covered the valley filled with dead Xeno. Rajax searched for any sign of survivors. The side of the hive cracked and Rajax grabbed onto Whitney. He looked down below and swallowed.

Rajax tucked Whitney close to his chest and jumped. He hit the side of the hive sliding fast. With his free hand he gripped onto the siding. Small suction cups grew across his fingers and they stopped. Rajax let out a sharp breath as his arm was pulled from its socket. He hung on the side of the crumbling hive unable to move. Whitney's heart rate slowed. The hive groaned and Rajax watched as the top caved in. He curled up holding Whitney close as debris fell around them. He whispered words of comfort to her trying to calm his dread. The fall would kill them both if the collapsing hive did not get them first. Rajax looked out as the sun set behind the valley.

“Help,” his voice echoed in the air.

A large plate on the hive broke off. Rajax braced for the end when it exploded. Through the smoke Rajax spotted a pod heading for their position. The back opened and Tressam reached out her hands. The pod shook as they pulled close to Rajax.

“Jump!”

“I cannot,” Rajax yelled. “I will lose my grip.”

“I will catch her!”

Rajax hesitated as the hive shook again. He looked at Tressam and pushed off the hive. Whitney fell into Tressam's arms. Rajax pulled his arm off the hive and fell onto the pod. Tressam grabbed his torso and pulled him inside. He laid motionless on the floor watching Whitney. A Naanan doctor worked attempting to stabilize her. Rajax sat up using his good arm for support. The valley faded into a cloud of smoke and dust as they flew away. He fell back, the world fading around him.

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Rajax stretched his leg and winced. The Naanan doctor nodded approvingly.

“The pain will continue for a few weeks,” he explained, “but your wounds have healed nicely. You are free to go.”

Rajax thanked him and left the room. The hallway in the underwater city was crowded as he pushed through. A month had passed since the Xeno Queen’s reign came to an end. Tressam and her troops worked around the clock destroying the remaining hives and making sure every Xeno was dead. When Rajax awoke back in the city, he learned Whitney was taken to a high security area where she was being monitored. Her wounds were infected and the Naanans feared her time with the Xeno Queen would cause other problems. No one was allowed to see her despite Rajax’s attempts. He refused to believe Whitney was a threat. The doctors gave little detail on her condition. Rajax feared the worst. He pushed the thoughts from his mind.

Rajax was pleased to learn Matthew and Austin survived the hive collapsing. Rescue teams found them days later under the rubble. Matthew suffered a major blow to his head and the nerves in Austin’s arm were severely damaged. They succeeded in transmitting the virus. Austin woke each night, the sounds of battle sounding in his head. Matthew refused to accept another enhanced eye, suffering from headaches and damage done by the first. After they recovered from their injuries, Austin led Orion Squad in search of survivors from NOVA. Commander Daniel Evans was recovered with his team. They were stranded in the desert after a hive destroyed their pod. They were dehydrated but alive. Matthew took a sabbatical from science and spent most of his days staring into space, the weight lifted off his shoulders.

NOVA arrived a few days after their victory with repairs complete. Captain Briers was relieved to see most of his crew

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survived. The Xeno ships orbiting Trem-NA lost power when the Queen died and burned up in the atmosphere. Briers split his NOVA crew into two groups: one helped with caring for the Naanans and the other helped Tressam and her troops. The Naanans were in rough shape. Freed from the Xeno's grasp, many found it difficult to move forward with their planet in ruins. The underground city was overflowing with refugees. Supplies and energy were running low. Small camps were set up in the untouched parts of the continents. Captain Briers helped the Naanans set up their communications using components from NOVA.

Rajax pushed his way out of the tube and into the main courtyard. Naanans eyed him carefully as he past. He stuck out in the crowd. The other survivors kept their Naanan features. The unique abilities Rajax honed were not shared among the others. He was alone. Rajax entered the main court. Bykov nodded to him. The Chancellor and his advisors sat around the table with Captain Briers and Evans.

“How's your leg?” Evans asked.

The others turned to Rajax.

“It feels better,” he said as he sat down, “I will have some pain over the next few weeks.”

“We were discussing how we can offer better aid to the Naanans,” Captain Briers said filling him in.

“What did you have in mind?” Rajax asked.

“I think it would be best to leave for Earth and return with supplies,” Briers said looking around the room, “but some don't agree.”

“The trip would take far too long,” an advisor insisted. “Our people need help now.”

“A trip would require supplies the Naanans cannot spare,” Evans put in. “Unless you take a small crew back with you.”

“Many are eager to return home,” Bykov interrupted. “We need fresh eyes and minds.”

“But what if you do not return as you say?” another advisor asked.

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“What makes you think I won’t return?” Briers asked accusingly.

The Chancellor held up his hands. He looked at Rajax.

“What do you believe is the best course of action?”

Rjax looked around the room. The NOVA crew was weary, the months away from home weighing on their minds. The Naanan leaders were exhausted, their people in greater need than they prepared for.

“Captain Briers is right,” Rajax concluded, “it would be wise for NOVA to leave and return with supplies. Much of our planet is lost, but we can utilize the growth we have.”

“What if the strain on the remainder of our planet is too great?” the Chancellor asked.

“There’s enough supplies on your moons. I will take the trip for food and water if that is what you are worried about,” Briers suggested.

The Chancellor and his advisors looked at each other uneasy. Rajax knew their concern.

“I will permit this action,” the Chancellor sighed heavily. “We cannot ignore the gifts Trem-NA has.”

“When did you plan on leaving?” an advisor asked.

“I can leave tomorrow for the moons. It will take a few days to harvest each one. I would like to leave for Earth in two weeks,” Briers explained.

“What about Whitney?” Rajax asked.

The room stirred with sadness.

“She cannot be moved,” the Chancellor explained. “Whitney needs to stay under our care.”

“You don’t sound hopeful for her recovery,” Evans interjected.

“There are many paths her recovery can take. We will have to wait and see.”

Matthew rolled in his bed as Austin slept restlessly across the room. He returned late from his patrol. His snores echoed across the walls. Matthew sat up in bed and sighed. Word spread through

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the NOVA crew they were leaving in two weeks for home. Matthew's heart was heavy. He was ready to return. The glory of saving the Naanans was not what Matthew expected. Many thanked him but the Naanans ignored the NOVA crew. They were skeptical of the new alliance. No one blamed them. It was reasonable for them to be suspicious. The Xeno caused enough damage to haunt the Naanans for several lifetimes.

Matthew crawled out of bed and left the room. He carefully stepped over the Naanans sleeping on the floor. They tried to give up their rooms to the refugees, but the small space made the Naanans nervous. He entered the tube and traveled to the main courtyard. Matthew folded his arms trying to keep warm. The lights dimmed as he walked. He stood in front of the shield and looked out into the sea. A Na-hal swam by, its four fins shaking swiftly. Matthew sat on the ground enjoying the view.

He had no desire to return to science at this time. The stress he put on himself drained his soul. Each night the virus plagued him, the calculations running wild in his mind. The Xeno was vanquished there was no reason to worry... he hoped. Sounds of rapid footsteps echoed in the hall. A Naanan doctor came running around the corner. He spotted Matthew and waved him over.

"Is something wrong?" Matthew asked as he approached.

"There has been a development with Whitney. Please hurry!"

Austin tapped his foot impatiently as he looked around the room. Matthew was gone when he woke during a nightly fit. The morning came and he was still missing. Naanan guards escorted Austin to the main court and left without a word. Evans and Bykov joined later demanding to know the reason why they were brought. Rajax entered with the Chancellor equally confused. They sat quietly talking amongst themselves. They turned as the door creaked opened and Matthew stepped in.

"What is going on," Bykov demanded.

"Good everyone's here," Matthew said ignoring him. "I brought good news."

"This better be good," Bykov snapped.

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Matthew inched out the door whispering. Austin tried to look around him to get a glimpse. The door slowly opened Matthew standing aside. Slowly Whitney entered the room. Austin tried to hide his shock. A white gown hung loosely on her frail frame. Her collar bone jutted out under her pale skin. Her blue eyes were dull and sunken in. The brown hair on her head was frayed and greasy. She grabbed Matthew for support smiling brightly.

“Hello everyone,” her voice rasped.

Rajax jumped from his seat and pulled her close. She wrapped her arms around him tears streaming. Matthew sat next to Austin and they watched Rajax and Whitney. He would not let go of her even when she started to stumble. Rajax helped her sit but did not let go of her hand. The Chancellor smiled at her.

“It is good to see you are up and well.”

“And alive,” Austin put in, “we were worried about you.”

She smiled at them, “It’s good to be up. I was startled when I woke up last week.”

Rajax stared at her, “You have been awake for a week? Why was I not informed?”

The Chancellor hung his head slightly, “The doctors believed it was the best course of action. We did not want to give you false hope in case her condition worsened.”

“It’s okay,” Whitney said patting Rajax’s hand. “I’ve been in no condition to have visitors. I needed to see for myself how everything was faring. My doctors are not happy.”

Austin leaned on the table, “You’re going to fully recover though, right?”

She nodded to him, “I look worse than I feel. My... wounds are healed.”

Whitney looked at the Chancellor, her professional composure returning.

“I am myself, no one else. I request different accommodations in order to heal.”

The Chancellor agreed, “We will need to find a quiet place for you.”

“She can stay with me,” Rajax piped up.

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Austin watched Whitney smile brighter. Rajax helped her up and they slowly walked out of the room. He watched Evans grin at Bykov.

“You owe me twenty bucks,” Evans smirked.

“Would you take rubles?” Bykov asked.

Evans laughed and the Chancellor looked at them confused. Austin leaned over to him.

“It’s an Earth thing,” he explained.

The Chancellor nodded understanding. He bid them farewell and left the room. Austin looked at Matthew.

“Do you really think she’s okay?” he asked quietly.

Matthew shrugged, “Only time will tell.”

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The next two weeks passed quickly. Whitney recovered her strength with Rajax's guiding hand. He made sure no one disturbed her while she slept or ate. Matthew and Austin came by often sharing updates on the Naanan's progress. They were coming into their own, accepting their planets condition. The scientists set up small devices throughout the continent helping the lakes and streams bring life. Farmers planted seeds from the underwater city's storeroom in the barren fields. Soon sprouts began to grow. Trem-NA's wildlife bounced back from the brink of extinction. Many accepted their new task to revive their planet. Slowly the refugees left the city spreading out into their new world.

Bykov took command of the NOVA members still on the ground. His tone changed taking a different approach. After seeing the condition Whitney was in several members of NOVA were afraid for her. He helped ease their worries. Evans and Tressam worked together to help the Naanans learn to defend themselves. Many were afraid of another invasion from the unknown. Soon their army was strong, Tressam's leadership shining through. Austin and Matthew helped the Naanans build stable homes and shelters. Children laughing echoed the towns again, easing their parents worries. Naanan life was returning to normal.

Rajax stood by the shore. He watched NOVA in the distance preparing to land on the desert. Whitney sat next to him soaking in the sun's rays. He smiled. Her body grew stronger every day. She walked without help and her appetite returned. He held her close at night as she slept restlessly. It was difficult for her to look in the mirror, the scars on her chest and back large and red.

She stood as NOVA landed. The crews huddled together off in the distance. Rajax held her hand as they walked towards the crowd. After much discussion, the Chancellor and Briers agreed on the supplies Trem-NA needed. Briers promised they would return

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soon and bring leadership to discuss the trade agreement. The air buzzed with excitement, many eager to return home. Rajax caught sight of Austin and Matthew standing with Evans and Bykov.

Austin waved them over.

“Are you happy to be returning home?” Rajax asked them.

“I’m ready for an actual meal,” Austin joked.

Matthew rolled his eye and laughed.

“How do you think your parents will react?” Whitney asked him.

Matthew shrugged patting the patch, “I’m sure my mom will have some choice words.”

“I’d be scared of her,” Whitney smiled. “She chewed me out once when I snuck into the backyard when we were younger. I’ve never been so terrified in my life.”

Rjax smiled as they laughed. It was good to see them happy again.

“I know my wife will have a fit,” Bykov said motioning to his arm. “How will I hold our baby with one hand?”

Austin looked at him surprised, “I didn’t know you had a wife.”

Bykov smiled proudly, “I have two little girls at home. I will be happy to see them again.”

Rjax felt Bykov’s homesickness in waves. He understood why he was so eager to return. Rajax looked at Evans. Sadness covered his face. He watched Whitney.

“You’re not coming with us, are you?” Evans asked her.

They looked at her silence falling over their group. She shook her head.

“My place is here now,” she squeezed Rajax’s hand. “This is where I want to stay.”

Evans stepped forward and wrapped Whitney in his arms. She returned his hug fighting back tears. He kissed her cheek.

“I’ll miss you Whitney,” Evans whispered.

“Don’t worry Daniel, I won’t be far.”

He let go and turned to Rajax.

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“You take good care of her. Remember, I know all your tricks.”

“I will,” Rajax promised.

Bykov shook Whitney and Rajax’s hand as NOVA sounded the boarding call. The crowd around them moved forward in excitement. Rajax stepped back as Austin and Matthew hugged Whitney. They stood wrapped in friendship. Matthew looked up at Rajax and waved him over. Rajax wrapped his arms around his friends, his family. NOVA sounded the boarding call again. Austin and Matthew released their grip.

“Keep in touch?” Matthew asked.

Whitney smiled at him, “Of course.”

Austin wiped his face and hugged her again. Rajax and Whitney waved goodbye as they ran towards the ship. He wrapped his arm around Whitney’s waist as they watched NOVA climb into the air. The ship sailed high into the clouds and out of sight. Rajax wiped a tear from his eye. It was hard to say goodbye to his new family. He looked down at Whitney, her face wet with tears.

“Do you regret staying?” Rajax asked.

She shook her head, “I’m where I belong.”

They turned to the small Naanan village just over the rise.

“There is still a lot of work to do,” Rajax stated.

“Then let’s get started.”

EPILOGUE: AUSTIN

Austin shifted in his seat outside the President's office. He pulled on his tie and swallowed the lump in his throat. NOVA's return startled many. The defense satellites orbiting Earth locked onto NOVA as they neared the planet. After they were powered down NOVA and its crew landed on Armstrong Base to return home in shifts. Shortly after landing Austin was shoved into a dark SUV and dragged to Washington. Each member of NOVA was kept separate from the other. Austin had no idea where Matthew was being held. He could hear voices behind the locked door, tempers beginning to rise. Austin pulled on his tie again as the secretary smiled at him. He stretched his arm pinching the nerves. The door swung open and Daniel Evans marched out fuming.

"What's going on," Austin tried to whisper to Evans as he was dragged into the room.

The door clicked behind him and Austin turned to the unfriendly faces. President Graves smiled at him trying to dispel the tension.

"Please Mr. Loughy," Graves motioned to a chair, "sit."

Austin sat carefully in the chair and looked at the room. Secretary Williams stared him down. General Hallock leaned forward on the desk. The other faces looked at him cold.

"Can I ask what all this is about?" Austin asked finding his voice.

"Why don't you tell us," General Hallock said slowly.

"What?"

"What General Hallock is trying to say," the President interrupted, "is we want to hear your accounts of what happened on Trem-NA."

"Everything?"

Secretary Williams leaned forward, "Everything."

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Austin adjusted himself as he recounted the mission. The room watched him intently as he spoke. He highlighted the attack on NOVA, the ambush on the beach, finding Naanan survivors, and their liberation. President Graves nodded slightly as he spoke. When Austin finished, they huddled together whispering.

“So, Director Blake stayed behind?” Williams asked.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“To serve as our liaison?”

“No...” Austin said slowly.

“Are you saying Director Blake abandoned the mission, her position, and her people,” General Hallock challenged.

“No, it’s not like that at all,” Austin argued.

“Then how is it?” President Graves asked. “I care about Director Blake, but this is unlike her.”

“You do realize,” Austin began, “she risked her life and almost died to save the Naanans. On many occasions she has put her life on the line to save others. Why would you consider her a traitor? She worked in a hostile environment, one I may add you *allowed*, and now has found a place she loves. The Naanans care about what happens to her. She could not get that kind of treatment here despite your praises and pats on the back. So yes, she went AWOL or whatever the hell you want to call it. But don’t *you* dare question *me* about her motives because I know every NOVA member will stand by her.”

Austin’s legs were shaking, noticing he was standing. He sat down as they looked at him stunned. His heart pounded in his head as the minutes passed in silence.

“Well,” Graves said clearing his throat, “if Director Blake has decided to stay on Trem-NA than I wish her the best. I’m sure in the future we will see her again.”

He straightened his papers, “Now the question is where to put you.”

“Excuse me?”

Secretary Williams leaned back in his seat, “We promoted Daniel Evans to second-in-command at Chora Base. The Orion

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Squad is left without a leader. He's argued very strongly that you be promoted to that role."

Austin looked at him surprised.

"Do you agree?" Williams challenged.

Austin lifted his head proudly, "I led Orion Squad on Trem-NA during Evans' absence. I would be honored to do it again."

The President stood holding his hand out. Austin stood and shook.

"Congratulations Mr. Loughy. Orion Squad is in good hands."

EPILOGUE: MATTHEW

Matthew straightened his tie and looked up at the townhouse. After arriving home six months prior his life was finally beginning to slow down. NOVA returned to the Armstrong Station without any difficulty. The team was exhausted ready to be home. Matthew was relieved to see the Earth still spinning. After returning they were briefed and questioned individually by the President and his cabinet. Much had changed since their departure.

Parkson was taken into custody after a manhunt lasting four months. Director Angela Myer oversaw Department Chora on her own with Secretary Williams as her guide. Luck was on their side as Parkson was unable to upload any information of their mission onto the internet. The countries in Chora did not take kindly to being lied to about Parkson's deceptions. Canada and Brazil left Chora forming their own organization Galaxia. Tensions rose throughout the countries as contact with NOVA was lost. Efforts to fortify the Earth was beginning to make the public suspicious. When the attack never came, they rested easy.

Matthew was allowed to continue his work with Chora promoted to the head scientist in the department. He declined. His reasoning was sound: he was not ready to take on that kind of responsibility. The fate of a civilization hung on his shoulders for so long, Matthew was not prepared to go through it again. After his meeting he requested to be taken to his parents before moving onto the Chora Base. They greeted him with open arms, his mother sobbing at the condition of his eye. Matthew lied and told them he lost it when an experimental system malfunctioned. The time he spent with them did him good. Matthew promised to keep in touch when it was time for him to leave. His father handed him a piece of paper with an address making sure he took one more stop before returning to work.

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Now Matthew stood outside the house of Nathan Bernard's daughter Clarice. He sighed deeply and walked up the steps. His hand shook as he knocked firmly on the door. Movement shifted inside and the door cracked. Matthew held his breath. A small woman with greying hair stood looking at him concerned.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Clarice Bernard?"

"Clarice Covens," she corrected him.

"My name is Matthew Alcott. I worked with your father—"

"—My father is dead," she said firmly. "He's been dead a long time."

She began to shut the door, but Matthew stuck his foot in the house.

"Young man if you don't leave, I will call the police."

Matthew fumbled for his pocket, "Please, I believe this belongs to you."

She watched him carefully as he pulled out the tattered remains of Nathan's tie. Clarice's eyes lit up as she took the fabric from him. Her eyes filled with tears.

"How..."

"I worked closely with your father. May I come in? I will explain everything."

Clarice sat quietly as Matthew explained what happened to her father. He told the events of Roswell and Nathan's recruitment into Chora. Matthew emphasized how her father's work saved the lives of thousands on a distant planet. He choked up as he recounted the events leading to his death. She wiped her face and sat quietly.

"So," she sighed heavily, "the man who killed my father, he's in prison now?"

Matthew nodded.

"And he worked at a secret government base after his 'disappearance'."

"That's correct."

She looked at him, "How do I know what you're saying is true Mr. Alcott?"

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Matthew rubbed his hands together, “I wouldn’t come all this way and carry that tie for so long if it weren’t. Your father... his findings helped me perfect a virus that saved thousands of lives. He’s the one that deserves all the credit, not me.”

“You seem like a very smart man,” she insisted. “I’m sure you deserve the credit.”

Matthew’s eye began to water, “I don’t feel like I do.”

He cleared his throat and stood.

“I have to get going.”

Clarice led him to the door, “Before you go, I think you should have this.”

She grabbed a small box off her mantle and handed it to him. Matthew opened the box, a brass tie clip placed in the center. The Statue of Liberty shined in the light.

“I can’t take this.”

“My father would’ve wanted you to have it,” she smiled. “Besides, I have what I wanted after his death.”

Matthew walked slowly out the door holding the box tight.

“You can do him one more favor,” she called as Matthew reached the car.

He turned, “What is that?”

“Live up to the potential he saw in you.”

EPILOGUE: WHITNEY AND RAJAX

“But father I’m scared.”

Rajax looked up at his son smiling.

“Do not worry Jorn I will catch you.”

Rajax swam closer to the small cliff side next to the river. Ten years had passed since Trem-NA’s liberation from the Xeno. Since then their planet prospered. Fields filled with Na-fee flowers again. Na-romans grazed in their rightful place. Wildlife bloomed in abundance. Efforts to retake their home were succeeding. Towns prospered and markets sprang to life once more. The Naanans adjusted well to the little technology they had. Many took to the simple life finding their roots once again.

Whitney and Rajax lived near the underwater city for the first year. Within that time Whitney returned to her old self. NOVA returned later that year with fresh supplies and teams. President Graves sent Director Angela Myer to be his ambassador while Evans stayed behind at Chora. The negotiations were slow and tedious. Much of the Xeno’s technology was destroyed in the hive liberations. Rajax stepped back and let Tressam take over. To the surprise of many she worked well with Myer. Years passed as Trem-NA and Earth worked together. Their alliance grew strong as the Naanans let go of their fear.

Rajax found the sudden influx of praise overwhelming. His people’s view of him shifted dramatically over the years. Naanans greeted him at every turn. They wanted him to be their leader. Rajax did not feel adequate and wanted to live in peace. He did not want to be lifted on a pedestal for all to see. Rajax wanted a quiet life. His chance arrived when Whitney announced she was expecting. They were overjoyed and ready to settle down away from the cities. Rajax scouted out a small grove on the middle continent to raise their family.

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They built their home at the base of a small mountain. Rajax carved rooms into the rock as Whitney plowed the fields to garden. When Jorn was born Whitney fell ill. The doctors informed Rajax the toll on her body was great and if they tried again, she would not survive. Rajax held Whitney in his arms as she rocked Jorn back and forth, their only child. Whitney cried in the night, pain coming and going. She cursed the Xeno Queen. Rajax knew her pain, his own fears seeping through. He watched Jorn carefully as he grew. To Rajax's relief Jorn did not acquire his ability to morph his body.

Rjax watched Jorn as he shifted back and forth on the rock. His brown hair bounced against his forehead, his black silver eyes looking down. He rubbed his pale blue skin and shook his head.

"I can't do it," he protested.

Rjax shook his head playfully, "You told me you wanted to jump and play in the river, this is the only way down. Unless you want to walk home and play in the stream."

"I'm too old to play in the stream!"

"Then jump. I will catch you."

Jorn paced above Rjax. He took a step back and ran leaping into the air. Rjax held his arms out as Jorn splashed into the water. He gasped as Rjax held him up.

"I did it," he smiled proudly.

"You did," Rjax agreed. "Was it scary?"

Jorn started to swim around, "At first. But I knew you would catch me."

Rjax splashed his son and he laughed. They played in the river as the sun began to set. Jorn climbed onto Rjax's back as he scaled up the cliff. Rjax carried him home down the mountain. They crossed the bridge at the stream, the waterfall spraying mist.

"When can I go down the waterfall?" Jorn asked excited.

Rjax laughed, "Not until you are much, much older. Your mother would have a fit."

"Where is she?"

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Rajax looked across their crops his heart racing. He sighed in relief as Whitney opened the door to their home carrying a large basket of clothes.

“Mother,” Jorn yelled as Rajax set him down.

Whitney’s face beamed as she dropped her basket and hugged their son. She brushed his wet hair softly.

“Mother I did it,” Jorn told her excitedly. “I jumped in the river!”

“I’m so proud of you,” Whitney smiled. “I knew you could. You’re so brave, just like your father.”

She smiled up at Rajax as he joined them. He picked up the basket and kissed her forehead as she stood.

“I can get it,” she insisted as they followed him to the clothesline.

“I know you can,” Rajax smiled.

“Jorn, can you go get washed up for dinner please?” Whitney asked.

He nodded and ran for the house, the door clacking behind him. Whitney turned to Rajax.

“Tressam contacted us again,” she said as they hung clothes.

Rajax sighed, “What does she want now?”

“Something about NOVA. The feed kept cutting out. I think we will have to adjust the rods again. I believe they’re coming for another conference.”

“I am not going,” Rajax said as they finished. “I have no interest in being paraded around every time we go to the cities. We are retired, how hard is that to understand?”

“I’ve told her, but she doesn’t listen to me.”

Rajax sat outside their home and rubbed his forehead.

Whitney sat next to him and placed a hand on his back. He looked around at their home.

“I am done with that life,” he stated.

Whitney nodded, “I know my love. So am I.”

He turned to Whitney, her eyes shining in the fading light. Rajax brushed her hair back. She leaned her head on his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head.

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“We have built a home to call our own,” Rajax said softly. “It is everything I could ever hope for.”

Jorn ran out the door and jumped onto Whitney’s lap. They laughed and pulled him close.

“I’m hungry mother,” Jorn protested.

She laughed, “Of course, let’s go have dinner.”

Whitney stood as Jorn jumped from her lap. She turned to Rajax extending her hand. He wrapped his fingers around hers, the liquid in his palm dancing up his arm. Rajax stood and followed his family inside. He took one last look at the grove around them. A warm smile crept across his face. The sacrifices and trials he went through to reclaim his home brought more joy than Rajax could have ever imagined.

About the Author

Mackenzie Friel is a lover of all things sci-fi and fantasy related. With a strong imagination at a young age, she has honed her creative skills to bring worlds to life. Taking a variety of courses online, she can dive deeper into the world of fiction. Mackenzie resides in Virginia with her husband, two children, and cats. Other works by Mackenzie Friel can be found on Amazon.