Sixteen - Close Quarters

The public bath house was one of the smaller public buildings near the back of the village. It was nestled against a group of boulders where natural hot springs bubbled. Inside the air was steamy and considerably warmer than outside. He followed the winding corridor that led towards the bathing pools in the rear, passing private baths concealed behind closed reed dividers. The smooth black stone floor was wet beneath his bare feet; he had taken his sandals off at the door.

Ashaki was somewhere in the building but he had yet to find her. Her sage scent, a strong herbal fragrance, lay hidden within the over abundance of natural Yautja musk, botanicals used for bathing, and the water in the pools. There was a large door at the end of the corridor that he breezed through on the hunt for his human.

His tusks rattled excitedly at the goose hunt she unknowingly led him on. The chase would make the meeting much sweeter. It allowed him to formulate the right words to apologize, his tongue reciting them as he stepped into the rear of the bath house.

A large, natural pool sat surrounded by smooth stones that towered so high that it was swallowed in the canopy of the trees. Long, ropy vines hung low and mingled with purple leafy plants. Bountiful beds of marigold, azure, blazing red, and creamy orange blossoms lined the space that the pool inhabited. Small particles of pollen danced in the steam that rose to the heavens. Blue-green moss coated the rocks where their surface was wet and slick from the humidity. A small waterfall sat in the farthest corner helping to keep the water churning and moving, easily the width of the human woman's height. The scene was beautiful in the dappled sunlight.

Dhare stood on a weathered veranda where a gently sloped ramp led a few paces down to the stone path to the pool. He froze as the doors shut behind him. Facing away from him was his prey.

The first thing he noticed was her bare back. It was speckled with dark spots that collected at the rounds of her shoulders and dissipated further down. Without her clothing, he got a full view of the smooth canvas of her warm brown skin. She stood in a part of the pool where only her mid back to her shoulders were visible. Her hair was wrapped in the fabric of her bandeau; he figured this was her way of keeping it dry, though he still wasn't sure why she didn't like it wet. Seeing her so bare stirred that flutter in his belly. If he had given into his unwanted cravings he would march to her and lay claim to her soft, plush body.

His hands twitched as he suppressed those scandalous inclinations of his body. A soft rumble filled his chest as he approached the pool.

Already his body relaxed as he deeply inhaled the swirling aromas of both the pool and Ashaki's natural scent.

Softly, he trilled, and she reflectively knew he was calling, her head turned to face him. Automatically, her arms came up to cover her bare chest with lightning speed, those lovely brown eyes wide. A soft gasp escaped her mouth as she took notice of him crouching by the edge of the pool.

"May I join you?" He queried, cocking his head to the side.

Her human mouth worked to form a word but failed. One short nod was the confirmation he hoped for. He dropped his towel before stepping foot into the water. Ashaki squealed and covered her eyes with her hands. At first he was confused as he waded through the water to submerge, but finally understood when she spoke.

"You're naked!" She turned her face away and put some space between them.

Realization finally dawned on him, a deep rumbling chuckle filling the air. He leaned against the side of the pool and spread his arms along the ledge.

"He's naked too." Dhare gestured to another lounging Yautja in the far corner. The large male chuffed back in acknowledgement.

"Yeah, but he's not *you*!" Ashaki hissed in a whisper. Dhare could only chuckle again.

The water was warm and relaxing. The natural bubbling, a result of the geothermal activity that made the bath house possible, soothed his tense muscles and the ache he felt in his anus from riding Pa'ju-te's knot. It had been some time since his last visit to the bath house, and the waters were already working on his overworked body. While his more recent activities caused some tightness, this was also helpful to aid his healing from the hunt that nearly killed him. A growling sigh vibrated in his chest, displacing the water minutely.

"Am I to cover myself simply because you know me? As I see you are doing for me." Dhare waved his hand towards her to make his point, her arms still hiding her own nudity.

She quickly changed the subject. Her face became tight but far away. "Why are you here?"

The humor in his features died abruptly. Ice sliced across Ashaki's soft face. She looked distant, but her eyes fell on him like a glacier.

Guilt burned in Dhare's chest. His mandibles flexed slightly as he cowered under the scrutiny of Ashaki's glare. Her frosty reception was warranted and reminded him that he needed to do what Artemis had instructed. So far he had failed that advice spectacularly. He released a deep breath before saying the words he had worked on earlier.

"I came to apologize. This sunrise I was an 'ass' as you say." He met her gaze levelly and took a few steps towards her. "I am sorry."

Apologizing...again...was embarrassing but he felt the weight lift from his shoulders.

Ashaki was quiet for a moment, her eyes warmed slightly, searching his for deception. He noticed how her face was slightly red in the cheeks. There was a glow there when her human emotions controlled her and he quite liked the sight. She looked alluring with her full lips that she chewed on with her upper teeth. His heart skipped a few beats just drinking in the sight of her.

What an odd feeling...

"Are you...being honest? You're not trying to pull some crap that you'll renege on later?" Her voice was hard but with a crack lancing through.

Strange. What would be the point in that?

"Ashaki, I have approached you with nothing but candor. Having you in my company has been joyful and I appreciate it. Often I am alone in space for many months. You have changed that." He let the words tumble forth, pushing the boundaries of their new friendship. His tusks rattled in apprehension as her facial expression changed.

He hoped that she would forgive him. It was time he stopped behaving so...terribly. Last night was eye-opening for him. He had to suppress some of what he discovered but he could enjoy this newfound companionship. He would allow himself that.

Despite his realization, he was lucky she didn't remember him bringing up their true first meeting, his involvement saving her life on LV-318.

Telling her about that wasn't something he wanted to explain yet. He just couldn't. It was his trump card. Something he should hold until the right moment. He didn't know when, but he believed when the time came, he would know.

"So..." she breathed, coming a few paces closer, "you don't think I'm an irritating pest? You don't hate me?" Her eyebrows scrunched together as she frowned at him.

Pauk He definitely didn't think that. He wasn't sure what his feelings were on her exactly, but it wasn't hate. He never hated her even at the very beginning when she was quite irritating.

" Mo I do not."

"And you actually enjoy my company?"

" Sei'i"

She nodded slowly. He let her ruminate on his words while he relaxed into the water. He was relieved to come to the conclusion that he would allow himself the simple pleasure of her company without personal judgment. That he could actually appreciate spending time with her. It was acceptable.

There also was the steady bubbling heat to enjoy.

He liked that, too.

"Apology accepted." Ashaki stated, giving him a small, but defensive, smile.

A pleased purr filled his chest. Joy at her acceptance elevated his mood.

He rested his head on a rock that had been weathered smooth. Through the upper canopy of the trees he could see the storm grow closer. Dark clouds were rolling in. The smell of coming rain overpowered everything else. His scent glands worked to parse through the many layers until he could smell the sharp electric pinch of ozone.

They needed to get indoors.

Storms on this planet were dangerous. They were equal to the hurricanes that Earth experienced. He had seen the destruction the storms here could do.

He rose to his feet and waded his way to the edge without being self conscious of his nudity, but a smirk of satisfaction graced his face when he heard a barely audible gasp from Ashaki. He slowed his pace and stood straighter so she could get the full view. His body was a temple that he had carefully sculpted to perfection over the centuries. Showing it off was always a pleasure.

"Stop staring, Kiki." He teased, using the nickname R'Shasti had called her at the bonfire.

Her eyes burned into his back, even as he rose out of the water and toweled off.

"Where are you going?" Ashaki asked, disappointment lacing in her voice. Water sloshed around as she walked in the pool to where he stood on the solid ground.

"A storm is coming. We should head indoors. The weather on this planet can be brutal."

A quick glance to the heavens showed that the storm was approaching faster than he had anticipated. The drumming of thunder in the distance rumbled across the sky confirming what his heightened Yautja senses already picked up. He saw Ashaki jump in surprise and immediately wade to join him on the shore. Out of respect for her privacy he turned away and knotted the towel draped at his waist.

The sun was hidden beneath the heavy black clouds rather quickly. Thunder drummed above, the sound making Ashaki hasten her drying. Just as they both reached the door, the sky opened up.

A heavy deluge came down and ruined the tranquil haven this rear pool had been. The door shut heavily behind them as Dhare led them back through the bath house. Along the way he swiped a wooden tray, dumping the bottles of botanicals and carrying on his merry way.

Most of it had been cleared because of the incoming storm and made it a quick escape. Once at the front entrance and dressed in their clothes, Dhare and Ashaki watched curtains of rain fall from the sky, drenching the village in steam and muddying the ground.

"We will have to make a run for it." Dhare watched as the wind whipped into a frenzy, bending the tall trees at an odd angle and sending leaves slicing through the air. "Let me carry you. I am faster."

Thankfully, she agreed.

"Don't drop me, please."

He scoffed, "I will not."

"Take this," he handed her the wooden tray he had stolen from the bath house, "to keep your mane dry." Without further hesitation he easily swept her into his arms and pressed her against his chest.

Surprise showed on her face as she accepted the round tray and covered her head with it.

Seeing that she was secure and ready, he braced himself for the downpour.

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Ashaki lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, counting the rafters. She listened to the rain hit the roof in a steady drumming. Wind howled also, but she tried to ignore it in lieu of the cascading rain.

She had spent most of the day at the bath house. R'Shasti had shown her the way and left to attend to business.

Dhare showing up and apologizing wasn't something she had expected. He had invaded her little oasis, which was disheartening at first, but he said he was sorry. It was just...odd. His apology had surprised her. When he spoke, he sounded genuine so she had to accept it. It was better than going backwards in this friendship.

Currently, Dhare was absent. The storm had been raging for hours, so he had gone to get them food. He had been gone so long that she had begun to worry for his safety.

Despite the blasting storm outside, the hut was still standing, which was bizarre because by all appearances it was a wooden hut and nothing more. Maybe there was some subtle Yautja technology involved and it was good enough to prevent structural damage in bad weather. She'd have to ask Dhare when he returned...

Just a few minutes later, a dripping wet Dhare trudged in carrying a container tucked under his arm. He set the rectangular box on the bed and entered the bathroom. She couldn't help but watch how his soaking wet loincloth clung to his derrière. The big alien man had a fine ass that she couldn't ignore.

And...and those thighs!

Ashaki was thankful the door shut before she could ogle him more. Having a walking thirst trap of an alien around was almost too much.

While Dhare was in the bathroom, she occupied herself with the box. Cold air tickled her skin when she removed the lid. Inside were many individual wooden containers with sealed lids. The layout reminded her of a neatly packed Bento—a Japanese lunchbox. A little red circular light flashed to life on the inside wall, steadily blinking, telling her there was hidden technology that made the whole thing a cooler. This was ten times fancier than her old Yeti cooler that had been lost with her ship.

She started to pry the lid off of a square container but a wall of heat approached her from behind. The liquid heat of awareness made its way to her stomach and loins, tingling with the suddenness of his presence. This was something new...something that her body wanted to explore but her mind screamed no.

Dhare came around her, now dry, and selected a container from the box. She noticed a carved symbol on the lid that she had missed on the others. He popped the top with a claw to reveal neatly sliced portions of the carrot-looking fruit. With a trill, he handed her the container, which she happily took. The Yautja plucked another container and sat on the bed with it.

Ashaki joined him as she ate her fill of a dozen or so slices of the fruit. They ate in silence while she ate her fruit and Dhare ate a portion of cubed raw meat.

Their empty containers were returned to the cooler where Dhare set it on the floor once they finished. She was the first to say something. The silence had become too much.

"That's a fancy cooler."

Dhare grunted, lying back on the bed to stare at the ceiling with her; his long locs fanned out around his head. His hands rested on his abdomen with his fingers curled in on themselves. He was the poster child of in repose

"That will keep us fed through the storm." He explained, "It will be too dangerous to leave later."

Ashaki curled up beside him, rolling to face him.

"Really? We can't leave at all? Is it really that bad?" She frowned at him, her lips screwing up. Apprehension tickled down her spine. She didn't want to think of what could happen.

What if the hut didn't hold up? What then?

" Sei'i Some have died when they did not take a storm seriously. Nature must be respected. She is a feisty warrior that is not to be disrespected." Dhare turned to face her. Some of his locs slid over his burly shoulder and dropped onto the bed. His mandibles twitched as he met her eyes.

Her head bobbed up and down in understanding. "What about the hut? Are we safe?"

A purr sputtered to life in his chest as if he could sense her trepidation. Her heart beat a little faster as nightmare scenarios ran through her head; the hut blowing away and taking them with it, getting sucked up into a funnel cloud, waking up to find the roof caving in while she slept, and many more possibilities that she tried to push from her mind.

"We will be fine, Ashaki." The Yautja moved closer, his large hand taking hers and pressing it against his bare chest. " Ki'cte little woman. Yautja are well advanced enough to create resistant dwellings. No harm will come to us."

He had called her woman instead of female! Had she died already? Did he really...

She focused back on him, feeling the warmth of his chest under her hand. The strong, steady *ba-bump* of his heart helped to ground her. They were safe and *would* be safe. By his side... she would be safe. Even with his mercurial opinions about her, she had a strong preference of being on equal footing with him and he seemed to be growing.

His apology earlier...she couldn't comprehend how quickly he came around to doing that. Unlike the last few times when they had argued or he had said something hurtful, he hadn't apologized. It was left to simmer until she had to forcibly move on.

But here he was, doing a turn around. This new shift was a solid track to follow.

Perhaps the storm was a good thing. They were forced to be near each other for its duration. Maybe she could finally learn some stuff about him. He had remained a mystery, despite all of the time they had spent together.

"What did you do today?" She asked, hoping a change in topic would help cheer her up.

Dhare messed with the long fur of a pelt he laid on, "I spent the day with my pup."

"Did you have a good time with him?" A small smile spread across her lips as she met his gaze.

He gave an affirmative. "I taught him some things."

She loved that he was at least a caring father to his kids. Even though he said males of his kind typically didn't spend time with their offspring, she delighted in the fact that he was different.

She pressed for more.

"What else did you do? Did you go kill things?"

They had been separated for many hours. He could've done many things during that time and she was curious to know how the alien spent his free time. His eyes darkened slightly, his tusks rattling together as he smirked at her. Amusement sparkled in his eyes.

"I rutted someone named Paj. He was a good *pauk*" The Yautja purred.

She was surprised by how sexually active he was. Sex seemed to be a hobby of his at this point. Everywhere they went he would sleep with someone. It did some as a surprise that he liked to have sex with females and males.

"Dhare...are you bisexual?"

"Am I what? What does bi-sex-ual mean?" One of his brows rose in question.

"Bisexual means that you are romantically and sexually attracted to males and females. We humans have words that explain our sexuality and attraction to one another." Ashaki explained, propping herself on an elbow. "I'm what my kind calls heterosexual, meaning I'm only attracted to the opposite sex." She pointed a finger at herself.

He trilled in understanding, nodding his head, "Indeed. I like males and females."

His muscles bulged as he sat upright in one fluid motion and gazed down at her. "In the Yautja society we are open about intimacy. We have a mating season where females are fertile for breeding, but we freely have sex without defined partnering, unlike humans."

Thankfully Ashaki didn't mind this newfound info.

"They're only fertile one time a year?!" Gasped Ashaki, her mouth falling open. "Lucky bitches! Us humans are fertile once a month!"

Female Yautja had it easy! Having a continuous cycle sucked and she was lucky to have pills that stopped her periods. It also helped to regulate her extremely painful cramps. As a young adult, before she left Mars, she had been diagnosed with benign ovarian cysts. They weren't life threatening so the doctors had refused to operate and instead put her on birth control.

Dhare didn't seem surprised, " Sei'i My step-bearer has monthly cycles. Her body bleeds for multiple days according to my sire."

Step-bearer? An alien having a monthly cycle was a thing? oddly contradicted what he had just told her...

It was her time to cock her head to the side in question, her brows scrunching together, "You just said your women are only fertile once a year..."

He grunted, "I did. My step-bearer is human. Like you."

"Your dad is mated to a human?" In that moment, absolute shock morphed her face.

She couldn't believe it! A human with an alien! A Yautja alien! His own dad!

It was too bad Dhare had proven thus far that he was the furthest person she should be chasing romantically. *Ugh!* Damn her errant emotions! They never listened.

"I just told you, Ashaki. He is mated to a human, Artemis." He explained, exasperated with her slowness. "She was forced to carry his pup but accepted it. That pup is now crawling according to her. They are happily mated. He has killed for her and would not hesitate to do so again." His eyes darkened slightly as he dropped his gaze to the furs, plucking at a pelt.

"Wow." Was all she could say.

It made sense now why he knew some things about humans. Some of the pieces of the puzzle had been put in their proper place.

"How does that work? Humans and Yautja are two different species. Your kind lives much longer than mine."

He was slow to answer. She noticed how his shoulders stiffened.

"She was given some of his blood. Yautja blood has healing properties for humans and extends their lives." Dhare's eyes narrowed slightly as he watched her face. It was like he was looking for a reaction. "Artemis will be given more in a couple of decades to further extend her life."

That explained so much! Their blood was like magic! It was no wonder his body healed so quickly. A human would've been in critical care for months with the injuries he had sustained on the ice planet, but he had been back to his normal self within a week.

It was amazing!

Learning this new info also made her realize that her life was fleeting compared to his. He would only know her for a few decades before she died of old age. Right in front of him she would wither away while he stayed youthful. It was downright annoying that he'd stay young and hot for centuries! He was damn near immortal.

"Well, at least I'll only be around to bug you for another few decades at the most." She smirked.

It was time for a different topic so she brought up the elephant in the room, "So, how are we supposed to pass the time? Sit here and stare at the ceiling? Twiddle our thumbs?" If there wasn't anything to do she'd likely give in to the carnal thoughts she subdued about Dhare.

Dhare shrugged, "Whatever passes the time."

Well that was a lot of help...not!

As she sat there racking her brain for an idea, one struck her. On the last visit to that market planet she had found something that she had been wanting to play with Dhare but never had the chance. She slid off the bed, her alien friend watching curiously as she hauled her backpack onto the bed. Opening the rearmost zipper, where a tablet would normally go, she pulled out a slender white box.

"I have one way to pass the time," she explained as she opened the box to reveal a folded black and white checkered chess board. "I'll teach you how to play."

He leaned closer, scooped up the white Queen piece and rolled it over in his large hand. His tusks tapped together in a quiet rattle and he traced the shape with a claw.

"What is this? A game?" Dhare's locs fell forward, slipping over his shoulders as he examined the board she unfolded.

"Yes, a game. It's called Chess. This is a strategy game." As she placed the pieces on the bed between them, she explained the rules of the game.

Over the next few hours, they play a few rounds. Ashaki started strong taking the first few games as Dhare picked up the rules and the possible tactics. He did so subtly, like the hunter he was. She barely picked up on him, slowly taking the lead on the third game and this time when her king was trapped, by a lowly pawn to add insult to injury, she began to clench her jaw.

"Ha!" She scoffed, "Beginners luck!"

"It is not luck. It is skill." Dhare said, almost demurely, until it dissolved into a sharp fanged smile. "Let us play again."

This time, he crushed her right out of the gate. She balked, but they reset the game. Now he proceeded to win one right after the other, quickly and brutally. Strategy was something he loved to toy with, especially in games so similar to hunting. The king was his prey and his pieces were his weapons. He wished to be effective with all of them, and lose none.

Finally, when Ashaki lost her fifth game, she threw up her hands and excused herself for a shower. It was already well into the night anyway. When she returned, Dhare had rolled over and the lights were down. She settled in next to him.

Later that night as she laid next to him in the darkness, she huddled beneath the fur pelts in an attempt to block out the booming thunder. Each rumble and violent crash made her jump in fright. Never in her life had she heard such an awful storm. Mars didn't have anything like this. Eventually it came to the point that she had enough.

Carefully, Ashaki tip-toed her way through the darkness, following the wall to find her way to the bathroom.

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"Ashaki, where are you going?" Dhare yawned from the bed.

Immediately after, a loud clash of thunder exploded outside. She dropped to the floor into a fetal position and covered her head with a shriek. Her body shook like a leaf on a windy day.

Dhare's voice reached her through her fog of fear. He sounded closer this time as he spoke, that rumbling deep voice of his vibrating in her chest.

"Ashaki...it is only a storm. Remember? All will be fine..." From within his chest came gentle purrs that helped to slightly ease the tension in her body. "Even pups do not fear thunder." A hint of amusement bled into his words.

"I-I hate storms. I g-grew up under a dome..." she sniffed, letting hot tears fall down her cheeks as she curled in a tighter ball. "W-we didn't h-have weather...ever..."

"Oh..." his voice softened considerably.

The purring grew closer until he was on her, drawing her into his arms. She let him scoop her body up and bring her back to bed where he laid her down. Quickly, he settled down next to her and held her close. His body surrounded hers and his locs slid over her head and shoulders as he nuzzled her.

"You are not alone..." he continued to purr, the sound reverberating through her body and straight into her soul. His body was a solid mass of warmth that was working to chase away the chill racing through her nerves.

Her sobs continued despite Dhare's attempts to calm her.

"May I tell you a story my bearer told me? She would tell me tales of the gods when I feared storms. It may help you." One of his hands cupped the back of her head and nuzzled her with the hollow of his cheek.

She nodded and he shifted his body slightly to get more comfortable. The thunder rumbled outside like a mighty drum, beating its pulse to an unknown rhythm. Ashaki snuggled a little closer to him.

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"Mara'khen, the mighty storm god, was once fearful of the powers that the sky wielded. He was mortal then. Nothing but a simple fisherman who fed his village along a great sea that has now long been dry. You see, after a disastrous storm wreaked havoc on his beloved village, he set out to become a god himself to prevent this from happening again.

"Paya would grant him godhood if he killed the deadly sea beast, A'sui. A'sui was a serpent that prayed upon the fisherman when they went to collect their catches from the nets. Mara'khen donned his *awu'asa* and set out to sea with his boat and a harpoon."

Thunder cracked like gunfire in the night causing Ashaki to attempt to nuzzle into him further.

"W-what happened next?" She sniffed, her voice wobbling, "Did he kill it?"

Dhare trilled softly, "Mara'Khen soon found the beast. A'sui was caught in the act of denying another fisherman an honorable death. Rather than dying during a hunt in the name of glory, he was devoured by the sea beast A'sui. Seeing this enraged Mara'khen and he sprang into battle. He slew the beast and brought its head to Paya's temple."

He sheltered her ears from having to hear the crashing thunder explode outside before continuing with his story. Her fingers clutched at his chest harder as a result.

"Paya appeared before him; she was a tall, blue and white female dressed in pearlescent *awu'asa* and shimmering robes. The chief goddess gifted him scaled armor and his new status as god of storms in exchange for the trophy from A'sui. From then on, Mara'khen protected the Yautja from violent storms as he became the wielder of thunderbolts. To this day it is said that he watches over all who are caught beneath a storm." Dhare concluded, hoping his story would have some effect on her fear.

He didn't miss how she relaxed against him, the tension leaving her body at last.

"Are you feeling better?" Worry for her state filled his voice. He craned his neck over her in an attempt to see her face.

"Yes. Thank you." She whispered, her voice hoarse. "I liked your story."

"Good. Now slumber. I will be right here." Dhare reassured.

"Just don't leave me alone, please..."

"I will not."

The next few days were filled with nothing but a domestic intimacy Dhare hadn't experienced with her. A comfortable peace had developed between the two. Hours were spent talking of her human family on Mars or sharing other Yautja legends like the one from the previous night. They played more human games, each one with different and diverse rules. He enjoyed learning and advancing in each.

From within this box he had bought her at the market, Ashaki produced games such as Candyland, something called Battleship, and another called Mancala. His favorite game, however, was a game that involved a sharp blade. This one didn't come from the box and he supplied the blade. Ashaki claimed she learned it on an Oasis. He had been impressed that she hadn't managed to stab his hand as she quickly jabbed her blade into the wood between his fingers on the floor. She held his eyes the entire time, bright and fiery. It was a show of concentration and skill.

Dhare was currently waiting for Ashaki to return from the cleansing room. The sound of the rain hitting the roof helped to placate the nervousness that had abruptly hit him. His time stuck indoors with Ashaki had helped move them forward. There was a new ease between them. It was as if they had fallen completely in sync.

Ashaki would sleep in while he prepared first meal, divvying up portions on small plates, and only awakened when the smell of food permeated the air. He found amusement in the fact that food was a reason for her to pull herself out of the nest.

She would then eat with him and use the cleansing room before coming back to discuss something new to occupy their time. The rest of the day would be full of games and more stories of their lives. Dhare liked to listen to her talk fondly of her deceased family, telling tales of childhood antics she and her siblings would get up to. Ashaki was quite the story teller.

At night she would sleep tucked into his side. The storm raged the loudest at night. As Dhare told, Mara'khen kept them safe. Whether it was the cracking whip of thunder or the heavy rain beating a cacophonous rhythm on the roof, no harm came to them. Ashaki was still fitful in her slumber but he saw how she took his presence as the reassurance she needed.

He liked how her small, plush body fit so well tucked against his. He could tangle his mandibles in her hair and have an excuse to touch her without needing to come up with a reason. Once the storm passed and they were back on the ship, he would invite her to share his nest.

Having her slumber on the floor was wrong. She deserved a comfortable rest every night cycle.

It was the fourth day when the storm finally broke. Immediately, Dhare received a ping on his gauntlet. There was a new mission. A hunt for a *ic'jit* that he had to deliver alive to his clan. There was a snag, though.

They were last seen on a human colony planet.

That familiar tension that creeped over his body before a hunt signaled this little fantasy was over. As they gathered their items and cleaned the space, Dhare could feel the weight of unsaid drama returning to the forefront. He could see it on Ashaki, too, her eyes tightening and that openness chilling considerably.

It was frustrating but all he could do was press on. They had spent too much time on this planet already and Dhare was itching to traverse the stars and begin a new hunt.

The next few days would have to be spent training in the *kehrite* and learning about his prey.

"Come on, Ashaki."

The two of them approached the entrance of the village and Ashaki had stopped to take a long look at the place they had called home for the last week. Leaves and fallen branches mixed with other natural debris littered the ground in places the villagers had yet to clean. High above them the sun shined brightly, a beacon that welcomed the end of their trial by nature. Villagers were scattered around in groups while they cleared evidence of the terrible storm.

Dhare saw no point in giving farewells, unlike Ashaki. She wanted to say goodbye to R'Shasti and her group as well as drag him to do the same with his young pup. The youth was embarrassed when Dhare picked him up in a bear hug.

Here they were now, all of the farewells said and gifts for Ashaki given from R'Shasti and the females, ready to leave this planet. He didn't know when he would come back but he noted that Ashaki favored this planet. There would eventually be some reason for his return for her sake if nothing else.

Their walk to the ship was quiet. Heavy.

Dhare was lowering the ramp when Ashaki broke the silence.

"Hey Dhare," her small hand brushed against his arm when she reached out to touch him. Those golden-brown eyes that he had come to adore were full of mixed emotions, none of which he could parse. His heart skipped a beat, the mechanical whir of the ramp extending faded into the background of white noise.

"I liked this planet. Can we return some day?" Hope in her voice had him turn away to hide his eyes.

" Sei'i" He didn't want her seeing his own emotions so blatantly on display. Vulnerability wasn't something he was exactly comfortable with.

Not yet, anyways.

Together they boarded the ship. Ashaki carried the bag of items she had been gifted and him his own bag of supplies for the ship. He shut the aft bay door and nodded after some further thinking on the matter, "As you wish, Ashaki."

That heaviness draped over them in a thick blanket of swirling emotions, those of which neither of them was willing to admit to the other. Within the last two rotations with Ashaki, sequestered from the storm, he realized that he liked her. He liked her *more* than a friend This was a startling realization and he wasn't ready to explore it just yet.

They both needed space.

"Thank you, Dhare."

He was seating himself in the pilot's seat but stopped mid-motion and turned to see her standing a few paces away, her items in her arms. A small, soft smile lit her round face.

"For what?" His fingers tapped the controls to initiate the engines, cocking his head in question.

"Thank you for being there. During the storm."

The Yautja watched her disappear down the hall, the light tap of her shoes fading beneath the steady rumble of the ship's engines. He shook his head to chase away the rising emotions that stirred in his chest and piloted off of the planet.

Clear blue skies gave way to the dark expanse of space. Once he was clear of the outer gravitational field, he set a course for the next destination and engaged the auto-pilot. Satisfied that everything was good to go, he reclined in his seat and began to read the extensive files on his next quarry. There was much to learn in the two days it would take to reach the target planet.

As he lost himself in his work, he reminisced over the last few days spent with a certain human that was capturing his heart.

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A/N: It's been a while since I've talked to ya'll, but I hope you're enjoying the book so far! I did promise you a glacial enemies to lovers and I'm here to deliver, mwahaha. Enjoy!

Continue reading next part