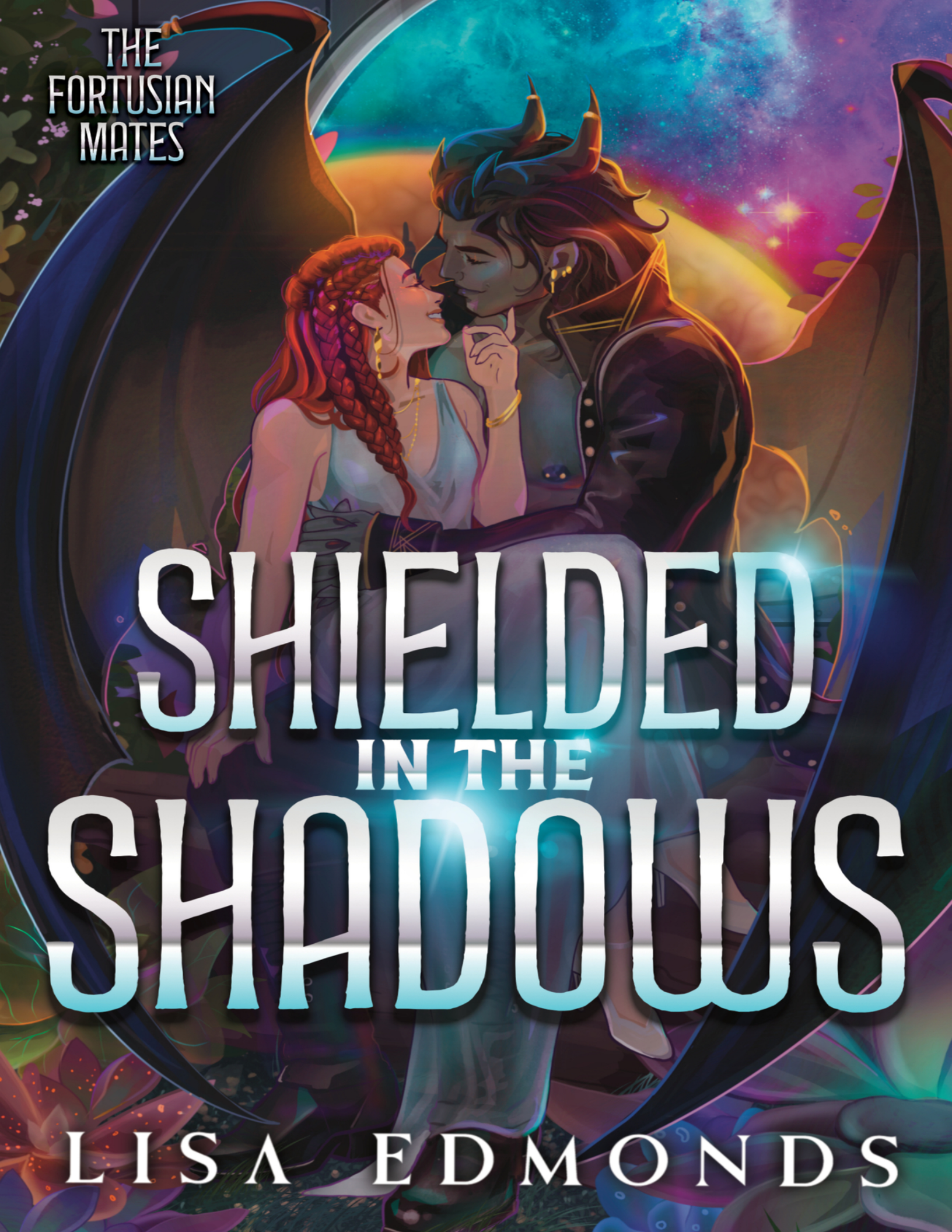

THE FORTUSIAN MATES
SHIELDED IN THE SHADOWS
LISA EDMONDS



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SHIELDED IN THE SHADOWS

A SCI-FI MONSTER ROMANCE

THE FORTUSIAN MATES
BOOK 4

LISA EDMONDS



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ABOUT SHIELDED IN THE SHADOWS



She's a criminal who always flies solo. He's the intergalactic lawman who breaks the rules to steal her heart.

Smuggler Keela Wren has a problem.

There’s a bounty on her head big enough to attract the attention of every mercenary and privateer in the sector, and even her allies can’t be trusted anymore. When a lead on her missing sister forces her out of hiding, bounty hunters converge, plunging Keela into a desperate battle for her freedom.

Intelligence agent Jarrix Tov’ok is just surviving.

His latest undercover assignment aboard a pirate ship is disrupted when the captain sets aside their planned raid to go after a lucrative bounty on a female smuggler. The moment he encounters their target, Jarrix realizes the fierce human warrior is his true mate, forcing him to betray his crew and his mission to get her off the space station alive.

Keela has no use for a mate, even one as well-trained and apparently devoted as Jarrix. The sooner she can be rid of this absurdly attractive male, the sooner she can get back to tracking down her sister.

But Jarrix is equally determined to use their temporary alliance to prove he’s the ideal mate for a woman who’s fought too long and too hard to

compromise on anything—especially command of her ship, her destiny, and her heart.

Tropes include fated mates, he falls first, hurt/comfort, size difference, touch her and RIP, and touch HIM and RIP.

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This one's for the warriors.

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CONTENT NOTES



This book, as with all other titles in this series, contains scenes that depict violence, death, physical intimacy, and some topics that may be disturbing to some readers.

A complete list of content notes can be found **on my website at LisaEdmonds.com/contentnotes.**

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CHAPTER 1

KEELA



Of course Vinian stabbed me in the back the first chance he got. Slimy bastard.

I should have seen it coming. The signs were there. This job had gone a little *too* well. The pick-up had been uneventful. The cargo—twenty unmarked and heavily secured crates—had made the journey across four sectors without any trouble. The handoff in a dimly lit docking bay on Daventi Station went like clockwork. The second half of the promised credits landed in my account on delivery, as agreed.

Once the crates were stacked onto an antigrav sled and taken away by Vinian's people, I'd accepted his offer of a drink. But I didn't make it to the bar he'd suggested on Deck 12.

I didn't even make it out of the gods-damned docking bay.

Lying face down in a pool of my own blood gave me a chance to contemplate the error of my ways.

"It's not personal, Keela," Vinian burbled, his tone conversational, as if he hadn't just plunged a plasma-edged dagger hilt-deep into my upper back. He'd changed the hues of his blobbish central body and many tentacles to dark mottled gray, probably to match the color of the docking bay's floor and walls.

Vinian flicked the dagger, splattering my blood across the metal deck. "This is business," he added, as if *I* was being unreasonable for having cursed his name once I realized who'd wielded the blade.

“A knife in the back is always personal,” I grated. My ears rang with a combination of blood loss and the hum of my nanobots as they mobilized in my bloodstream, fighting to heal the wound before I bled out or Vinian finished me off, whichever came first.

I’d never trusted Vinian. I didn’t have the luxury of trusting anyone. Not even an affable Wundi broker who’d gotten me more than a dozen well-paying contracts over three years.

We’d shared bottles of smuggled booze in dingy back rooms where the kinds of deals he specialized in tended to hatch. Up until about ten seconds ago, I’d never dropped my guard around him, but I’d always sensed Vinian at least respected me, and not just as a smuggler he could rely on to get a job done so we both got paid. At the very least he’d made a lot of money off the jobs I’d completed. Enough not to betray or kill me, I’d thought.

Apparently I’d thought wrong. And that was my mistake. In this business, it only took one.

What really had me seething, though, was that no one should catch a survivor of Ganai’s arenas off-guard. We were the best of the best, in the arena and off-world. Our trainers and endless battles on the sand had honed our bodies and instincts from the moment our hands were capable of holding weapons. For me, that was shortly after my fourth birthday.

Before the arenas had all finally been shut and burned, the child gladiators who’d survived to the age of sixteen and been granted freedom became some of the highest-paid smugglers, mercs, and specialized soldiers in the galaxy. We were vicious. Ruthless. *Monstrous*.

And yet here I was, eye level with the tips of Vinian’s tentacles, cheek pressed into the filthy corrugated metal floor of the docking bay and the familiar sickening scent of my blood and seared flesh filling my nose. At least shock and my nanobots made the physical pain distant.

I gritted my teeth to hold in a groan and craned my neck to look up.

Vinian and I were no longer alone. Two huge serpentine Altasians had entered the docking bay. Both nagas were males, judging by their size and spread hoods. They stared imperiously at me with golden eyes and diamond-slit pupils. Like my betrayer, the nagas towered over me, swaying upright on their coiled lower bodies as opposed to Vinian’s many tentacles. Each carried a plasma rifle and a variety of other weapons in specially designed holster rigs. Their uniforms bore no official insignias. Mercs, maybe. Or someone’s soldiers.

So they'd been sent to either execute me or haul me back to their boss. The fact I wasn't already dead indicated the latter. Who the hells had I pissed off?

Despite my situation, I almost snorted. I'd been a smuggler for a decade, so the suspect list was long. But the list of people who would be motivated *and* wealthy enough to pay Vinian to stab one of his best operatives in the back and hand her over to these Altasians was much shorter.

Oh, this was personal for *someone*, all right. But who?

Since it usually worked in my favor to feign being much more injured than I was, I let out my most pitiful groan and dropped my head as if too weak to hold it up. I needed to stall to give my nanobots time to heal me enough to keep me alive. The tone of their humming in my blood had a frantic edge to it that I didn't like at all.

"What the hells, Vinian?" I didn't have to fake a raspy voice or the wheeze and gurgle in my breathing. My chest felt tight. That dagger had definitely hit my lung. "I thought you *liked* me. I know you liked the credits we've made together. I was planning on us making a lot more."

His burbly laugh made me wish I still had my guns. His nimble tentacles had taken my guns and blades from the holsters on my thighs and waist at the same moment the dagger went into my back. None of them would respond to any bio-signature but mine, so they were useless to anyone else, but seeing them scattered across the deck out of reach made the fire of my hate burn brighter.

"I am fond of credits," Vinian agreed, his chortle stoking that fire in my belly even hotter. "But someone has offered me *favors* worth far more than I could make off you in ten years, and…well, there are other smugglers out there just as good."

A very inhuman growl escaped my clenched jaw. This bastard was already dead, but now I'd take a lot more pleasure in sending him to the afterlife.

Three of Vinian's black eyes stayed fixed on my face while the other three looked at something behind me. "And what I'll make from selling your ship will fund upgrades to my private yacht. Its mating tank needs a better bar, my concubines say. We will drink to your memory once the work is complete."

Icy cold washed through me, narrowing my focus and clearing my buzzing head. The chill had nothing to do with blood loss or the nanobots, or even the temperature of the deck under me.

Nobody threatened to take away my ship and lived.

The *CS Nivilus* wasn't just my means of making a living. It was my first and only real home, my refuge, my armor against a cold and unfeeling universe where my life meant little and my well-being even less. Every day I spent in its pilot's seat was proof that not only had I survived the arenas but that my life was now my own.

The only tentacle Vinian would get on the *Nivilus* would be the one I would cut off and mount as a trophy.

The nagas flicked their tongues, tasting the air in my direction as they swayed. Their genital slits, which hid their sex organs, bulged with unmistakable lust. In one of the great mysteries of the universe, human blood was an aphrodisiac for Altasians. I'd used that fact to my advantage before and I wasn't above using it again. I'd take all the favors I could get right now.

"Please." I didn't have to fake the quaver in my voice since I felt like hells, but my pleading expression was all acting. I'd rather die than ever beg for mercy. "Vinian…"

Very slowly, so he wouldn't interpret it as an attack, I stretched out my right arm, as if reaching for his tentacles like a supplicant. Agony radiated from my wound when I moved, the pain turning my thoughts to static. As I'd hoped, a gush of blood ran down my side, perfuming the air.

The Altasians' swaying—and those bulges—grew more pronounced, while their pupils had blown wide, the diamonds now filling their eyes with black until the gold was nothing more than a ring.

Yes, breathe it in, I willed them. *I smell so good.*

Rather than move away, Vinian sank lower on his tentacles. Drops of viscous fluid dripped from his body and stung wherever they hit my skin. His proximity gave me a close-up look at his dagger, still dripping my blood.

"You had some good years at least, little scrap," he said, with a hint of what might have been strange affection. "That's better than most of your kind ever got. You knew it had to end sometime."

Little scrap.

My stomach contracted, and suddenly I was a half a galaxy away, on my knees in the dirt outside our small house, holding my younger sister in my arms while my mother haggled with an enormous Ganaian male with horns and thick gray fur over our price.

“Ten thousand credits for these little scraps?” the procurer scoffed, his silver eyes cold as he glanced back at Calla and me. He hadn’t given Mother his name. “They aren’t worth two *thousand. Look how thin they are. The younger one won’t survive training, much less her first fight in the arena.”*

Mother’s expression hardened even further. “She will. Their father was a gladiator. He survived to sixteen and earned his freedom. His daughters will do the same.”

The procurer gave us another look. This time, his gaze was less dismissive and more calculating. “Their father will vouch for their parentage?”

She scoffed. “He’s long gone, Procurer. My word will have to do.”

His chuckle reminded me of gravel scraping across stone. “The word of a scrap means little if there is no proof.”

Mother’s mouth compressed into a thin line as the procurer’s stare locked on Calla and me. My sister buried her face against my chest, but I didn’t look away.

My stomach, always aching and hungry, churned like I might be sick. I wanted to grab Calla’s hand and run. She was only a year younger than me, and she could run almost as fast despite her shorter legs. We had to be quick to avoid all the dangers in the city’s alleys and markets, and to be able to snatch food from wherever we could find it. Gods below knew there was seldom food for us at home.

But there was no hiding from the procurers who worked for the arena owners—at least, not for long. Not if they’d made a deal. And I sensed a deal was about to be made, as if the price was a scent carried by the hot wind stirring the dust around us. It settled over my sister and me like a shroud.

“No proof of parentage, nothing but skin and bones,” the procurer mused. One of his horns was broken and jagged at the tip. I wondered if it hurt. “Still, if you’re telling the truth about their father…” He turned back to Mother. “Five thousand credits for both.”

She raised her chin, eyes narrowed. “Eight thousand. They’re stronger than they look.”

The procurer smiled, but the twist of his mouth had no humor in it. “A father who was a gladiator and a mother as immovable as stone. Perhaps these little scraps will be worth the expenditure.” He gave Mother a nod. “Eight thousand, then.”

Everything inside me turned to stone.

Gods below, I hoped Calla wouldn’t remember this day. I hoped the sight of our mother accepting the credit transfer faded from her mind. I hoped she’d have no recollection of how Mother didn’t say a word to us, or the way the door closed in the procurer’s face once the deal was done, leaving us alone with the stranger who’d take us away from this city to another much larger one, where we’d begin our training and face our fates, like so many other little scraps from the dusty human colony towns of the cesspool that was the planet Ganai.

I looked up at Vinian, at his empty eyes and satisfied smirk, and heard the roar of spectators. Instead of blood and metal, I tasted the sand of the arena floor as my faceless opponent stood over me, weapon raised for a killing blow.

All my pain vanished as if a switch had been thrown. I hadn’t died in the sand of the arena, and I wasn’t going to die in this docking bay.

With a practiced flick of my wrist, the plasma-edged lash stored in the bracer on my right forearm shot from under my sleeve, uncoiling as it sliced through the air in a searing arc.

Vinian blinked at me with all six eyes. His mouth moved, but no sound emerged. The dagger he’d used on me clattered to the floor.

I was already rolling to my left and coming up on one knee as Vinian’s body separated into pieces, spilling dark green blood across the deck. His severed tentacles writhed. Far more of his blood now pooled on the deck than mine. Very satisfying given how much he’d apparently enjoyed the sight of me bleeding out.

Not that I had time to relish that fact.

The Altasians were reacting slowly thanks to the intoxicating scent of my blood. I’d hoped to gain a better advantage, but what little I’d gotten would have to be enough.

The nagas raised their guns and undulated their long serpentine bodies in opposite directions as I swung my plasma lash around and over my head. The pain of doing this with a deep wound in my back made everything spin and go hazy for a moment.

Stretched to its full length, the lash crossed the distance between us and sliced through the larger of the two Altasians before he had a chance to fire. His scream pierced the air as his torso split horizontally, severed all the way down to his spine.

As he collapsed, I dashed to where my weapons had ended up after Vinian disarmed me. A bolt of plasma seared the air just over my head as I grabbed one plasma gun and dove behind the dying naga.

The second Altasian fired through his partner's torso, leaving a gaping hole where the male's hearts had once been. The plasma bolt, though diminished by cutting through a thick body, left a scorching wound across my hip.

I clenched my jaw to hold back a scream and launched myself forward, taking cover behind a tall stack of shipping crates with bring yellow symbols indicating their contents were volatile. The remaining Altasian probably wouldn't shoot them trying to get to me and blow up the docking bay—or the entire station, depending on what was in the crates.

I checked my weapon. Fully charged still. Excellent. My odds of getting out of here alive just went up by at least thirty percent.

Biting my lip to stifle a groan, I staggered against the crates. The cold metal felt good on my hot forehead. My body temperature had risen while the nanobots struggled to repair my wounds. I felt like I was boiling inside my skin.

I couldn't decide if I was relieved or disappointed that station security hadn't yet come running. Surely the bay's sensors had detected small weapons fire? Possibly Vinian had paid them off to look the other way until his business here had concluded.

The docking bay remained completely quiet except for the low humming of the station's systems. Despite the naga's bulk, I didn't hear any hint of scales sliding across the metal deck. The way they moved so silently never failed to make my skin crawl.

He knew where I was, so there was no sense staying quiet. "Hey, friend," I called out. "Can we bargain?"

Silence. I took that as a no.

It wouldn’t be the first time I’d paid off a mercenary to let me slip through their fingers, but generally that only worked on mercs who’d been contracted by small-time players. Whoever had sent these Altasians was big enough that Vinian had wanted their *favors*, and those favors had apparently been very valuable. Still, it was worth a shot.

I was ready to put this station behind me and then climb into my emergency medpod and pass out. All the gods above and below, did I *hurt*.

I needed to finish this and get aboard the *Nivilus*. Just because only two Altasians had come with Vinian to the docking bay didn’t mean there weren’t more on their ship. They might already be on their way if the survivor had called for backup.

“*Sssscrap*.”

The low, sibilant voice came from the other side of the crates. It sounded like he was in the open area between my ship and the doors that led deeper into the station.

I really wanted to know who’d made this deal with Vinian and sent the Altasians to bring me back, but I had a feeling this hired gun wasn’t going to give me any answers. He might not even know.

The docking bay had all the usual security features, including a weapons lockdown protocol and remote guidance system that took control of vessels and piloted them into and out of the bay. The former was designed to prevent large weapons fire within the bay, and the latter to reduce the chance of pilot error causing a crash.

For years, whenever I was in this sector, I’d used Daventi Station as a meetup point for jobs. I’d routinely stretched my legs on its promenade. Small but not *too* small, out of the way but not *too* out of the way, busy enough to feel anonymous but not jam-packed, corrupt but not *so* corrupt as to be lawless, the station had been perfect for my needs.

Unfortunately, I was about to ensure I could never come back here again —if I managed to survive, anyway.

I pressed the inside of my left wrist to my mouth, feeling the warm metal of my wristcomm through my bloody sleeve. “Shadow two-five-eight-seven,” I murmured, my voice barely audible even to me. “Siber, target Altasian bio-signature, attack level three. Ready sub hatch on kill.”

The wristcomm buzzed twice to confirm that the *Nivilus’s* AI had received both the emergency code and my instructions.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

Spurred by instincts honed in childhood, I dove out from behind the crates and rolled before my brain had a chance to make a conscious decision about moving. Three rapid-fire plasma bolts seared the air over my head and scored smoking gouges in the deck in my wake. I leapt to my feet and dashed for my ship.

In my peripheral vision, the naga emerged from behind the crates. His rifle, armed with a stun net ejector, was aimed squarely at my back.

I dropped to the deck as the *Nivilus* fired a controlled burst of plasma over my head. It incinerated the Altasian before he could fire the net, leaving only a smoking hunk of flesh behind.

With his death went my only chance to find out who'd put this particular bounty on my head. Oh well. Sometimes I had to choose between answers and survival. This was going to be one of those times.

Alarms split the air, triggered by my ship overriding the station's weapon lockdown protocol and remote guidance system. Time to go.

My vision swam as I scrambled to my feet, grabbed one of Vinian's still-twitching tentacles, and staggered toward my ship's small side hatch. The ringing in my ears almost drowned out the alarms.

I made it to the hatch and slapped my hand to the bio scanner just as the doors to the docking bay ground open. A half-dozen uniformed security personnel spilled through the gap. All of them had their weapons raised.

"Halt!" the human woman in the lead shouted.

Getting arrested and thrown in the brig for violating station laws would likely be a death sentence. I'd be trapped in a three-meter-by-three-meter cell while whoever had paid off Vinian sent more soldiers after me.

I dove through the hatch into my ship as the plasma bolt from the security team leader's weapon scorched the hull right where my chest had been less than a second before. It was a low-level blast designed to injure and incapacitate rather than kill, but the next one might not be.

"Siber, seal hatch!" I rasped.

As the hatch slid closed and locked reassuringly behind me, I rolled to my feet, dropped the bloody tentacle on the deck, and ran for the cockpit.

Or at least I *tried* to run, but it was a stumbling, staggering journey on rubbery legs. Adrenaline and determination had gotten me on my feet, but blood loss and shock meant I had to lean on the hull to stay upright. I left a thick smear of blood the entire length of the corridor leading from the hatch to the cockpit. My vision had gone gray around the edges.

I dropped into the pilot's seat and smashed my fist into the emergency harness activation on the armrest. The straps snapped into place in a blink, criss-crossing my torso and securing me in place.

With its engines and navigation systems already activated by the *Shadow two-five-eight-seven* protocol, my ship automatically launched from the docking bay into the vast silence of space. The abrupt acceleration crushed me back into the chair and made my stomach rebel as if I'd left half my internal organs back at the station. Normally launches—even abrupt ones—didn't affect me much, but I was hanging onto consciousness by a thread.

"Captain, incoming hail from Daventi Station security," the ship's AI Siber said, her voice barely audible over the ringing in my ears and my racing heart.

I gritted my teeth. "Ignore it."

My harness and my control over my digestive system got another test when the ship made three abrupt automatic evasive course changes to avoid the station's tractor beam and several pulse cannon blasts.

"Activating shadow mode," Siber said, still following the emergency protocol I'd activated in the docking bay. "Hyperdrive engaging. Destination, pre-selected coordinates alpha nine-seven."

The lights dimmed, signaling the ship had gone into shadow mode. No beacon, no locating signal, no comms, and no recognizable shield harmonics that might give away my ship's identity or location.

Alpha nine-seven was my designation for Kevii, an uninhabited moon orbiting a quiet Outer Rim mining planet. It was a good place to lay low long enough to recover and plan my next move.

The ship vibrated, the stars blurred, and Daventi Station vanished from my scanners.

I slumped in my chair—at least as much as the harness allowed—and took a deep breath that turned into a gurgling cough. Everything hurt. I heard blood dripping onto the deck next to my chair.

"Captain Wren, your vital signs are reaching critical levels," Siber said. "Loss of consciousness estimated in two minutes. Recommend immediate use of the emergency medpod to avoid cessation of basic life functions."

I'd been avoiding *cessation of basic life functions* for as long as I could remember.

“Activate medpod,” I groaned. “Maintain course and shadow mode protocols while I’m sleeping.” *Sleeping* sounded so much more pleasant than *unconscious*.

“Affirmative, Captain. Rest well.”

With one last, blurry look at the stars streaking past, I released my harness and hauled myself out of the seat. I stumbled my way past my quarters, the unused crew cabin, and the galley to the ship’s medbay, which was in the rear of the ship’s main compartment next to the door leading to the cargo bay.

I kicked Vinian’s disembodied tentacle as I went by. It hit the wall with a satisfying wet *thud*.

My medpod was the second-most advanced—and thus, second-most expensive—bit of tech on the *Nivilus* after its shadow mode systems. The pod hummed and beeped and began flashing red the moment I got within range of its scanners.

“Yeah, I look like shit,” I muttered. “You don’t need to rub it in.”

I toed off my boots and dropped my bracer to the floor next to them. The jumpsuit was a loss already, so I didn’t care that the pod would disintegrate it during treatment. At the moment, the only things I cared about were that I was alive and my ship was putting light-years between me and Daventi Station.

I hauled myself into the pod, flopped on my back, and stared blearily at the medbay ceiling.

My nanobots’ hum changed tone as they synced with the medpod. The vibration was a familiar sensation, one that offered welcome reassurance. I’d survived Vinian’s betrayal. If I were to be honest—which I generally avoided as a matter of principle—until my ship reached hyperspace and my exhausted, wounded body landed in this pod, I wasn’t sure I would.

A frisson of energy danced over my skin as my clothes disintegrated. The medpod began listing injuries aloud, noting my vital signs, and describing what procedures were taking place. The words were indistinct, but I got the gist.

One item did register through the fog in my brain: Vinian’s blade had been doused in an anticoagulant. No wonder I’d lost so much blood so fast. Bastard. I should find a place of honor for that tentacle I’d taken as a trophy.

Something warm pressed against the side of my neck with a familiar and very welcome tingle. All my pain faded, swept away by a pleasant warmth that flooded my battered body. Bliss.

Unconsciousness beckoned—the medically induced kind, not the bleeding-out-on-death's-doorstep kind.

When I woke up, I'd book my next cargo haul. Something hopefully lucrative and far away from Daventi Station. In the meantime, I'd also quietly reach out to some contacts and try to figure out who was behind the attack today. Once I knew who'd sent those nagas after me, I'd decide what I was going to do about it.

For now, I closed my eyes and let the soft darkness sweep me away.

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CHAPTER 2

JARRIX



ONE MONTH LATER

ROUGHLY HALF OF THE INJURIES SUSTAINED BY THE CREW OF A PRIVATEER vessel were inflicted on one another, or so I'd learned.

"Hold still," I snapped at the second engineer, Jonor. Both of his thick right arms were very obviously—and very gruesomely—broken as a result of a disagreement with the ship's weapons master. Their fight had also left the galley in a bloody shambles. "Do I need to tranq you so I can do my job?"

Jonor snarled and bared his fangs, one of which was chipped. "Just try, you scut. You'll be cleaning your own entrails off the floor."

"I could just let you suffer," I muttered, my focus on the medical equipment currently attempting to set and repair the bones in Jonor's broken arms.

As usual, he'd refused to get in the ship's medpod, so I'd had to resort to a slower method to heal his injuries. He worried Kitna, the weapons master, would do something to him while he was trapped in the medpod because that would be what Jonor would do if the situation were reversed. Never mind that I'd never permit something like that to happen in my medbay, or that Kitna wasn't the dishonorable scut Jonor was.

Jonor twitched and cursed at me.

“Shut up, Jonor.” Captain Sjer leaned against the medbay doorway, arms crossed. His thick blue brows were set in an even deeper scowl than usual. “Our very fine medic Tal here is trying to get you patched up before we get to the next job. You want your full share of the take, you got to pull your weight. Half your normal number of working arms, half your normal share. We clear?”

Jonor grunted acknowledgement, but made an obscene hand gesture at me with one of his unbroken arms, using my body to block the captain’s view of the movement.

Sjer’s threat worked, though, because Jonor stopped trying to get off the exam table and go after Kitna to continue the fight. It was a fight he wouldn’t win, but the idiot was determined. I expected him to be back in medbay before too long with more broken limbs, if the captain didn’t lose his temper and just dump Jonor at the next planet or station we visited. That would be my vote, if there were such a thing as a *vote* aboard a pirate vessel, which there wasn’t. The captain’s rule was absolute.

My covert identity for this undercover job aboard the *Fleeting Fancy* was one I’d used before: Tal Noku, a career privateer and ship’s medic who’d been in the game far too long to be bothered by much, whether it was Jonor's combativeness or the chief engineer’s highly imaginative approach to on-the-fly ship repairs.

And after surviving fifteen years as an operative for the Galactic Alliance Intelligence Service, it would take more than name-calling, threats, and obscene hand gestures to push me into putting my fist in Jonor’s flat, three-eyed face, or driving my dagger into his throat and jettisoning him out the airlock.

That didn’t stop me from envisioning it, though.

Maybe I could drop a hint to Sjer the next time we made a supply stop and *accidentally* stumble across a well-qualified replacement second engineer. The trick was to make the captain think it was his idea rather than mine. I had a knack for that, along with languages, hand-to-hand combat, and field medicine, plus a few other handy skills I hadn’t revealed to this crew.

To stay in the game and stay alive, a GAIS operative had to have a lot of knacks.

Jonor had finally settled, but Sjer lurked in the doorway as if he expected the second engineer to change his mind and start swinging at me.

Or did he have something else on his mind?

"Are we still on course for Puret IV, Captain?" I asked over my shoulder, adjusting the osteorepair device on Jonor's lower right arm. It would take another fifteen minutes to finish knitting the smashed bones back together. Kitna had really done a number on this arm in particular.

"We're making a stop along the way," Sjer said, which surprised me. He'd been impatient to get to Puret IV, chasing the best lead he'd gotten yet on a crashed vessel that had disappeared in the area with cargo bay full of items destined for the luxury cruiser shipdock on Raxia Prime.

The *Fleeting Fancy's* crew had been speculating nonstop on what the ship's fate might have been and what would be recovered from its wreckage. Their hopes were high despite Puret IV's inhospitable atmosphere and the number of enormous predators who lived on the planet's surface. It could be our ship's biggest payday in a year, and that was saying something. Sjer had a nose for good-paying jobs.

"Picked up an easy side job," Sjer said with a too-casual shrug, his eyes still locked on Jonor, who was muttering under his breath in his native language. It sounded like a list of injuries he planned to inflict on Kitna in retribution. I heard the Barmian words for *eyeball* and *asshole*.

"There's a bounty out on a smuggler who's supposedly surfacing today on a station only a slight detour off our route to Puret," Sjer continued. "We'll be there in plenty of time to grab her and cash in." He scraped one long claw against the hull. The sound made my wings restless and my tail twitch. "They pay only if we deliver her alive, though," he added.

My eyebrows shot up—both at the change of plans and that Sjer was revealing this to us. He wasn't known for sharing information beyond what was absolutely necessary for the crew to know.

"Enough to delay getting to Puret, sir?" I asked, and if there was a slight disbelieving edge to my voice, I couldn't help it. The missing ship's cargo was rumored to be worth a fortune.

The captain's laugh actually had a hint of real humor in it, which was almost as unsettling as the scrape of his claws on the metal doorway. "The individual who posted the bounty is offering more than just credits for a living prisoner. It's enough to make it worth our while to put effort into taking her alive and relatively unharmed. At least, unharmed enough that *you*—" Sjer's casual punch to my upper arm nearly made me stagger "—can patch her up before we hand her over."

“A big bounty, but they’d *prefer* her alive and unharmed?” Jonor chortled. “So they want the pleasure of breaking her bones and burning off her flesh themselves, then.” He slapped his knee with his lower left hand as if this was funniest thing he’d ever heard. The blow vibrated the exam table he was sitting on and jostled the osteorepair devices on his arms.

I was far too experienced of an operative to let my reaction show, but I focused on settling the devices back in place so I didn’t make eye contact with either male. The prospect of turning someone over knowing they’d be subject to torture—especially a female—made my gut churn.

“I like bounties,” Jonor said, still beaming as if Sjer had suggested spending a week at an Ngaran pleasure resort rather than facilitating murder. “So what’s the offer for going to the great trouble of turning over this smuggler alive instead of just delivering a head? It must be something *big*.” He made the same clicking noise with his tongue I’d heard him make when he saw attractive females.

Sjer eyed Jonor, his expression unreadable. Was he calculating whether Jonor could be trusted to keep the information to himself?

I almost snorted. Of course Jonor wouldn’t keep the information to himself. Within the hour, everyone on board would know about the so-called *side job* and that its value at least equaled if not exceeded that of the missing cargo ship.

“The reward for a living bounty is a *favor*,” Sjer said finally. “One I’d like to have.”

Jonor fell uncharacteristically silent. I knew what he was thinking because I was thinking it too: *favors* came from criminal organizations. They had the potential to turn a private, moderately successful corsair operation into a very wealthy one with powerful connections—as long as the captain of that vessel didn’t mind bedding down with one or more of the most dangerous people in the galaxy. Which clearly Sjer was ready and willing to do.

“Favors are good,” Jonor said, his spine straightening. “Favors can change a male’s fortunes.”

“Which is why a lot of others are going to want this favor too,” Sjer said, grinning to show all his long, sharp teeth. “So it’s to our advantage to get to the station first, pick up the package, and deliver her to the hand-off as fast as possible. We are traveling at top speed to Ghira Station with an ETA of 1750 hours, ship’s time.”

His gaze locked on me. “You’ll be going with the pick-up team, along with Kitna, L’mel, and Boorginamai.” When Jonor snarled, he added, “Jonor and Qo will guard the ship at the dock and make sure you get back on board without any trouble. Take your field medical kit and keep that smuggler alive.” His eyes swirled black. “If she dies, don’t bother returning to the ship. In fact, if she dies, you’d best be sure none of us lay eyes on you again. I want this bounty.”

In a matter of minutes, I’d gone from *our very fine medic* to an explicit death threat. Such was life as a corsair.

“Understood, Captain,” I said, spine straight and wings folded tight. “I’ll be armed and ready to disembark at 1750.”

“Good.” He turned his attention back to Jonor. “When you’re done here, go directly to Chief Engineer Urta’nor and inform him I want confirmation that our engines will run at full capacity for the entire journey from Ghira Station to Forval IX. I don’t want any other bounty hunters trying to take our prize along the way.”

“Yes, Captain.” Jonor was all business now. I probably didn’t need to worry about him hunting down Kitna for a rematch—at least for the moment.

Sjer studied me, his expression cold, as if he suspected I didn’t approve of the side job.

The *Fancy* had collected bounties before, but both the captain and the crew had always preferred going after smugglers’ cargo and salvaging wrecks like the one awaiting us on Puret IV. Sjer had solid contacts for leads on lucrative targets, we had no trouble fencing the goods we obtained, and no one could complain they weren’t earning good credits. Bounty hunting was an entirely different kettle of purpafish.

On the one wing, my approval didn’t mean anything one way or another to Sjer. All decisions aboard the *Fancy* belonged to him, and all his decisions were final.

On the other wing, disagreeable crew members could be a liability, and liabilities went out airlocks.

“This is a good opportunity, sir,” I said, and gave Sjer my best, most bloodthirsty smile—the one that showcased my fangs. Like my wings, horns, tail, and claws, they were an unmistakable sign of my Pallasian shadowbat DNA. And unlike Jonor’s useless fangs, mine could deliver

deadly venom. “As always, I’m looking forward to using my skills to continue reaping the rewards of serving aboard your ship.”

It was the right answer, apparently.

“Good.” With a chuckle, Sjer gave me another punch to the upper arm and strode off down the corridor toward the ship’s bridge.

“By Biramman’s hairy balls,” Jonor grumbled once the captain was out of earshot. “How much longer is this going to take?”

“You’d be done already if you’d gotten in the medpod.” I glanced at the osteorepair devices’ screens. “Ten minutes. You can study the layout of Ghira Station in the meantime. I’m sure the captain has made it available on the ship’s computer.” I swung one of the small terminals closer to the exam table. “Here.”

Jonor’s upper left hand landed on my shoulder. “If you fuck up and the bounty dies, I’ll be the one to skin you alive,” he said, grinning like the sick bastard he was. “I just wanted you to know.”

I knocked his hand off my shoulder. “I don’t think it’ll be up to you, will it? Last time I checked, Sjer is the captain. Unless you’d like to challenge him for the right to sit in the big seat?”

In a blink he was standing, his chest pressed to mine. I was a head taller and just as bulky, and despite his extra arms and the unhinged glint in all three of his eyes, I knew I could take him in a fight. He thought I was a field medic with some weapons and combat training. He didn’t know what I was capable of.

None of them did.

“Careful,” I said softly.

I didn’t need to remind him that Sjer wanted to claim this *favor* more than he wanted to find that wrecked cargo vessel and the fortune in its hold, and that my skills would likely be needed to ensure the survival of the smuggler with a bounty on her head. Even awash in fury, Jonor knew the score.

But the truth hanging in the air was that if he tried to kill me now, he’d die at my hands right here in the medbay. A predator like Jonor knew instinctively when he’d encountered a bigger, better, deadlier one.

Pure, unvarnished hatred flared in his eyes and twisted his features. “When this job is done, we’ll settle this,” he snarled.

I spread my arms, indicating the medbay. “You know where to find me.”

Ignoring the shrill alarms, he yanked the osteorepair devices off and tossed them onto the exam table. His arms weren't fully healed, but clearly his pride and fury overrode his good sense. The bones would finish healing on their own eventually, or maybe he'd visit another medic elsewhere in the meantime.

"Report this to Sjer and I'll sever your spine and rip off your wings," Jonor hissed on his way out the door.

I listened to his boots stomping down the corridor in the opposite direction of the bridge. Likely he was headed to engineering to deliver Sjer's message about the engines.

Despite his threat, Jonor knew I'd report his decision not to finish healing his arms. Sjer needed to know one of his people wasn't at a hundred percent. If I didn't report it and Sjer found out later, it would be my ass. The parting warning was more about saving face than an actual threat. At the very least, Jonor wouldn't try to sever my spine until the job on Ghira Station was done. After that, though, all bets were off. Jonor was a vindictive scut liable to act on impulse rather than good sense. He'd proven that time and again.

I'd probably have to deal with him, then. Ghira Station would be a good place for an accident.

I sent the requisite message to Sjer, shut and locked the door, and activated a triage training module on the screens in the corner of the medbay I'd set up as my office.

I leaned back in my creaky chair and scrubbed my face.

According to my handler, a humorless Tivoran female code named Gitto, the GAIS wanted me serving aboard the *Fancy* because they needed intel on where Sjer was fencing his ill-gotten gains. They also wanted to know more of his contacts, such as whoever had passed along the information about the Raxia-bound cargo vessel going down on Puret IV.

But most of all, Gitto and her superiors believed Sjer was ambitious enough that he wouldn't be satisfied with plundering smugglers' ships and salvaging cargo from wrecks. Almost eleven standard months after I'd sworn my oath to serve Sjer as a medic and fighter, the scenario the GAIS had predicted was unfolding before my eyes.

If Sjer successfully claimed his *favor* for completing this bounty, this crew would likely become affiliated with a major criminal organization.

And that meant as long as I didn’t jeopardize my position, I would go from a good undercover asset to an extremely valuable one.

The price—to start—would be this smuggler’s life. No doubt there would be more costs after this. There always were.

I left the triage training module running on one screen and called up the schematics of Ghira Station on another. It was an open secret that Sjer tracked all computer activity aboard the ship. He’d expect everyone assigned to the mission to be examining the station layout in preparation. I’d need to study as much as anyone else, even if my primary purpose was that of a medic, leaving most of the fighting to the others and focusing on getting the bounty aboard the *Fancy* alive.

But as I flicked through the station layout, memorizing the locations of security offices and other key places, as well as routes from the docking bays to the main promenade, the habitat rings, and so forth, I was composing an encoded message to Gitto on my wristcomm, using an extremely high-tech hidden set of functions not even Sjer’s security scanners had uncovered.

In a few terse sentences, I explained the situation and requested instructions. I had a feeling I knew what my handler’s reply would be, but I sent the message anyway.

An hour later, I was memorizing the layout of the station’s three-level promenade when my wristcomm signaled that I had a response from Gitto.

It was a single word: *Proceed*.

I’d been an operative for fifteen years, but my stomach felt like I’d swallowed rocks.

For my message to have reached Gitto via intersector relay and then a reply to have come back this quickly, the decision had to have been made within minutes, if not instantaneously. The smuggler’s life had been weighed and deemed expendable in those scant moments.

Not that I was surprised. This scenario was what the GAIS had wanted all along: a deep-cover operative embedded in an established privateer crew with a captain hungry to trade piracy and salvage for something more lucrative. I’d be in an ideal situation to feed prime intel from inside a crime syndicate back to the GAIS. It was an intelligence dream come true for my handler. They couldn’t have planned it better.

The monitor showing the triage training froze, went dark, and then flashed up a two-word message from Sjer: *Target Profile*.

Below were an image and a short block of text.

Name: Keela (Full name unknown)
Species: Human, Female
Planet of Origin: Unknown
Age: Unknown (Estimated 30 standard years)
Registered Planet of Residence: None
Owner and pilot of Niven-class cargo vessel, last known designation Defiance
Reason for bounty: Unspecified
Reward for proof of death: None
Reward for delivery in good health: At petitioner's discretion

At petitioner's discretion was code for the *favor* Sjer wanted.

I turned my attention to the single image provided of our target.

At a glance, it had been taken in a crowd on what appeared to be a space station, though there were few clues as to which one. The target was indeed a human female. Not that I could see much of her given the quality and angle of the image, which had only captured her from the chest up, but her species was obvious just from her face. I expanded the image to take up the entire monitor screen.

In this clandestine image, Keela wore a black hooded cloak over what looked like a dark-colored flight suit—a common sight aboard stations. A few wisps of red hair had escaped intricate braids to frame her face, and her eyes were a startling shade of green. She was staring straight ahead, a slight twitch on her lips that might have been a hint of a smirk. I wanted to bite that plush lower lip and I had no idea why.

I stared at the image like it held answers to questions I hadn't even asked yet.

According to my wristcomm, the *Fancy* was three and a half hours from Ghira Station. That was simultaneously not nearly enough time and an eternity.

I did not want to drag this female aboard the *Fancy* and deliver her to be tortured to death on…what planet had Sjer mentioned? Forval IX?

But given the demands of both my handler and my captain, what the hells other choice did I have?

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CHAPTER 3

KEELA



EVEN IN A PACKED AND DIMLY LIT BAR, THE KURUTAN WAS EASY TO SPOT. That was one benefit of meeting someone who weighed nearly a tonne.

This bar's name translated roughly from Beltraxian to Alliance Standard as *Final Chance*, though according to my translator the words in the original language carried a much-heavier connotation of doom. The name might reference its location at the far end of Ghira Station's three-level promenade, or that its patrons might not be welcome at one of the station's more reputable establishments. Or maybe the owner had ended up on this station after a run of bad luck. In any case, Final Chance was the kind of place where I tended to conduct business, so in a way I felt right at home.

My contact was sitting in a booth near the back, one designed for beings of Kurutan size and body type. Their enormous, multi-segmented, insectoid body rested on a padded seat designed so their jointed legs could fold and rest beneath them comfortably. A sizable bottle of green liquid sat on the table in front of them, clasped in one clawed hand. A tube as big around as my thumb ran from the bottle into their fanged mouth.

My entire body was so rigid that I ached from my clenched jaw to my stiff toes.

This is nothing, I reminded myself. *This will be a dead end, just like all the other leads you've chased across the galaxy*.

I couldn't allow myself to hope. Even the smallest shred of optimism just made the pain so much worse when disappointment came—and it

always came. Ten years of searching had led to nothing.

Sometimes I wanted to cancel every request for information I'd placed at intersector relays and comm sites and never post another one, but every time I started to take down the notices, my hand started shaking and I couldn't go through with it.

And whenever I got a response to a posting, which wasn't often—just twice this past standard year—I had to reply.

So here I was on another station, in another bar, with another mysterious contact who wanted to sell me information, because I couldn't help myself. Because I had to keep *trying*.

Both of the Kurutan's eyes, which were on long stalks, followed my movements as I approached the booth and dropped onto the matching bench on the other side of the table. Both were too tall for a human, but I didn't let it bother me.

I studied the Kurutan from under my hood as they took a long drink from the tube. Judging by the way their eye stalks were wavering, this wasn't their first bottle. "N'vera?" I asked.

They inclined their head and made a clicking sound. "You are Asta Irclion."

I always posted the notices as Asta of Ganai, one of many alternative identities I maintained. After my near-miss at Daventi Station a standard month ago and finding out I had a bounty on my head, it was more important than ever for me not to show up anywhere as Keela Wren, red-haired human pilot of the *Nivilus*.

Instead, today I was dark-haired, brown-eyed Asta, pilot of the *Stardust Flyer*, with comm codes, Alliance identification, and ship's registry to match.

"You can speak in your native language," I said, indicating my right ear. "I have a translator."

N'vera replied in a rapid series of clicks that my translator converted to Standard. "Much gratitude for meeting in my language, Asta Irclion. I have information you want. You have payment?"

I barked out a laugh. "Right to the point, I see."

Which was fine. I didn't want to stay on Ghira Station any longer than I had to. We were two sectors from Daventi Station, both my ship and I were disguised, and not a single soul had given me anything more than a passing glance, but the back of my neck had been prickling since I'd docked.

“I have payment ready,” I said. “But you know how this works. I need something I can verify before I pay you a single credit. So talk.”

N’vera made a strange grating sound and launched into a long series of clicks. “I have two pieces of information for you,” the translator supplied. “You will order a drink and when it comes, I will give you the first piece of information for free. You will pay the full amount for the second.”

My eyes narrowed. “I don’t want a drink.” I needed a clear head as long as I was on the station. I’d drink once I was back aboard my ship and safely away from here.

N’vera made that strange grating noise again. Was that a laugh? I’d never heard a Kurutan laugh before, so I couldn’t be sure.

“You offend me,” N’vera said via the translator. “Among my people, it is expected to conduct business only after a ceremonial greeting. As I doubt you know the appropriate Kurutan dance, I offer to drink with you instead. It is a blessing upon our business.”

“Looks like you’ve blessed our business enough for both of us,” I said, gesturing at their mostly empty bottle. “I’ll bless it once I know whether I’ve wasted my time and fuel coming here. Deal?”

N’vera clacked their claws. “Agreed. You are entertaining, Asta Irclion.” They withdrew a small datapad from a bag slung around their side and slid it across the table. “Here is the first piece of information. As promised, I offer it freely.”

Warily, I nudged the datapad closer. Seemingly unperturbed by my overt distrust, they drank from their tube and watched our surroundings.

The screen appeared to show a personnel record from the Alliance Defense. My heart nearly jumped out of my flight suit when I saw the name, image, and ID number at the top: *Lieutenant Calla Wren.*

It was unmistakably Calla in the image. My little sister, all grown up. The tiny girl who’d been ripped from my arms so long ago had transformed into a beautiful woman with long red hair and green eyes that looked so much like mine that it hurt like a kick to my jaw.

She stared straight at me from the screen, her expression fiercely determined. And she was wearing a green Alliance flight suit. The orange piping signified she was an enlisted soldier. Two pips on her collar proved her rank. A *lieutenant*.

We’d both survived Ganai and become pilots, but on opposite sides of Alliance law. I’d think more about that later, when I could.

With a trembling hand, I scrolled down to see more of Calla's service record.

Homeworld: Ganai
Species: Human (Genetically Verified)
Age: 28 Standard Years
Enlistment Location: Havel Prime
Final Rank: Lieutenant
Qualification: Solo Pilot, Delta Seven Long-Range Deep Space Fighter
Assignment Station: Epsilon Squad, Outpost 60, Solan
Status: Deceased (Ship Destroyed; Remains Not Recovered; Believed Killed in Combat, Sector Alpha 57-1908B; Final Report and Commendation Filed by Commanding Officer Squad Captain Ezr Proos)

The date of her death was listed as a little over a year ago.

This file wasn't her complete service record—just basic information someone with halfway decent skills could scrape from the Alliance Defense database. A better hacker could extract more.

Numbly, I scoured every word repeatedly, drinking in the information and building a history for my sister between the lines. Somehow she'd traveled from Ganai to Havel Prime, where the Alliance Defense had a large recruitment center and training facility. And then she'd earned her way into flight school and become a solo pilot in a Delta Seven fighter, one of the Alliance's premier ships.

And then she'd died in Sector Alpha 57-1908B, wherever the hells that was, her body reduced to ashes scattered among the stars.

My numbness gave way to grief and fury. I wanted to scream. I wanted to find whoever had killed her and cut them into pieces. But I couldn't move. I was a hollowed-out husk hunched in a booth across from a silent Kurutan.

"How did you know where to find this?" I didn't recognize my own voice.

"That is the second piece of information, Asta Irclion." The translator's tone didn't change, but N'vera's clicks were a little quieter than before,

almost lost in the din of voices that filled this bar. Maybe they were sympathetic, but their chitinous face made it difficult to tell. “She was beloved to you?”

“Yes.” No sense trying to pretend otherwise, even if it meant N’vera could try to squeeze me for more now that I’d given away a personal connection to the subject of my search. I’d simply stated in my postings that Calla and I had fought together on Ganai and I was seeking a reunion.

I couldn’t find it in myself to care that I’d screwed up, but I still had to add, “I’m not paying you more credits than we agreed upon.”

“I did not ask for more credits.” N’vera gestured at the blinking corner of the datapad with one of their clawed hands. “But I have more to tell you. Pay.”

My sister was dead. She’d been dead only a year, and I hadn’t managed to find her in time. How many more wounds could I be expected to take today?

As many as N’vera wanted to dish out, I supposed. And I had no choice but to pay for the privilege because I needed to find out what else N’vera knew. I owed Calla at least that much.

Robotically, I tapped in a code on my wristcomm, passed it over the light, and paid.

“Many thanks for upholding your part of our business.” N’vera inclined their head. “I must tell you something of myself, if you will indulge me. I assure you it is important for you to hear, Asta Irclion.”

Somehow I doubted it, but my legs had been cut out from under me, so I stayed in the booth—at least for now.

“Until recently, I was employed by a Kurutan of great standing, whose name I will not mention as I remain loyal and it does not concern you,” N’vera said. “This Kurutan had chosen as their life’s mission to avenge the death of their parent, who died at the hands of assassins not long after their birth.”

“Sounds like a mission I could get behind,” I said. “The prospect of vengeance appeals to me at the moment.”

“No doubt.” N’vera took a long drink from their bottle. If I’d thought whatever they were drinking would be palatable for me, I might have asked for a swig. “I found their quest quite compelling myself, and assisted them as they searched for the culprit across the galaxy. But once we found the former assassin my employer believed had killed their parent, they

discovered they had been mistaken. The assassin had not slain my employer's parent, and in fact had prevented my employer, who was a young child at the time, from suffering the same fate. Two years of searching for vengeance had instead led to a reunion of savior and the one he'd saved."

"Heartwarming." I made a rolling gesture. "Is this story meant to discourage me from seeking vengeance for…" My throat closed and I couldn't quite finish the sentence. I wasn't ready to say the words aloud.

"No, Asta Irclion. This story is important because when my employer found the assassin they had sought for so long, he was retired and living on a moon at the edge of Alliance space, and he was not alone." N'vera leaned forward, claws clacking. "Calla Wren is his mate. I heard her speak her full name to my employer, and saw her alive with my own eyes several months after her supposed death. The Defense thinks she is deceased, but she is *not*."

I felt as though my innards had been ripped out and then stuffed back inside in all the wrong places.

The urge to kill this Kurutan for gutting me with that gods-damned Defense file and then doing *this*—giving me hope only an idiot would cling to—compressed my vision until all I saw for several heartbeats were N'vera's eyeballs waving at the end of their spindly stalks. If my informant was telling the truth, those eyes had seen my sister alive and in the flesh.

I clenched my hands. My nails dug into my thighs. "What moon?" I grated. "I need coordinates."

N'vera's eyes dipped meaningfully toward the datapad and its blinking red light. A number had appeared beside the light. A number twice as much as the number of credits I'd already transferred.

For all the suffering and pain I'd experienced in my life, the universe had never felt quite as ruthless as it did in that moment.

The fact I should have seen it coming but somehow hadn't ripped a laugh right out of me. The sound was so loud and harsh that a dozen bar patrons nearby turned to look and N'vera clacked their jaw in what seemed like alarm.

I hated N'vera, but I had to respect them too for laying such an expert trap. It was a weird feeling—one I'd felt before, most recently while lying in my own blood at Vinian's feet…er, tentacles.

N’vera had drawn blood too, just not the kind that could be seen. Maybe I’d take one of their clawed hands and put it on the wall next to Vinian’s severed tentacle. Or maybe not. It would depend on how the next minute played out, the knowledge about Kurutan ways I’d absorbed in my travels, and how well I’d read the being across the table from me.

“I don’t have that much,” I said, which was true. “And I can’t raise the difference soon enough to suit both our needs. But I want to find my little sister. I owe her that as a matter of family honor.”

N’vera’s insectoid expression was impossible to read, at least for me, but I thought their gaze had turned appraising.

“Family honor means a lot to your people. It doesn’t mean shit to most of mine, but it does to me,” I said. “Calla is all I’ve got and I couldn’t protect her when we were kids—children, younglings,” I clarified when N’vera’s head tilted. “So I have a debt of honor I must pay.” I leaned forward. “I can transfer just over half that amount right now, which is all the credits I have minus enough to fuel my ship, and I’ll bless you and your journey with a true and grateful heart.”

And leave your appendages intact, but I didn’t add that part. If I’d assessed N’vera correctly, threats would get me nowhere, but invoking family honor and offering to bless their life’s journey might.

Slowly, N’vera reached for their datapad.

I watched them drag it close, tap its screen with long, curved claws, and swipe their palm across a scanner. Then they pushed it back across the table.

The figure in the corner had dropped by half.

I held my wristcomm above the light but didn’t tap in my confirmation code. If N’vera refused to give me the coordinates after I paid, or they’d lied about seeing Calla alive, I’d be screwed worse than I’d been in a long, long time. I’d have a near-empty credit account, a ship with its fuel depleted by half, and be possibly—*probably*—no closer to finding my sister than I was when I walked into this bar.

This would be a leap of faith, and I hadn’t had any faith in anything or anyone but myself in a very, very long time.

“The coordinates?” I prompted, arm poised over the datapad.

N’vera made that strange grating sound again. It was definitely laughter—or the Kurutan equivalent. I grinned, but there wasn’t an ounce of humor in it.

I wasn’t going to get any coordinates without paying first. Gods above, it was hard to think about giving away almost every credit I had to my name on the *hope* N’vera didn’t fuck me over.

Years ago, after a job had gone dramatically sideways at the delivery location on Pelles, I’d had to pull a J’noran dagger out of my own thigh and then use the only thing available—my enemy’s plasma-edged blade—to cauterize the wound so I didn’t bleed to death. I hadn’t gotten my nanobots at that point, so my options were far more limited.

The decision hadn’t been whether to pull the dagger out, but whether to do it quickly or slowly. I’d ended up pulling the dagger out slowly and then slapping the plasma-edged blade to the injury so fast I’d barely registered that I’d moved. The searing heat had already done its job before the pain hit.

The lesson wasn’t that one hurt more or less than the other, but that sometimes it was better to just get it over with.

I typed in my confirmation code and watched the blinking red light on the datapad turn solid as the funds transferred. The sudden emptiness of my credit account was echoed by a hollowness in my gut.

Without hesitation, N’vera rattled off a set of coordinates. My fingers danced across my wristcomm display, securing the information in an encoded sequence only I could access. I also transferred the data to my ship just in case.

“I bless your journey, Asta Irclion.” N’vera’s eyestalks tilted up, swiveled, and leaned forward to focus on something going on behind me. “However short it might be.”

I dove under the table just before a flurry of blaster shots punched smoking holes through the bench where I’d been sitting a heartbeat earlier.

For a being who weighed close to a tonne and ambulated on four long legs with flipper-like feet, N’vera could move surprisingly fast and with astonishing dexterity considering their bulk. By the time I’d rolled under their bench and taken cover in the empty booth behind it, my Kurutan contact was out of sight, lost in the sudden chaos of patrons scrambling to get out of the line of fire or using the chaos as an opportunity to start fights of their own.

As if this sort of thing happened with regularity, employees of Final Chance had already lowered protective shielding over their inventory and

retreated through a door in the back, content for the time being to let the chaos sort itself out.

Beings who frequented station bars like this one tended to love a good fight. I'd been known to partake myself from time to time. If nothing else, a brawl was a good way to let out some pent-up restlessness or aggression. The rush was pretty great too. More than once, I'd ended up sharing a bunk later with a fellow fighter who wanted to blow off steam in other more pleasurable ways. The memories sent a little tingle through me. Good times.

Judging by the pair of armor-clad Atolani mercs headed straight for me, weapons raised, though, this was not going to be one of those good times.

I had no time to wonder how I'd been identified. There was another merc headed my way—this one an enhanced Halutan, complete with a pulse rifle mod on his right arm and trimetal exoskeleton on his legs. All three of his eyes were locked on me. And he was grinning.

I grinned back and cracked my neck.

Without missing a beat, one of the Atolani whipped around and shot the Halutan in the forehead. Sparks and blood burst out the back of his skull. He went down instantly and didn't move again.

The shouts, screams, and frantic scrambling of other patrons doubled in both volume and violence.

My plasma gun had already dropped from my sleeve into my hand. I fired two shots at the second Atolani. Both hit a personal disruptor shield. The energy displacement knocked him back a step and sent several bystanders sprawling.

He returned fire almost immediately, but my earlier shots had bought me the precious seconds it took for me to roll under several tables and then find cover behind a low wall that divided the booths from an area of the bar used for gambling. The Atolani's weapons fire hit the wall, burning metal and sending plumes of noxious smoke into the air that burned my eyes.

With a rumble, the doors at the main entrance that led to the promenade and the smaller one at the side entrance began to close, threatening to trap me inside Final Chance with the Atolanis and any other bounty hunters who might have tracked me down.

I dove for an overturned table, intending to use it as a shield to reach the side door, but a flurry of plasma bolts drove me back behind the wall.

The doors closed with a heavy *thunk* and locked.

Gases in multiple colors streamed into the bar through ceiling vents. Either station security or the bar owners—or both—apparently weren't willing to let things spiral out of control and opted just to gas the lot of us.

I pulled a membrane hidden in the collar of my jumpsuit up and over my nose and mouth. The inside of my nose burned, making my eyes water, as some of my nanobots swarmed to act as a second layer of filtration against the knockout gases.

One by one and then seemingly all at once, the bar patrons cursed, screamed, and collapsed to the deck with *thuds*, *clanks*, and in the case of the gelatinous Ivarians who'd almost made it to the main doors before they'd shut and locked, a nauseating kind of wet *plop-plop*.

As I dashed for the employee door, the Atolani males stumbled and fell, firing wildly in my direction as they went down. One lucky shot by the one who'd killed the Halutan burned through my cloak, leaving a streak of fire across my side that made me curse and stagger.

His companion fired a different weapon. A dart hit my thigh and embedded itself deep into the muscle. It burned like acid.

I clenched my jaw and yanked it out. I felt the dart snap inside my leg as I did and the gods-damned thing came out minus its tip. A tracker.

My head swam and I careened into the wall, stumbling to one knee behind a table. *Fuck*. Not just a tracker—the tip was also loaded with some kind of drug.

I let out a garbled sound. My tongue was going numb. The Atolani smirked, showing his fangs, before his eyes rolled up in his head and he hit the floor.

My nanobots had already swarmed the wound in my leg. Apparently they'd detected the drug or poison loaded into the dart because my right wrist tingled as my bracer injected the antidote through my skin into my bloodstream. Two buzzes in my wristcomm told me the tracker had been deactivated by my nanobots. I still wanted to dig it out, but that would have to wait until I got back to my ship.

My bracer automatically injected painkillers and a stimulant once the drug was neutralized. I was in motion before my head had even cleared. My tongue was still numb, which was annoying but not particularly debilitating.

I made it through unconscious bar patrons to the Atolanis. Their personal disruptor shields prevented me from killing them with my plasma gun, so I used my dagger to do the job. I wiped their black blood off on

their clothing and then checked to make sure the Halutan was no longer a threat. He *looked* dead, but with all those enhancements, I couldn't be sure he wouldn't heal, even from a head wound. So I used my plasma lash to take his head clean off.

As blood and sparks sprayed from his severed neck, the back of my neck prickled. I spun, lash and gun at the ready, but the bar was still. Everyone but me appeared unconscious.

It wouldn't stay that way for long, though. Security would be coming through the doors at any moment. And who knew how many more mercs might be waiting in the promenade for their chance at me. I had to assume if the Halutan and Atolanis knew who I was, others did too—though *how* they knew was still a mystery, as was the identity of who'd put the bounty on my head. I'd asked my usual sources of information, but no one had an answer.

Without warning, the door at the back of the bar that led to employee areas slid open. I dove for cover behind an overturned table, expecting security officers to flood the bar. Instead, there was only silence.

Cautiously, I peered around the table. The corridor beyond was entirely empty. No bar employees, no security officers. No mercs lying in wait. What the hells?

The command panel next to the door was blinking erratically and emitting tiny sparks. My eyes narrowed. A malfunction? At this precise moment? Definitely not a coincidence.

An alarm sounded at the bar's main doors, followed by a heavy *thunk-thunk* of the locks disengaging. I was about to have company. Time to go.

Maybe someone had opened that rear door on purpose, and maybe not. But an exit was an exit, and it was probably no worse than any other way out of here. I'd have to sneak and fight my way back to my ship regardless.

As I dashed to the open doorway, I spoke quickly and quietly into my wristcomm, initiating a series of emergency contingencies similar to those I'd used to depart Daventi Station to prepare for a speedy exit from where I'd docked on Deck 14. Siber acknowledged my commands with a series of buzzes and confirmed no one had approached my ship in my absence.

According to the station schematics and guidance displayed on my wristcomm, the employee entrance led to a maze of corridors behind the promenade's shops and restaurants that in turn connected to maintenance

hallways and tubes. I had to get from this level of the promenade down to Deck 14. That was ten decks.

As I started down the empty corridor, the door to the bar beeped and ground closed with a high-pitched whine that made my teeth hurt. The panel beside the door sparked, popped, and emitted a plume of smoke before going dead. That door probably wouldn't be opening again anytime soon without plasma cutters.

The only way forward was to go deeper into the tunnels and back rooms behind this promenade level. Someone had seen to that. All the little hairs on my body stood on end.

Every instinct was telling me this dim corridor might *look* empty, but I wasn't alone. Cloaking shields? Hidden surveillance? Natural camouflage? Or some kind of new tech I wasn't familiar with?

Best to let them think I wasn't aware of being watched, at least for now. I'd deal with whatever or whoever was on my tail at my first opportunity. They were bound to show themselves sooner or later. Hopefully sooner.

As the Atolanis and the Halutan could attest, you came after a survivor of the Ganai arenas at your own peril.

Dagger and plasma gun at the ready, I headed for my ship.

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CHAPTER 4

JARRIX



A BURST OF PLASMA FIRE AND A SUDDEN CACOPHONY OF SHOUTS AND screaming rang out just as our team approached the Final Chance bar's main entrance via the promenade.

"Fuck," Boorginamai rumbled. Like all Merdians, his voice sounded like boulders grinding against each other. "We are late to the party, brothers."

"It is Jonor's fault," Kitna hissed, raking his claws through his spiky hair. His forked tongue lashed out to taste the air. "Had he not argued about trading assignments with L'mel, we would have arrived sooner. Sjer will kill Jonor for certain now."

Not if I get him cornered first, I thought.

Pushing and shoving each other to escape danger, patrons poured out of Final Chance. One look at Boorginamai's bulk and Kitna's many-fanged glower and even the most panicked escapees gave us a wide berth.

More weapons fire from inside the bar made us all growl and hiss. "They will kill the bounty," L'mel grunted. The ship's navigator preferred a modified J'Noran crossbow, which he carried on his back. "We will lose our chance at a great favor if she dies." He turned to me. "You must not let her die."

"I'm aware," I snapped.

L'mel scowled, but I ignored him. Jonor's behavior plus my reluctance to participate in this mission had put me in a foul mood—one I didn't

bother to hide. In fact, the closer we got to our quarry, the more my entire body seemed to rebel at the idea of letting Boorginamai get near her with the manacles he carried on his belt, while simultaneously driving me to find Keela. Find her, and keep her safe.

Nothing about how I felt made sense, and that irritated me too.

Without warning, the bar's two entrances began to close. The locked doors would trap our bounty inside with the mercs who'd already opened fire on her.

Boorginamai, L'mel, and Kitna cursed and started to run, but none of them would get there fast enough.

I leapt into the air and flew toward the Final Chance's main entrance. At full speed, I careened through the rapidly closing gap, hit the deck, and immediately rolled behind the deserted bar to take cover. I glimpsed Kitna's furious face just before the doors shut and locked. A flurry of dull thuds were probably his fists pounding futilely against the thick, blast-proof door.

The second smaller side entrance locked down as well, effectively containing the remaining patrons and the mercs who'd located Keela before we'd managed to track her to this location by hacking into the station's biometric scanners.

Containment wasn't the only goal, though, apparently. A mixture of gases poured into the sealed bar from the ceiling. Those trapped inside the bar began to drop.

To quote Boorginamai, *fuck*.

Fortunately, thanks to the genetic engineers on my homeworld of Fortusia, my Pallasian shadowbat DNA didn't just give me obvious advantages like wings, horns, and a tail.

I dropped my medical pack, let go of my humanoid shape, and turned to shadow. My empty clothing and boots crumpled to the deck next to the med kit.

As always, my stomach lurched and my awareness faded in and out as my form changed. All my senses had to adjust to perceiving and interacting with my environment as a shadow—a shadow that wouldn't be affected by knockout gas.

A rapid exchange of weapons fire and a muffled curse were the first sounds I heard clearly after my shift. I flew high into the shadows above the bar to hide my presence and observe the scene.

A human in a dark cloak was leaning against the far wall, a plasma gun in one hand as she glowered at a pair of heavily armed Atolani mercs. They were the only beings left conscious in the bar. Everyone else had succumbed to the gas.

The female, who wore a filtration membrane over her mouth and nose, yanked something from her thigh: a commonly used dart, designed to deliver both a tracking device and a paralytic drug. Judging by the way the female's mouth twisted, she'd recognized it too. She staggered against the wall as the Atolani finally passed out from the gas.

I flew along the ceiling, keeping to the shadows as I approached the female.

Despite her hooded cloak and her disguise—dark hair and eyes and the colorful tattoos that ran along her hairline and fanned out across her right cheek—this was unmistakably our target, Keela. I'd spent hours staring at her face for reasons I couldn't understand, memorizing every feature while doing my damnedest to also commit the layout of Ghira Station to memory because her life and mine depended on it.

I expected her to collapse almost immediately from the effect of the drug in the dart. Instead, as I got closer, my enhanced hearing caught the sound of a device on her body emitting a series of buzzes.

She shook her head, blinked a few times as if clearing away disorientation, and headed straight for the now-unconscious Atolanis, her steps brisk and unwavering despite the drug in her system and what appeared to be a plasma burn to her side.

As she strode directly below me, apparently unaware of my presence, a scent reached me through the overwhelming stink of the gas mix combined with body odors and the smells of plasma burns and scorched metal. The scent reminded me of warm sun on grasses native to my homeworld combined with a sweetness that made my fangs tingle. The effect was so instantaneous and powerful that I shuddered uncontrollably. For the first time in all my years, I damn near changed forms involuntarily.

My mate.

In the eternal moment that followed this realization, I felt myself change down to my marrow, as though every cell in my body had re-shaped and re-tuned itself to center on this magnificent female to the point that nothing else in the universe seemed to matter.

Keela waded through the bar's unconscious patrons to the Atolani mercenaries, whom she dispatched quickly with a plasma-edged dagger. And then she went to the side of a cybernetically enhanced Halutan and removed his head with a three-meter-long plasma lash that emerged from a bracer on her right arm.

Gods above, my mate was quick and lethal. I had never seen anything more beautiful or arousing.

Abruptly, Keela spun around, brandishing her plasma gun and lash. She scanned the bar for threats, her sharp gaze moving past the shadowy alcove where I floated. She'd sensed my presence somehow, or her fighter's instincts were telling her to watch her back. My appreciation for her as a warrior, already considerable, increased further.

To fight at her side would be an honor without measure. To earn her trust and love, an even greater one.

I wanted to change forms, declare my devotion, and fight at her side all the way to her ship. And then I wanted to leave this station and its dangers, including the crew of the *Fancy*, far behind to begin our lives together.

But the cold reality was that the moment I returned to my physical form, I'd be vulnerable to the gases in the bar as well as her weapons. In the wake of the mercs' attack, Keela's every instinct would be focused on self-preservation and escape. My mate was clearly a skilled fighter and warrior. The sudden appearance of a Fortusian male, especially a naked one, would not offer the opportunity to explain who I was and why I would give my life to keep her safe.

We needed an exit strategy and a clear path to her ship—hopefully one that would give me a chance to establish myself as her ally and protector. When she left this station, I intended to go with her.

Unseen, I flew to the rear door that granted access to the maze of corridors running behind the bars, restaurants, and shops of the station's promenade. I placed my shadowy hand on the control panel by the door and used my ability to manipulate electrical fields granted by my Dekaran eel DNA to disrupt the mechanism.

With a hiss and a shower of sparks, the control activated. As the door slid open, I flew into the corridor beyond, ready to confront any dangers that lurked, but the corridor was empty.

The sounds of the promenade door unlocking and the gases venting from the bar were followed by quick, light footsteps heading my way. Keela

burst through the open door and flattened herself against the wall only a few feet away from where I floated unseen. Her sharp gaze swept the empty hallway, the furrow between her brows deepening. I could almost taste her suspicion and distrust. I willed her to feel my confidence in her and my vow to keep her safe, but as we hadn't yet touched, much less bonded, I doubted she sensed any reassurance from me.

I forced the door to the bar to close and melted the controls, sealing us in the corridor. Keela's visible tension increased, but her attention went to her wristcomm and its display of the station's layout.

Peering over her shoulder from above, I noted her ship appeared to be docked on Deck 14, in a quiet area with lower docking fees due to its distance from the promenade and other station amenities. The only docking rings lower than that were cargo-only docks. The *Fleeting Fancy* had docked on Deck 10.

Keela's wrist display offered several potential routes from our location to her ship. Like us, she'd clearly studied the station's schematics and planned ahead.

Apparently having selected her route, Keela set off down the corridor at a brisk, purposeful walk, giving no hint of either the dart injury in her leg or the plasma wound to her side I'd noticed earlier. In fact, the tears in her jumpsuit and cloak appeared to have mended themselves, leaving no visible trace of damage. Anyone seeing her now would have no idea she'd been burned or hit by a dart.

I flew ahead, watching for danger as we approached the first intersection of corridors. When I glanced behind me, I nearly flitted into the wall in surprise.

In mere seconds, Keela's human face had vanished, replaced by the blue-skinned, three-eyed, noseless features of a Gandarian. And her cloak was now dark blue with gold trim, the signature colors of the Gandarian merchant class.

The biomask and nanotech clothing were impressive, but even more so was the change in her gait and body language. She moved like a Gandarian rather than a human, her steps heavier and stride shorter. Gandarians were a common sight on Ghira Station since Gandar was in an adjacent sector of Alliance space. Had we crossed paths on the promenade, I wouldn't have given her a second glance.

A strange warmth grew in my chest. At first, I didn't recognize the sensation. Then I realized it was pride. I was *proud* to be the mate of this highly trained, brilliant, and adaptable female.

Head high and shoulders back, Keela turned left at the first intersection and began weaving her way through the workers rushing in all directions laden with everything from stacks of crates to cages containing live animals. She moved with purpose and confidence as if she'd traveled these corridors dozens of times, and not at all as if she were fleeing converging mercenaries. I stayed close, taking advantage of the shadows along the ceiling to move unnoticed.

Without missing a beat, Keela veered to the right, activated one of several unused antigrav sleds docked along the corridor, and used its controller to drive it in front of her. To onlookers, it would appear as if she were a simple merchant who'd delivered part of her cargo and was now headed back to her vessel to pick up another load. The sled added another layer to her disguise. Again, I was impressed by her quick thinking.

The dull roar of voices in the corridor ahead changed pitch and several beings let out surprised and annoyed exclamations.

I spotted a flash of familiar red through the crowd. If I'd had teeth in this form, I would have ground them together.

Jonor.

He was stalking through the crowd in our direction, knocking unlucky beings aside simply with his bulk. In his upper arms, he cradled his personal oversized pulse rifle. Such a weapon would cause significant injuries. Did he plan to use it against Keela? Surely not. Sjer would never stand for it. He wanted her alive and as unharmed as possible.

The rifle wasn't my only cause for concern. Clipped on Jonor's belt next to his favorite dagger was a biometric scanner, which would be feeding information on every being in his vicinity to an earpiece.

In seconds, he would be face-to-face with my mate. I had no idea if Keela's disguise was purely visual or if she had some way of fooling a biometric scanner as advanced as the one on Jonor's belt, but I wasn't about to take the chance.

Still in shadow form, I darted ahead to Jonor's side and reached for the scanner.

If I'd had time for finesse, I could have melted a single component that could easily have been mistaken for a manufacturing defect. But I *didn't*

have time, so I fried the entire scanner in a massive surge of electrical disruption. The device's superheated casing broke open with a burst of blue flame, a shower of sparks, and a puff of foul black smoke.

Cursing, Jonor ripped the scanner from his belt and flung it away. It hit a Forbian trader in the face and then skittered across the deck, where a lumbering Zaltrudan stepped on it and crushed it flat.

With a roar, the offended Forbian swung at Jonor's face. Jonor leaned back so the Forbian missed his chin by inches and then used his opponent's momentum to send him crashing into the wall.

Having probably witnessed similar occurrences often enough, most beings in the vicinity immediately divided into two groups: those who egged on the fight, treating it as entertainment, and those who fled to avoid either becoming collateral damage or the inevitable arrival of station security.

Keela opted for the latter. She steered her sled against the wall and abandoned it. Maneuvering it through the gathering crowd would have been more trouble than it was worth. Similar sleds would be docked throughout the station's service corridors, ready for use by traders and shopkeepers.

I had no idea why Jonor was here instead of acting as a sentry back at the *Fancy*, unless Sjer had decided to send more crew members throughout the station to try to hunt Keela down after our initial plan to take her into custody in Final Chance had gone awry.

By now, the doors to the bar would be open and my former shipmates would likely have discovered Keela was no longer there and I'd left my clothing and med kit behind and vanished as well. From this moment on, if anyone from the *Fancy* spotted me, I would be a target. Sjer might want me alive to find out what I'd done and why, but he'd probably settle for seeing my corpse. Either way, he'd care far less about my fate than getting his hands on Keela and earning his *favors*. The thought of her in his grasp made my vision go red around the edges.

Never.

Moving more quickly but still with a distinctly Gandarian gait, Keela headed away from Jonor and toward another intersection of corridors. I kept pace directly above her, watching for any indication that she'd caught the notice of anyone, but it seemed most beings around us were either intent on minding their own business, getting farther from the fight, or rushing back toward the sounds of fists striking flesh.

As Keela turned right at the next intersection, we passed Boorginamai coming from the other direction. He was lumbering toward Jonor, cursing in his native language. His gaze raked over everyone in his path, including Keela, but he didn't appear to take any special notice of her. Her disguise seemed to be working thus far.

It might be too much to hope for that the angry Forbian would kill Jonor, but a shadow could hope. My only regret would be that I hadn't done it myself.

For the next several minutes, I accompanied Keela through the maze of Deck 4 corridors as she made numerous turns that included backtracking and sudden changes in direction obviously designed to spot or evade tails. I wondered if she still suspected the presence of someone unseen tracking her movements. If she did, she gave no indication.

Finally, apparently satisfied she wasn't being followed, she headed for a cargo lift. I'd expected her to use a maintenance shaft to descend levels, but maybe she thought she'd have a difficult time explaining her presence if she ran into one of the station's service or security personnel. They might sound the alarm and give away her location.

Keela stepped into a small lift and set her destination as Deck 8, the busiest of the docking rings. I took up position near the ceiling at the front in case we ran into trouble on arrival. The doors closed and the lift lurched into motion. The passenger lifts ran much more smoothly.

"I know you're here," she said, her voice the flat, grating timbre of a Gandarian rather than her own.

I stayed where I was, unmoving, as she faced the doors with her hands hidden inside the cloak.

"You fried that scanner the same way you did the door controls in Final Chance," she added. "I would have been fine, though. To biometric scanners, I read as Gandarian. But thank you for the exit from the bar. Would you care to introduce yourself?"

Gods, I wanted to. I wanted to return to my physical form and greet my mate in the proper Fortusian way with a vow of devotion and a promise that everything I was now belonged to her, from my fangs and claws to my combat and weapons training.

But if I spoke, she'd know where I was and how to spot me, and that plasma lash on her right arm could leave me incapacitated even in this form. The only thing I wanted more than to see her in the flesh was to

ensure she boarded her ship and left this station unscathed and without the *Fancy* on her tail. To do that, I had to be alive and invisible at her side.

So I said nothing and didn't move.

She laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound, full of anger and strain.

I suddenly wanted so badly to hear her laugh with joy that something twinged sharply inside me.

"Stay close, then, ghost," she said, her tone mocking, as the lift shuddered to stop on Deck 8. "Don't run off before I have a chance to deal with you face to face."

I slipped through the doors into the corridor beyond the moment they unsealed, ready to defend against anyone lying in wait.

Which was why the stun field she deployed inside the lift clipped the very tip of my shadow form, leaving me momentarily disoriented. If I'd remained inside with her, I'd have been rendered completely insensate.

By the time I gathered my wits, Keela had deactivated the stun field, strode out of the lift, and joined the crowd on the Deck 8 walkway.

The view here was spectacular, one of the best on the station, despite claims made by the observation decks and expensive eateries on the top decks and the habitat rings. Deck 8 ringed the station's core, offering an unobstructed view of cargo and passenger vessels coming and going from the station and the expanse of space beyond.

Under different circumstances, I might have been pleased to walk the ring with Keela and admire the endless variety of mid-sized ships and the hundreds of species of beings around us.

Instead, I took to the shadows, keeping watch on my mate and our surroundings as she made her way through the crowd, following whatever route she'd chosen as the best way to reach her ship—which apparently didn't include taking that cargo lift straight to Deck 14. Maybe she didn't want to risk leading someone directly to her ship.

Maybe that someone was me.

She'd nearly put an end to my protection in the lift with that stun field. I had to assume she'd try to evade me again. The prospect filled me with dread. If Keela left this station without me, I might never find her again in the vastness of space.

Keela couldn't deploy a stun field or use her plasma lash in a crowded walkway. If I wanted to speak to her, perhaps now would be the best time, before she thought of a way to rid herself of my presence.

I flew down from the shadows and settled very lightly on her shoulders like a mantle. She stiffened but didn’t so much as miss a step.

If I’d had a throat, surely it would have been dry at the prospect of speaking my first words to my magnificent mate.

“My name is Jarrix,” I murmured, my voice pitched so it carried no further than her ear. “I am a Fortusian male currently in shadow form. It is my sworn duty, Keela, to see you safely to your ship and away.”

“You’ve mistaken me for someone else,” she said, equally quiet, still in a Gandarian voice. “Your assistance is not needed. You have three seconds to remove yourself from my body.”

If she said three seconds, I probably had two seconds to move. Or less.

I detached immediately and returned to the shadows before she could activate whatever defensive weapon she might have concealed within that cloak.

I was disappointed, but not surprised or deterred. She didn’t trust me, and she didn’t want me on her shoulders being a potential distraction when she might the attacked at any moment. But I’d shown myself to be helpful by opening the door in the bar and dealing with Jonor’s scanner. I’d done nothing to endanger her or threaten her in any way. It had been enough for her to let me give her my name and state my intention—or at least part of it.

She could have activated her defenses immediately when I’d touched her, but she hadn’t. She’d even given me a warning and a chance to show good faith by backing off, which I’d done.

Now I had a chance to continue to show my true intentions and keep her safe.

I could work with that for now.

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CHAPTER 5

KEELA



My shadow had a name: *Jarrix*.

I kept my attention on my surroundings and tried to dismiss the memory of his low voice purring in my ear when he gave me his pledge.

It is my sworn duty, Keela, to see you safely to your ship and away.

And the way he'd said my name, in a tone usually reserved for murmuring the name of a deity during worship, elicited a full-body shiver.

I gave myself a mental slap. No matter how sincere he'd sounded, his pretty words and the warmth of his presence on my shoulders changed nothing. Neither did his promises, or the fact he'd let go instantly when I'd told him to. Yes, there'd been a threat behind my words, but he hadn't hesitated and he hadn't argued.

And yet, he remained somewhere close, judging by the now-familiar sensation of being watched from above.

A Fortusian male in shadow form. How novel. Most Fortusians were products of genetic engineering that combined human DNA with that of various beings and even plant life from across the galaxy to create a race of unique individuals with a nearly infinite variety of characteristics. I'd met a number of Fortusians since leaving my home planet of Ganai, but to my knowledge none of them could turn into a shadow. Maybe I'd get to see him before I left the station.

Beneath my Gandarian biomask, I scowled. I needed to focus on staying alive, getting Jarrix—if indeed that was even his name—off my tail, and

reaching my ship before any more mercs tracked me down. Then I could turn one hundred percent of my attention to finding my sister using the coordinates N'vera had sold me.

If the coordinates were real and accurate *and* I could evade the bounty hunters fighting to claim the reward on my head…

My conversation with N'vera had scraped me raw inside and out in ways I couldn't have imagined when I'd walked into Final Chance. Bracing myself for another dead end had in no way prepared me for the revelations I'd faced. And I couldn't even take solace from N'vera's claim that Calla was alive because I didn't know that she was. N'vera could have been lying. The news of Calla's apparent death plus the uncertainty of her ultimate fate left me in an emotionally gutted limbo.

Physical pain didn't bother me. This pain was much, much worse. I had to dig deep to put it aside to keep myself alive.

Unlike the service hallways of the promenade, the crowd on Deck 8 offered me the chance to blend in with the hundreds of beings who crammed its walkways. I needed to get down to my ship as soon as possible, but I also had to be smart. When I'd disembarked on Deck 14, I'd noticed how few other vessels had docked there and how relatively deserted it was. I'd stand out every moment I walked its corridors. Here in a crowd, I more easily passed as a Gandarian. But alone, if any mercs were stationed on the various docking rings watching for someone the size and shape of a human, I was an obvious suspect. My biomask and the nanotech in my clothing that could change their color and design couldn't do anything to disguise my height, build, or number of arms, legs, or heads.

Which was another reason I was following directions provided by my bracer toward an Engaren textile and clothing shop in the middle of Deck 8's busiest sector.

When I arrived at the shop, a pair of elegant Pallasians in opulent clothes were disembarking from a docked luxury craft nearby, surrounded by armed guards wearing crests on their uniforms. The arrival of royalty caught the attention of most beings in the vicinity. I scanned the crowd to see if anyone was watching me rather than the royals, but I didn't seem to have attracted any notice. Excellent.

Inside the clothing shop, the employees and customers had all gathered near the wide-open doors. While they murmured and trilled in awe over the

royals and their entourage, I browsed a display of blue robes and gold-trimmed satchels suitable for a Gandarian of the merchant class.

Unlike the service corridors on the promenade and the Deck 8 docking ring walkway, this shop was brightly lit so customers could admire the clothing and adornments on display. The light gave me my first opportunity to lay eyes on my shadow.

Jarrix had tucked himself into a corner above my head, presumably so he could keep watch on me, the shop as a whole, and the activity on the walkway outside. The shadow's shape was vaguely humanoid, with what appeared to be wings. If I hadn't been looking for him, I might not have noticed there was a shadow there that didn't belong given the lighting in the shop.

It was an objectively perfect form of disguise, and a stab of highly unreasonable jealousy made me scowl again.

A shop employee finally tore herself away from the scene outside and approached me. The young Engaren female fluttered her hands in greeting. "A pleasant evening to you," she trilled. "I am Aama. I hope you have found our merchant robes to your liking. Do you wish to take a few robes to a changing room and admire them privately?"

"I do," I said in Alliance Standard. My biomask converted my human voice to sound Gandarian. I indicated two of the robes with a nod. "I will consider these."

"Very good." With an expert eye, Aama selected the correct size and length for my height and build and led me to the back of the shop. I sensed rather than saw Jarrix moving with us and gritted my teeth. I needed to rid myself of this shadow immediately. The question was how to do that without drawing attention.

According to the station schematics, the rear door next to the private changing rooms led to the shop's workroom and storage area. I went directly to the changing room closest to the workroom door. Aama obligingly opened it for me with a trill and a flourish. "Please go in!"

She followed me into the luxurious little room and displayed my prospective purchases on rotating pedestals illuminated by what looked like a million tiny faceted lights that made the cloth shimmer and sparkle. Engarens were consummate masters of textile-making and clothing, and everything in this shop was designed to impress.

Aama beamed at me. “Will you allow me to help you try on these robes, honored one?”

I’d come into the shop with a certain plan in mind, but after studying the young shop assistant, I changed my ruse.

“I must ask for a different kind of help,” I said quietly, moving closer as if taking refuge next to the much-taller female. “There is a male following me. I do not know his species, but he is a large red male with four arms. He has been following me for two days. I am scared.”

Aama’s eyes widened. She fluttered her hands below her waist in an expression of fear and dismay and moved protectively between me and the changing room door.

“I will give you credits,” I continued, “if you will please let me leave the shop by the back way.”

“No credits, no credits,” she whispered, her long, slim hands waving away my words. “We females must help each other, yes? You would do the same for me?”

“I certainly would,” I said with sincerity.

“Wait one moment.” Aama disappeared briefly, then returned with a simple purple hooded robe. “I intend no disrespect, honored one. I know this garment is for those in the servant class. But perhaps you would like to change your appearance to avoid the notice of this red male?”

I considered her offer. My own cloak could take on the right shade of purple, but the quality of its nanotech-enhanced fabric was similar to a Gandarian merchant’s customary clothing. If I tried to pass as a servant in purple, the difference in textile quality would be immediately noticeable to anyone who paid attention.

“I am very grateful,” I told her. Mindful of my telltale human hands, I said, “Would you assist me with putting the robe on over my cloak?”

With the speed and efficiency of a clothing shop attendant, Aama had the robe draped around me and fastened in moments. Once the hood was on over my head, she stepped back to adjust the drape until it met her approval.

“I would think you a servant,” she said, and her eyes widened. “Oh, no offense meant.”

“I took no offense,” I assured her. “Servants’ work is very honorable.”

She fluttered her hands and peered out the changing room door. “No one is nearby,” she whispered. “The other attendants are with clients and our workroom is empty now. Come, come.”

As she herded me to the rear door, I glimpsed Jarrix right above me, keeping close. I strongly disliked his presence, but I couldn’t do anything about it until I was away from this shop. There were only so many ways to incapacitate or kill a being in shadow form, all of them guaranteed to draw attention. I could use the stun field once Aama opened the door to the workroom, but I didn’t want to harm her.

My trainers back on Ganai would have beaten me into unconsciousness for caring about collateral damage. I could almost hear their shouts and feel their blows raining down on my body.

On another day, I might have been able to justify it. Using the stun field would rid me of Jarrix and Aama would only have been unconscious for a few hours, with no lasting effects. The stun field was one of the kinder weapons I carried.

And yet, I left the stun field inactive and followed Aama through the shop’s quiet workroom where Engaren clothiers turned the bolts of textiles stored in the adjoining rooms into merchandise to be sold out front. The lights were dim in the shop since it wasn’t in use, so I lost track of Jarrix’s shadow, but I felt him nearby.

The fact it wasn’t just the unsettling sensation of being watched anymore but a distinct *presence* made me even more uneasy.

Aama led me to the back of the workroom and a large door. “This leads to the service corridor,” she said, keeping her voice low. “If you follow it to the left and make two more left turns, you will arrive at a set of lifts. From there you can access the habitat rings and the promenade.”

I pointed at the circular hatch on the floor. “And this, honored Aama?”

She gasped and her hands fluttered near her face in embarrassment at the title I’d given her. “That is a maintenance shaft. It is seldom used since the new tunnels were completed. Very dark and dirty. Surely you would not want to go into it.”

“I am more afraid of the red male than I am of darkness or dirt,” I said. “I am desperate to evade him. I give you my oath that if I am discovered, I will not implicate you in any way.”

With a quiet warble of distress, Aama knelt and raised the hatch to reveal a dimly lit vertical passage with a decrepit personnel conveyor on one side, a ladder on the other, and service junctions and conduits running along its length.

“Where will you go?” Aama’s hands hadn’t stopped fluttering since she’d lifted the hatch.

“As far away as I can, and then I’ll try to find help I can trust.” I gave her a small bow of respect, which made her hands flutter faster. “I thank you. May good fortune ever find you.”

“And you as well, honored one. Please be safe!”

I climbed into the maintenance shaft and clung to the ladder, keeping my hands covered with my sleeves. It wasn’t pitch dark in here, which was a relief. I didn’t want to use a light source of my own unless I absolutely had to. The longer I could go unnoticed, the better.

As soon as I was well clear of the hatch, Aama warbled a few times in distress and then closed it.

I let out a breath.

According to the station schematics, this maintenance shaft terminated on Deck 20, where the station’s mid-level power generators were located. There was an access hatch on every deck, though, including Deck 14. And the one on that deck was only two hundred meters from where the *Nivilus* was docked. It was the closest access point to my ship other than the much more exposed personnel and cargo lifts.

That was all good news.

The bad news was that I couldn’t use any weapon in the shaft that would be capable of incapacitating Jarrix. Not with all these conduits and sensors around me. Even if I didn’t rupture something, the sensors would alert maintenance and security of my presence and I’d be in real trouble. I had to assume at least some of the more capable mercs would be monitoring all station comm channels for news of an intruder or other suspicious activity.

I freed my hands from my sleeves to get a better grip and started down the ladder. The rungs were spaced uncomfortably far apart, clearly designed for beings much larger than a human. I ended up gripping the sides of the ladder with my hands and boots and sliding the last few inches each time.

I wasn’t at all surprised when after I’d navigated ten rungs that way, a familiar male voice spoke from behind me. “Thank you for not using your stun field on me in the shop.”

The low rumble didn’t startle me, but it did stir something in my belly I forced myself to ignore.

“That had nothing to do with you,” I said icily. “I didn’t want to harm Aama.”

His chuckle made me want to deploy the stun field, and damn the consequences. “Be silent and let me focus, nuisance,” I snapped. “It’s a long drop.”

Obligingly, he went quiet.

I moved as quickly as I dared, which wasn’t terribly fast. Jarrix refrained from hovering nearby—whether to avoid distracting me or in case I changed my mind about the stun field, I had no idea. I sensed him somewhere below me, maybe keeping watch for anyone climbing up the shaft or trying to access any of the hatches.

Seething, I descended the ladder one giant rung at a time.

What was this male’s motivation? To protect me until I got to my ship and away, as he’d stated? Surely not. There was no reward in it for him, only risk from me and the many mercs who were chasing me. It made no sense.

Did he intend to guard me until I got to my ship and then try to take me captive for the bounty? That seemed far more likely. I was apparently worth enough to someone that mercs were more than willing to kill each other for the chance to claim the reward, as I’d witnessed with the Atolani and their rival, the Halutan, in Final Chance.

Part of me wanted to confront Jarrix and demand to know who he was and what he planned to do, but since I couldn’t trust a damn thing he said, there wasn’t much point. I’d just have to find a way to either kill him or put him out of commission between the maintenance shaft hatch on Deck 14 and my ship’s docking port. How I’d do that was largely dependent on what I found once I opened that hatch.

I paused just long enough at the Deck 12 hatch to flex my cramping hands and check my ship’s status. No one had tried to access its systems or the docking port since I’d disembarked on my way to meet N’vera. That meeting felt like eons ago instead of a few hours. And the two decks and two hundred meters between me and the docking port felt like light years.

I hadn’t wanted to risk attracting notice by hacking into station security surveillance, so I didn’t have eyes on the Deck 14 docking ring near my ship. I did, however, have my shipboard port viewer, which showed only a handful of beings passing by on the walkway.

A lot could happen in the two hundred meters between the hatch and my ship's port, though.

By the time I reached the Deck 14 hatch, I'd decided to maintain the Gandarian servant disguise, adjust my posture and gait accordingly, and bow and scrape my way from the hatch alcove toward my ship. Once I got close, I could activate the port, my stun field, and a few other surprises, dive into the ship, and leave.

I raised my wristcomm to my lips and murmured the code for Siber to begin departure procedures. I also instructed the AI to automatically disengage from the dock and follow evasive maneuvers the moment I was inside with the port sealed. I had a feeling I'd be coming into the ship hot without a nanosec to spare.

I took a deep breath and reached for the hatch.

"Stay here a moment once you open it," Jarrix said, his voice coming from just enough distance away that he'd be out of range of my stun field. "I'll check the area for anyone lying in wait."

I gritted my teeth. "I don't want or need your assistance, whoever the hells you are."

"I see quite clearly that you're well trained with tremendous skill and strong instincts," he said, seemingly unruffled by my anger. His words sounded less like flattery and more like one warrior assessing another's abilities, though he let a hint of admiration seep through.

"I understand you have no reason to trust me," he added. "In fact, you have every reason to kill me. I'd feel the same in your place."

His reply startled me with its apparent honesty—*apparent* being the key word.

"We don't have time to be at an impasse," he said when I didn't reply. His tone was clipped now and much more businesslike. "I don't know how your location leaked out, but I doubt the Atolani and Halutan you disposed of or my former crewmates are the only agents combing this station for you and your ship. You need better cover to get to your ship than this disguise."

My nails bit into my palms. I should have used my stun field on him in the shop's workroom, even if it meant I'd incapacitated Aama too. I'd gotten soft, and I deserved the beating my old trainers would have given me for it.

"Keela."

There it was again: my name spoken in a reverent tone that made my belly flutter for no damn reason. “What?” I snapped. With my voice still altered to emulate a Gandarian, the sound was more like a bark.

“I must put my cards on the table,” he said, his voice a little nearer than before.

My fingers twitched toward my stun field controls. *Come closer, you shadowy bastard. Just a meter closer…*

“My name is Jarrix To’vok,” he continued. “For the past ten months, I have been serving aboard the privateer vessel *Fleeting Fancy* under the pseudonym Tal Noku, posing as a corsair and ship’s medic. In truth, I am an operative for the Galactic Alliance Intelligence Service, tasked with sending intelligence on the ship’s captain and its operations to my GAIS handler.”

It all had the ring of truth, which meant either Jarrix was admitting something guaranteed to get him killed in a very painful way, or he was a very good liar.

“My now *former* captain wants to collect the bounty on your head,” Jarrix continued, and he sounded angry. “Regardless of the reason for your bounty, I cannot condone turning someone over for what is likely to be torture and execution.”

Despite my misgivings, I replied dryly, “I appreciate that.”

His chuckle sounded strained. “I arrived at Final Chance intending to find a way to help you evade his crew, but then…” He paused. “The moment I saw you, my plans changed.”

I really did not like how much those words sounded like some kind of purr. “I don’t have time for your life story, Jarrix,” I hissed. “I’m being hunted. I need to get to my ship.”

“I know.” He let out a quiet and very inhuman growl. “I wish to take physical form and speak to you face to face. Will you give me one minute of truce? I will be well within reach of your weapons. You may choose to protect yourself however you choose. I only ask for a chance to meet you in the flesh.”

For a beat, I was too surprised to respond. He had to know the moment he took physical form I had a dozen ways to kill or incapacitate him even from a distance. And up close, that number doubled.

If he was who he said he was—still very much in doubt—he wasn’t that stupid, which meant either he believed he could get close enough to take me captive, or he truly had something he needed to say that was important

enough to risk his life on someone who'd already made it clear she wanted him out of her way.

Either way, I needed him closer so I could take him out without risking damaging any of the station systems running through this shaft, and if this was what I needed to do to make that happen, so be it.

I backed up against the hatch, dropped my plasma gun into my right hand, and drew a dagger with my left from the sheath on my thigh. "You have thirty seconds to get down here and say whatever it is you want to say."

"Gods above," he muttered in what sounded like relief combined with exasperation.

His shadow flew down and hovered above the narrow landing in front of me. The shadow swirled and coalesced into the shape of an enormous male. A heartbeat later, Jarrix To'vok appeared in the flesh, completely naked.

And he was on his knees at my feet.

Moving at a speed only attainable through pure muscle memory, I pressed the tip of my dagger to his throat above an artery. My gun barrel dug into to his temple, set to kill.

"Don't so much as breathe," I warned, my voice low.

He stilled.

This male was enormous. More than two meters tall, probably, if he'd been standing rather than on his knees. As it was, we were eye-to-eye.

His skin was dark gray; his eyes, claws, enormous wings, and the tip of his long tail all a stunning deep black. So was most of his shoulder-length hair, though it also had streaks of purple, blue, and green.

Two horns curled back over his hair and then turned up to form points at the crown of his head. Smaller, distinctive points above his forehead, along with the wings, hair, and tail, reminded me of a Pallasian shadowbat, which hinted at the genetic source of his unusual ability to become almost invisible.

In true corsair fashion, he wore gold body jewelry everywhere: on his horns, in his pointed ears, and through his nipples. More glittered below his waistline, where a pair of swiftly hardening dark gray cocks with black markings and interesting ridges threatened to distract me from watching for any sign of movement. But he might as well have been turned to stone by

my threat and the deliberate press of the gun barrel and dagger against his skin. Even his tail was still, and his chest barely moved as he breathed.

Every inch of him was solid muscle, as if he'd been carved from the finest Vorcian marble by a sculptor with a deep appreciation of a perfect masculine form honed by training, exercise, and discipline.

By the gods, he was gorgeous. Under different circumstances, I might have dragged him to a bed in one of the station's hotels for a night of memorable fun.

"Twenty seconds." I was proud that my voice remained cold and didn't betray the thoughts in my head.

His black eyes reflected the colored lights in the alcove, giving them the illusion of being fathoms deep.

Very carefully, he leaned into the dagger's tip until the point pierced his skin. A bead of crimson blood welled from the wound.

"My mate," he said, his voice and expression reverent. "My life belongs to you."

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CHAPTER 6

JARRIX



KNEELING BEFORE MY MATE, WEAPONLESS BUT FOR MY CLAWS AND FANGS, and putting my life entirely in her lethal hands, hadn't been nearly as difficult as I might have imagined. After all, she'd owned me from the moment I'd caught her scent. It seemed a reasonable risk given the alternative of being left behind if and when she escaped the station and its myriad dangers.

With the stakes this high and only thirty seconds of truce in which to make my case, I'd had little choice but to blurt out the truth and hope for the best.

I'd never imagined I would meet my true mate on a space station a galaxy away from my homeworld, much less pledge my life while kneeling naked in a filthy, disused maintenance shaft. But somehow the only thing that mattered in this moment was the magnificent woman before me, even as she pressed a gun to my head and a dagger to my throat with rock-steady hands.

I would have given every credit I had to my name to see Keela's lovely human face when I voiced my devotion rather than the biomask's depiction of a Gandarian merchant with a grave expression.

I had no idea how she would react to my words. Stabbing was possible. A point-blank shot to my head equally so. Acceptance, merely a dim possibility.

Instead, she barked a laugh—a harsh, sharp sound that echoed like a dropped piece of equipment hitting the bottom of the tube far below us.

Then she did something I didn't expect: she deactivated her biomask.

Suddenly, her beautiful face was bare. Her eyes were still unnaturally brown and her hair dark, and the colorful tattoos remained on her skin, but it was *her*—the beauty who'd captivated me from the moment I'd seen her image on my monitor in the medbay aboard the *Fancy*. And she was staring at me in what looked like disgust combined with irritation and something else I couldn't quite identify.

Something made a soft click, and then I heard my mate speak for the first time.

"That is the most ridiculous lie anyone has ever tried on me," she said, "and I have heard some serious bullshit in my time."

Despite her derisive tone, the sound of her real, lovely human voice sent a shiver of need through me.

Her dagger prodded my bare shoulder, drawing blood, but at least I wasn't dead. Yet. "Who *are* you?" she demanded.

"I am Jarrix To'vok," I repeated. "I am Fortusian. My people are gifted with a physiological ability to recognize our true mates through scent, touch, or psychic connection. I was supposed to help capture you. The moment we met—or crossed paths—in Final Chance, I knew who we are to each other and became your ally."

"I know about Fortusians and their mates." She shook her head, her jaw tight. "Don't waste your breath. You…this is a *lie*."

"It isn't a lie." I spread my hands, palm up. "I have few ways to prove this to you if my oath and my choice to kneel before you without weapons aren't enough. Your life and safety are now my top priority. We must get to your ship and away from this station."

"I'm going *nowhere* with you." Her mouth formed a grim line. "Even if this wasn't a lie meant to get me to drop my guard so you can claim that bounty for yourself instead of sharing it with your pirate crew, there's no room in my life for a *mate*." She spat the word like a curse. "Only a male would believe someone like me would give up everything for the privilege of being called his mate."

"I would never ask you to give up anything," I countered. "It is I who will give up everything to be at your side. I won't return to either the

Fleeting Fancy or the GAIS now that I've found you. If you must fight, then so will I. If you are a smuggler, then now so am I."

"I'm supposed to believe that?" she scoffed. "You must think I'm stupid. You'd never give up your career with the GAIS and your mission aboard your fancy pirate ship—even if your claims being my mate are true, which I highly doubt."

Gods above, she was fierce, like the heart of a star.

"I'm quite certain you are not stupid," I countered. "I am a male before I am an operative or a spy. I am certainly not a true privateer; I've only played the role of one. I have found you in all the vastness of the universe. What is my job when weighed against that?"

"You know *nothing* about me," she argued. "Nothing at all."

"I've learned much from observing you," I pointed out. "And more importantly, the true mate bond only draws together those who compliment each other in all possible ways. If you know about Fortusian physiology, you know that is proven science."

Scowling, she moved her dagger from my shoulder to the center of my chest and rested its point against my sternum. "This is your primary heart, yes?"

I'd never been quite so aware of my dual heartbeat as I was in this moment. "Yes."

Her thumb hovered above the button that would activate the dagger's plasma edge. "Speak truth," she said, her voice cold as space. "You said there were *few ways* to prove your claim that I am your true mate. What are these ways?"

There was equipment on Fortusia that could verify the connection, but my homeworld was far from this sector. That left only one option for me to reveal.

"My bodily fluids will heal you if you are injured," I said. "Science has shown it is only possible between true mates. The effects cannot be faked."

Her expression didn't change. "Bodily fluids."

"Typically, blood, saliva, and semen," I clarified. "In my case, my venom may also affect you in an unexpected way, but I would never use it on you without determining its effects first."

"I see." The corner of her mouth tilted up. It was barely a twitch, but it was an infinitesimal smile that made my stomach clench. "I'm not interested in either your semen or your venom."

With the dagger still resting against my chest above my primary heart, she retracted her gun into her sleeve and pulled aside her robe and cloak to reveal her jumpsuit-clad leg.

“I was darted in the bar,” she said. “There is a wound ten centimeters above my knee on this side beneath my clothing.”

“What about the one on your side?” I asked. “The plasma burn from when the Atolani just missed you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You *were* watching me in the bar. For how long?”

“I came in just as the doors closed. I didn’t see you get shot, but I saw the wound.”

“It’s a much larger wound than the one from the dart.”

“Then I want to heal them both.”

Keela studied me, then moved her robe and cloak further out of the way. The dagger stayed where it was, pressed against my chest with the point just piercing my skin.

Moving very slowly so I didn’t earn more of her blade, I lifted her jumpsuit away from her leg and then her side, slicing through the material with my claws to reveal the wounds. The puncture from the dart was reddened and swollen but relatively minor. The burn, on the other hand, was sizable. It should have been agonizing and debilitating. She was either extremely good at hiding her pain or she’d injected painkillers. Or both.

“Saliva?” I asked, meeting her gaze. “Or blood?”

Her scowl deepened. “Your mouth is coming nowhere near me.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Blood it is, then.”

I swiped my fingers across my bleeding shoulder and gently dabbed my dark red blood on her injuries. When no more of my blood seeped from that wound thanks to my rapid healing ability, I pressed my chest into the point of her dagger and collected more.

“How long?” she asked when I finished.

I dropped my hands to my sides. “The puncture will heal in minutes. Within a day, the burn will be gone.” At her scowl, I added, “You will start feeling warmth almost immediately.”

“Warmth proves nothing,” she muttered, but she tilted her head and frowned as if she was indeed feeling telltale warmth.

She was no longer flatly denying the truth of my claims about our connection. That gave me hope. And despite her ferocious scowls and the dagger still poised above my primary heart, she’d allowed me to treat her

wounds and remain close, when she certainly would have already slit my throat and dropped my corpse down the maintenance shaft if she truly believed I planned to capture her for the bounty.

The scientific study of true mate physiology had proven that trust between mates was instinctual. On a cellular level, Keela sensed she could rely on me, even if she didn't believe it yet.

"What planet are you from?" I inquired as the puncture wound from the dart began to fade.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why does it matter?"

"I suppose it doesn't at the moment," I admitted. "Did you know about the bounty on your head?"

The scowl came back. "Yes."

"Then why did you risk being caught and come to this station?"

"None of your business." She nicked me with the dagger's tip. "Stop talking."

A series of beeps echoed through the shaft.

I knocked Keela's dagger away from my chest, wrapped her in my arms, and turned my back, shielding her as the hatch leading to Deck 14 swung open.

A stun grenade skittered across the small landing and ended up at my feet. Reflexively, I kicked it over the edge and into the darkness below.

The burst of energy when it detonated made the entire maintenance shaft brighten for a moment, but the effects stopped short of our level.

Alarms blared and emergency lights flared throughout the shaft.

"Move!" Keela pushed me aside and unleashed a barrage of plasma bolts through the open hatch. I heard shouts and curses and the sounds of people scrambling out of the way.

She shoved a small plasma gun into my hand, obviously a backup weapon to her larger gun, and pressed another metal object into my other palm. A personal energy shield—one with a limited range and function, but it was better than nothing.

"Go!" she ordered me. "Docking port 14-Epsilon. I'm right behind you."

With a roar, I dove out through the hatch—

—And nearly collided with L'mel.

My reptilian crewmate from the *Fleeting Fancy* gaped at my nakedness for a crucial second. "You—" he began, raising his crossbow.

I shot him in the forehead.

As he dropped, the maintenance hatch shut and locked behind me. My hearts stuttered. *Keela. No*. I started toward the hatch, then hesitated.

Docking port 14-Epsilon. I'm right behind you.

Was she giving me the location of her ship, intending to meet me there via some other route that hadn't been compromised? Or was this her way of separating us for good, whether or not she believed the true mate bond was real and not a lie?

Everything good in my life depended on whether it was the former or the latter.

I could try to access the maintenance shaft and get to her, but she might be counting on me to clear a path to the ship or provide a distraction. Or both. And if that was the case, I had a job to do.

And I'd have to do it naked, armed with only a backup gun and a small personal shield.

I looked down at L'mel and grinned. Make that a backup gun, a personal shield, a J'noran crossbow, and two good daggers in forearm sheaths.

It took me only moments to confiscate L'mel's weapons. After a brief debate, I took his kilt as well, strapping it around my waist before depositing his nearly naked body behind a stack of crates.

Then I headed for docking port 14-Epsilon, crossbow in hand.

The area around the hatch had cleared the moment the firing began, but dock workers, maintenance crew, and ship personnel emerged when things went quiet again. I felt conspicuous given how few beings were on this level, especially compared to the much-busier Deck 8 or the promenade, but it did make it easier to spot potential adversaries.

My gut, meanwhile, roiled with unease. My body was instinctively rebelling at walking away from my mate. Each step felt heavier than the last the more distance I put between myself and the hatch she'd locked behind me.

She wouldn't still be there now, though. She'd be on her way somewhere else, moving through the station's interior unnoticed, making her own way to our rendezvous point. Or so I hoped.

Every minute we were separated crawled by like hours.

I'd just passed the halfway point between the hatch and docking port 14-Epsilon when the personnel lift in front of me opened. Kitna and

Boorginamai emerged, along with a half-dozen unsuspecting bystanders going about their daily business.

We locked eyes.

I saw the moment they both registered the weapons I was carrying and the kilt I wore and guessed what had befallen their crewmate. Their reactions were predictable and probably understandable given the circumstances.

Bystanders scattered with a chorus of alarmed shouts in a dozen languages as Kitna and I fired simultaneously at each other. The impact of the plasma bolt from my crossbow sent him flying back into Boorginamai, who staggered as he fired. His shot went wide, burning a hole into the deck behind me.

Kitna's bolt hit my shield dead on. The energy displacement knocked me back and punched the breath out of my chest. I braced myself and let off two more bolts, hitting both males center-mass in the chest before they could return fire. Kitna went down and didn't get back up.

Boorginamai's bellow of fury probably traveled halfway around the docking ring. His reflexive attempt to return fire missed, and my third shot caught him in the face.

At the same moment, a massive blast of plasma from behind me impacted against my shield and sent me sprawling.

I twisted as I went down, knowing by the sound of the weapon who was behind me even before I took aim at the red flesh and familiar face twisted in fury.

Jonor.

I fired three bolts with the crossbow, thankful for L'mel's modifications —which he'd bragged about many times—that had enhanced its auto-targeting ability. The first two hit Jonor's personal shield, but three shots in the same place overloaded the device. The final shot got through, sending Jonor skidding across the deck, leaving a bloody trail in his wake. He hit the wall next to a personnel lift.

With a howl of rage, Jonor staggered to his feet and swung his pulse rifle up, taking aim with his uninjured upper right arm.

My next two shots severed his upper right arm at the shoulder and punched a hole through his left thigh. His arm, with the rifle still gripped in his hand, hit the deck as the force of the impacts sent him sprawling

backward into the lift compartment. The doors closed, cutting us off from each other, and the lift began to ascend.

In less than fifteen minutes, I'd killed at least three of my former crewmates from the *Fancy*. Four, if Jonor succumbed to his wounds, which seemed likely.

Given my undercover role aboard the ship, I'd expected my assignment to end abruptly and probably violently at some point. If my cover had been blown, I would have been lucky to simply be spaced out the airlock without being tortured first. The other most likely scenario was something similar to what had just transpired, where circumstances pitted me against them.

In my wildest imaginings, I couldn't have predicted those circumstances would be a battle for the life of my mate.

Regrettably, I had to leave Jonor's powerful weapon where it had fallen. Unlike L'mel's less-powerful crossbow, the pulse rifle had biometric controls, so I wouldn't be able to use it.

As I turned my steps back in the direction of my rendezvous with Keela, an anxious warble behind me and a tug on my kilt made me spin and raise my crossbow.

A tall Engaren female I'd never seen before fluttered her hands. "Please," she trilled, her eyes wide with fright.

I turned the crossbow so it no longer faced her. "What do you want?"

She gestured at the small antigrav sled at her side. On it was a single crate labeled *Textiles* in both Engaren and Alliance Standard. "To'vok," she trilled.

How the hells did she know my name? "What is this?" I demanded.

"To'vok. Keela. Fourteen Epsilon," she warbled frantically and tapped the crate. "To'vok. Keela. Fourteen Epsilon," she repeated. Then she ran for a set of open personnel lift doors, sidestepping the corpses of Boorginamai and Kitna before leaping inside the lift without looking back.

I stared at the retreating female and then at the crate. It was big enough —and secure enough—to contain a half-dozen bolts of very expensive fabric, or one utterly priceless human female.

The only way the Engaren would have known my name and Keela's as well as our specific rendezvous point was if my mate had given her the message to relay to me. In the scant minutes we'd been separated, Keela had somehow found an ally to hide her and get her to me. My admiration for my mate and her resourcefulness continued to grow.

I wanted to pull her from the crate and wrap her in my arms, but that would have to wait until we were safely aboard her vessel.

Crossbow at the ready and with the sled and its precious cargo racing along smoothly beside me, I headed for docking port 14-Epsilon and my destiny.

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CHAPTER 7

JARRIX



As I ran, I wondered how the hells the crew of the *Fancy* had managed to converge so quickly on Deck 14. I'd assumed Keela had docked under a false identity and without using her ship's true designation, but my former crewmates might have discovered the real registration of the vessel.

That didn't explain how L'mel had found us at that specific hatch, though.

Possibly Keela's false Gandarian biosignature had been disrupted. If so, that would make her visible to scanners searching for a human. Just deactivating her biomask in the maintenance shaft shouldn't have affected it, but there were jammers and other devices capable of revealing false biosignatures.

If that were the case, this crate wouldn't be enough to hide her from scanners, only eyes. And if L'mel had alerted the rest of the crew to our location, which I had to assume he did given Kitna, Boorginamai, and Jonor had all turned up, more would be coming to Deck 14, along with other mercs who might also have spotted her human biosignature.

I ran faster, pushing the sled to its highest speed. Others using the walkway scrambled to get out of the way.

I rounded a curve and spotted port 14-Epsilon. The ship docked there was barely visible from this angle, but it appeared to be a small cargo vessel

with good maneuverability. In other words, exactly the type of vessel I would have predicted a smuggler like Keela to own.

But as I approached the port with my cargo, I glimpsed a small hooded figure further along the docking ring, steering a similar sled with a stack of crates on its bed. The figure wore a familiar blue-and-gold robe with a faint sheen that could have been expensive Gandarian fabric, or cloth with built-in nanotech.

I glanced down at my sled, then back at the figure. Was my mate in this crate, or was I a distraction standing at the wrong port while she made her getaway elsewhere?

The hem of the blue merchant's robe swirled as the figure in the distance moved, offering the tiniest glimpse of familiar black boots. I'd studied those boots up close, along with every other visible inch of my mate.

I had no time to feel betrayal, anger, or even satisfaction at how masterfully Keela had orchestrated this scenario. If her false Gandarian biosignature had failed, the disguise she wore was transparent as glaz to anyone with the right kind of scanner.

Up ahead, only meters from the hooded figure, two more Atolani mercs wearing red armor stepped out of a cargo lift. I abandoned the sled next to docking port 14-Epsilon and ran, firing as I went.

Both of my shots blazed past the hooded figure and hit the mercs' armor. The advanced tech absorbed the energy and they barely missed a step.

One merc targeted me with rapid shots. Two hit my shield, making me stumble before I regained my footing. The second Atolani tossed a stun grenade at the hooded figure I felt certain was my mate in disguise. The figure crumpled to the deck, unmoving.

I roared. The Atolanis threw their heads back and laughed.

A second pulse of energy—this one strangely familiar—rippled through the air, its effects buzzing against my shield. The Atolanis dropped where they stood, their harsh laughter abruptly silenced.

Confused, furious, and a little panicked, I ran for my fallen mate.

Impossibly, instead of lying motionless from the effects of the stun grenade, she rolled to face me, revealing a familiar Gandarian biomask, and took aim with her plasma gun directly at my chest.

My world dwindled to the barrel of that weapon and the human hand holding it. Did she plan to shoot me down right here, steps from her ship's door?

"Drop!" she shouted.

I hit my belly.

She fired a volley of plasma bolts over my head. They nearly singed my horns as they flew past. Something heavy hit the floor behind me. When I craned my neck to look back, I found a human male with cybernetic enhancements sprawled face-down on the deck, his chest smoking.

Keela was already on her feet, running for a port at the far end of the docking ring. This ship was a little smaller than the one docked at 14-Epsilon, but with a more dilapidated appearance and larger engines.

I caught up and shielded her with my body as she slapped her hand to the security lock of port 14-Tau. The panel turned orange and beeped twice to signal it had been unlocked.

As the port began to slide open, revealing the interior of Keela's ship, a flash of movement made me turn.

Captain Sjer stepped out from behind a stack of crates, his plasma rifle aimed squarely at me. His expression was cold, but his eyes glinted with murderous intent.

Keela slipped out from between me and the port hull and fired just as Sjer unleashed three bolts of plasma.

Her attack forced Sjer to take cover behind the crates, but his first shot hit my shield, knocking me aside just enough for the second and third to strike my mate's overloaded shield. The third bolt punched through and hit her in the left upper chest near her shoulder. Blood and tissue sprayed across the wall.

The sound she made—part dismay, part agony—cut through my gut as painfully as a dull blade.

As Keela staggered, I caught her with one arm, shielded her again with my body, and muscled my way through the half-open port door with my wings and tail tucked tightly against my body. The mechanism groaned as I forced my way inside.

Another volley of Sjer's plasma bolts struck me in the back. My shield absorbed most of the hits, but it still felt like I'd been punched three times in rapid succession by a boulder-sized fist with spiked knuckles.

I stumbled and went down to one knee, cradling Keela to keep her from falling hard to the deck. Two more shots sizzled over our heads, burning holes in an interior wall of the ship before the port closed behind us.

Dull thuds reverberated through the hull. Sjer was probably firing at the door, trying to get through, but the shielding held.

I cradled my mate as her breath rattled and gurgled in her chest. Her lung sounded like it had been punctured.

“Keela,” I grated.

She hung dully in my arms, her hood falling back to reveal her darkened hair and lovely human face. Her Gandarian biomask had deactivated already. Maybe it did so automatically when she boarded her vessel, or she’d switched it off manually.

She coughed and wheezed, blood bubbling on her lips and dripping down her chin. Her labored breathing hurt me in ways I didn’t know I could be hurt.

I ripped off her cloak with one hand and wrapped it tightly around the wound in her shoulder to staunch the flow of blood.

“Captain aboard,” the vessel’s AI said in a female voice, startling me. “Brace for emergency departure.”

Holding Keela in one arm, I got to my feet and staggered toward a nearby emergency seat. I unlatched it from the bulkhead and folded it down.

“Scanners show multiple vessels moving to intercept our ship,” the AI continued calmly. “Launch and evasive maneuvers commencing in three…”

I dropped into the seat with Keela wrapped in my arms.

“…Two…”

The emergency harness activated automatically, securing us tightly but definitely not comfortably. My wings ended up compressed in a particularly painful way. The webbing wasn’t designed to hold two individuals, much less one with wings.

“…One,” the AI finished.

The ship launched.

The detachment from the docking port was only a minor jolt, but two seconds later the thrusters kicked in, crushing us back into the emergency seat. My head and neck were stabilized by the seat’s adaptive cushioning. I had to hold Keela with one arm across her upper chest and my other hand on her forehead so she didn’t suffer whiplash. I also wrapped my tail tightly around her legs.

I held my true mate in my arms, but her blood was running down my chest and she was wheezing. Her suffering made my chest hurt like my ribs were being crushed in a vise.

Driven by instinct, I used my fangs to rip into my forearm and pressed the torn flesh to Keela's mouth. "Drink," I said, my lips against her hair. Gods, even now her scent was maddening. "My blood will help heal you."

She tried to turn away, but I held her firmly as the ship began a series of abrupt evasive maneuvers. Vibrations and shuddering impacts indicated we were being attacked and the ship's AI was returning fire. At least the defensive shields seemed to be holding.

"Drink, Keela. *Please*," I begged as the painful pressure in my chest continued to build. "I can't get you to the medpod until the ship stabilizes. I swear to you on my life this will help."

With a ragged sound, she put her lips on my arm and sucked.

My entire body shuddered. I hoped given the ship's violent movement she didn't notice, or if she did that she wouldn't think my shiver was a sign of arousal. There was no pleasure in this—only the visceral knowledge I was designed at the cellular level to care for her.

When the ship lurched sharply, Keela stopped sucking at the tear in my arm and let out a groan.

The sharp pressure in my chest became acute pain. Was the wound in my back more serious than I'd thought?

A strange, warm sensation rose in my upper chest and throat, replacing the pain with a deep vibration as if I were humming. It reverberated in my chest in a similar but distinctly different way than my growl. My chest twinged and my throat spasmed like the sound was trying to escape.

Understanding dawned like a sunrise, and my breath caught.

This sensation was my body trying to release the sound I would make only for my mate to comfort her. Like the healing power of my blood, the physiological changes in my body to create it were proof of what we were to each other—or what I very much wanted us to be to each other, if Keela would accept it.

Filled with wonder, I opened my mouth and let the sound emerge. My coo was low and sweet and unlike any sound I had made before.

Its effect on Keela was instantaneous and miraculous. My mate exhaled and relaxed into my arms. Her groans of pain quieted. And her heart, which

had been pounding since we'd come under fire near her ship, finally slowed.

I smoothed my hand over her hair, attempting to soothe her with my touch as well as my coo as the ship lurched and rocked. She seemed to be breathing better, at least. Hopefully the bleeding had slowed too. I used a clean edge of her cloak to wipe some of the blood off her face.

"Keela," I murmured, my lips on her hair. Gods above, she smelled so good. "I'm here. I have you."

"Ship will go…into hyperspace…soon," she rasped, craning her head to look up at me. Her pupils were blown so wide that only a tiny ring of brown iris remained. Up close, I could see the lenses that altered her eye color. "Put me...in the medpod. Don't touch…anything…or I'll have…the ship… space you."

I chuckled and clasped her hand in my much-larger one, marveling at how different her small fingers and their blunt pink nails were to my longer digits and black claws. "I am a trained ship's medic. You have my word I will touch nothing but what I must to heal your injuries and my own."

She gazed up at me. For the first time since I'd knelt for her in the maintenance shaft, her expression when she looked at me was cautious and thoughtful rather than full of mistrust, disdain, and the obvious desire to see me lying unconscious at her feet.

"Your coo," she whispered. "I know…that means…"

"Yes." I couldn't help but nuzzle her hair. "Save your strength. We'll talk about everything when you're recovered. I will keep you safe."

She frowned at me. "Never safe."

Before I could reply, the ship finally stopped lurching and settled into a smooth flight. All the ship's interior lighting dimmed.

"Activating shadow mode," the AI's voice stated. "Hyperdrive engaging. Destination, pre-selected coordinates beta two-eight-six."

The vessel vibrated and surged as it slipped into hyperspace, following whatever route Keela had already ordered the ship to take.

I exhaled for what felt like the first time since the *Fleeting Fancy* had docked at the station—possibly for the first time since Sjer had sent me Keela's photo and dossier.

"Captain, scanners have detected an unknown life form aboard the vessel," the AI said, and now its voice sounded ominous. "Biological

signature appears to be Fortusian. Do you wish the intruder to be incapacitated for disposal?”

I stiffened.

“No,” Keela rasped, her bloody lips quirking at my expression. “The Fortusian is…my guest.”

“Understood. Your Fortusian guest is granted limited access to ship’s functions.” The AI paused. “Captain Wren, your vital signs indicate a life-threatening injury. Please proceed immediately to the medpod for treatment.”

I released the emergency harness and rose with Keela in my arms, leaving the bloody cloak on the floor to clean up later. “I am taking Captain Wren to the medpod now,” I said.

“Understood, Fortusian guest,” the AI replied.

By the time I reached the ship’s tiny medbay, the medpod had already activated. I laid Keela carefully on the medbay’s exam table and removed her boots, bracer, and her weapons—all seven of them—plus the band hidden in her hair that controlled her biomask.

Before I could pick her up again, she made a spinning motion with her right index finger. “Let me see your back,” she rasped.

Obediently, I turned.

“It’s not so bad,” she murmured. “Bit bloody, but you’ll live.”

“I will.” I scooped her up as gently as I could. “As will you, Captain Wren.”

Predictably, she frowned. “Don’t get comfortable on my ship,” she warned as I lowered her into the medpod. “You still have to convince me not to drop you at the next station.”

“I know.” I brushed loose hair carefully back from her face. “I will address all your concerns once you’ve healed.”

“I highly doubt that,” she muttered, and scowled when I smiled.

The medpod beeped. “Treatment commencing. Stand clear of the pod.”

Reluctantly, I took my hand from Keela’s face and moved away.

The pod’s clear dome slid closed, sealing my mate inside. Moments later, she was sedated by the unit and slipped into unconsciousness.

“Fortusian guest, the cockpit, captain’s quarters, and other sensitive areas are sealed while the captain is indisposed,” the AI said. “However, the crew cabin and galley are available for your use.”

Keela was safer now than she had been for the entirety of the time I'd known her, but I didn't want to leave her side—not even to go into another room on this little ship.

"Captain Wren will be under sedation and undergoing medical treatment for approximately six hours," the AI continued when I said nothing. "For her security and privacy, please take medical equipment necessary to address your own injuries and depart the medbay."

"I am a certified ship's medic," I argued. "I would prefer to stay with the captain."

"Please provide your credentials for verification."

I sighed. If the ship attempted to confirm my identity, my GAIS handler might be able to track my location. "Fine. I'll go."

"Acknowledged, Fortusian guest."

"My name is Jarrix."

"Greetings. I am Siber, the systems AI for the CS *Nivilus*. Please depart the medbay to avoid the activation of aggressive security measures."

In a storage cabinet, I found a medical kit that contained what I needed. I collected all of Keela's weapons and her boots and took them with me. The moment I stepped into the corridor, the medbay doors closed and locked behind me.

"The galley is ahead on your right," Siber said, sounding much more agreeable now that Keela was secure. "The clothing synth is at your disposal. The cleansing unit is also fully functional should you wish to refresh yourself."

"Thank you, Siber." I suddenly felt every one of my many injuries. I leaned against the wall near one of the burns left by Sjer's pulse rifle, my tail drooping. "What is our destination?"

"You are not cleared to receive that information," the AI said primly.

"Understood." I thought about my next question. "Why did Captain Wren visit Ghira Station?"

"You are not cleared to receive that information."

"Do you know why there is a bounty on Captain Wren?"

"That data is not contained within my files. And even if it were—"

"Yes, I understand," I said with a sigh. "I'm not cleared to receive that information."

"Affirmative. Is there anything else you require, Jarrix?"

I almost chuckled. I was aboard an unfamiliar vessel hurtling toward an unknown destination with no control over any aspect of the journey. Everything I owned was back in my quarters aboard the *Fancy*—at least until Sjer finished going through it looking for ways to find me before blowing it out an airlock.

My GAIS handler would soon be wondering what the hells had happened to me. With my wristcomm abandoned along with my clothes in Final Chance, Gitto wouldn't have any way to track me unless I made contact. At some point I would have to tender my resignation and hope Alliance Intelligence let me go without a fight.

Meanwhile, every merc, pirate crew, and bounty hunter in the sector was trying to capture my mate for a massive reward, and the fierce warrior who was now the center of my universe was undergoing life-saving medical treatment in a medbay that was locked to me unless I wanted to risk activating her vessel's *aggressive security measures*.

I had no idea what my future held now, other than I hoped it would be at Captain Keela Wren's side.

"No," I said finally in response to Siber's query. "I'm…fine."

Keenly aware that the ship's AI was monitoring my every move, I familiarized myself with the vessel's layout. I located the cockpit, captain's cabin, cargo bay, and engineering level access hatch—all locked and inaccessible to me. Until Keela or Siber decided otherwise, I was apparently only permitted to enter the small crew cabin, a shared cleansing unit, a storage room containing tools and other equipment, and the tiny, doorless galley.

The ship's banged-up exterior was purely camouflage because the interior was state-of-the-art and spotless. Keela had clearly invested in both her own comfort and outfitting the vessel to maximize speed, efficiency, space, and her odds of survival in a dangerous business.

The most startling find was a severed gray tentacle preserved and mounted above the doors to the cargo bay. I looked forward to hearing the story behind that particular trophy.

In my cabin, I stripped and dropped L'mel's bloody kilt into the waste disposal. I washed off what felt like a bucket's worth of blood and station gunk in the cleansing unit. Once I was clean, I used the med kit to heal my various injuries. Reaching the wounds on my back required some creative

problem-solving, but after fifteen years as a GAIS operative, I was used to patching myself up.

The ship's clothing synth offered a surprising variety of styles, but I opted for a utilitarian jumpsuit similar to the one Keela wore. I had to make some manual alterations to the design to accommodate my wings and tail and avoid an overly snug fit in some key areas. Once I dressed, I had the machine create two spares plus a pair of boots. That would get me by until we were able to stop at a port or station and I could purchase clothing of my own.

In the crew cabin, I studied myself in the viewing panel, trying to reconcile the male on the tall, narrow screen with the one who'd woken up at 0600 today in his bunk aboard the *Fancy*. I looked…better. More alive. Worried, yes, but less like I carried a hundred kilos on my shoulders.

After a quick meal, I removed the stale bedding from my bunk and dropped it into the sonic cleanser. As the machine did its work, I turned my attention to the mess near the port door. Some of the blood was mine, but most was Keela's. Seeing and *smelling* so much of my mate's blood spilled and remembering the chilling sound of her gurgling breaths made my hands shake as I meticulously cleaned the area.

When no trace of her blood remained, I channeled my restlessness and unease at being kept away from my mate by cleaning her boots and repairing the damage done to the wall by Sjer's rifle blasts as best I could with my limited access to tools and other maintenance supplies.

Then I remade my bunk with fresh linens, cleaned and performed preventative maintenance on my weapons and Keela's, and waited for my mate to wake.

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CHAPTER 8

KEELA



WAKING FROM A LENGTHY SEDATION IN THE MEDPOD WAS NEVER enjoyable.

And waking after a serious injury involving significant blood loss… well, that was even worse. A hangover from a long night of drinking Bacoran wine was pleasant by comparison.

At least the ship was still in shadow mode, so all the lights were dim and my sensitive eyes weren't assaulted by brightness when the medpod powered down and the cover slid open.

Soothed by the familiar thrumming of the ship traveling through hyperspace, I blinked drowsily at the ceiling as sensation slowly returned to my extremities and the brain fog cleared. My nanobots were silent, as they often were after a lengthy stay in the pod. I was so used to their hum in my bloodstream that the silence was sometimes unnerving.

The most unsettling aspect of waking up in the pod was that the events preceding going into it felt disconnected from reality. My time on Ghira Station, from my meeting with N'vera to our abrupt departure and even the seemingly endless minutes sitting on Jarrix's lap in the emergency seat as Siber got us away from the station, felt hazy, like a half-remembered dream.

The residual ache in my shoulder and the strange awareness of Jarrix's presence aboard my ship confirmed all of it had been very real.

Cold reality hit like a stack of stones on my chest: N'vera had sold me alleged coordinates where I *might* find my long-lost sister, I had a big

enough bounty on my head to draw in mercs and pirates from across the sector, and a Fortusian male I'd never seen before in my life had knelt naked at my feet and pledged his life to me. And he was traveling aboard the *Nivilus*.

My stomach growled loudly enough that it might have been audible throughout my entire ship. I'd been too wound up to eat anything on the way to Ghira Station after receiving N'vera's confirmation of our meeting.

I might not have a plan to deal with the rest of my troubles, but at least I could address my need for food. I sat up, waited for the room to stop tilting, and swung my legs over the side of the pod.

I made it halfway to the medbay door before I realized I had a problem: I was naked.

Normally, whenever I came out of the pod, I simply went directly to my cabin to dress. No other soul had ever traveled aboard my ship, so I had no reason to keep clothes in the medbay. But now Jarrix To'vok was aboard my ship, and regardless of whatever connection he thought we had, I had no intention of parading past him in my skin.

I searched the room for anything I could use to cover myself. Finally, I located a small stack of sterile thermal blankets in the back of a cabinet. They were designed for use if a patient was undergoing treatment, or in case of emergency.

This qualified as an emergency.

I broke the seal on the package, wrapped the blanket around myself so it covered me from collarbone to knees, and marched to the door.

Before I could reach for the control panel, Siber spoke. "Greetings, Captain Wren. Medbay scanners indicate the inert tracking device in your leg has been removed and your overall condition is acceptable, with minimal residual effects requiring ongoing therapeutic treatment."

Gingerly, I rotated my left shoulder and moved my arm. "Sore but functional," I confirmed.

"Noted. Your guest is currently located in the crew cabin. Would you prefer I restrict him to that location until you have visited your quarters, eaten a meal, and then secured yourself in the cockpit?"

Gods above and below, it was tempting.

I wanted to put on a flight suit and feel like the captain of my ship again. I needed food. I had so much to think about and process, like the news of Calla's apparent death and possible survival. I had decisions to

make, *big* ones, and I didn’t need or want to deal with Jarrix while doing any of it.

But as the brain fog dissipated, vivid memories of Ghira Station piled up in my head, one after the other: the Final Chance staff door opening just in time for me to evade security, Jarrix kneeling at my feet, the way he’d laid waste to a half-dozen or more mercs on Deck 14, how he’d used his body multiple times to shield me even after I’d ditched him and used him as decoy…

The frantic way he’d used my cloak to staunch the blood pouring from my shoulder. How he’d ripped his arm open *with his own fangs* to share his blood with me so I wouldn’t die before he could get me into the medpod.

His coo, which had swept away my pain and comforted me when nothing else could, and proven we were indeed physiologically true mates. Even I couldn’t deny the truth of it anymore, as much as I wanted to.

I’d have to face him and figure out where we’d go from here.

Might as well get it over with. According to the medbay door controls, he’d been waiting for me to come out for more than six hours.

“No, don’t lock him in,” I said finally. “But do continue monitoring for unexpected hostile actions and maintain security on key locations unless I order otherwise.”

“Confirmed, Captain. Medbay security locks disengaging now.”

When the door slid open, Jarrix was already in the corridor and headed my way. He stopped just short of the medbay doorway, though, presumably to give me space.

He took up nearly the whole damn corridor. His horns were maybe ten centimeters or less from the ceiling, and his shoulders almost brushed the walls. My ship had never once felt small until this moment.

He’d apparently put the clothing synth to good use and made himself a jumpsuit the same basic design as mine, scaled up significantly for his size and modified for his wings and tail. Did he think it was the *Nivilus’s* official uniform? And why had he chosen to dress this way when the machine could have produced a hundred different possible options, most of which wouldn’t have clung to his body quite this well?

Quite this *much*, I meant. Not that I was noticing the fit of his clothing.

I definitely didn’t note the way the jumpsuit stretched across his shoulders or showcased a pair of thick, muscular thighs, or hugged an objectively perfect ass I wanted to sink my nails into.

I snapped my gaze back up to meet his.

His dark eyes raked over me from the top of my head to my bare feet and back up again. His expression was an even hungrier echo of how he'd gazed at me in the maintenance shaft: full of awe and edged with disbelief, as if he still couldn't quite believe I was really here.

I couldn't quite believe I'd let him aboard my ship, so we were even.

Belatedly, I realized I was no longer disguised as a brunette. The sonic cleanser in the medpod had removed the artificial coloring from my hair. Now it was its natural red again. My temporary facial tattoos were gone too, along with the lenses that had changed my eye color from green to brown.

In a way, Jarrix was seeing me for the first time.

Part of me hated that I was wrapped in a damn blanket and barefoot instead of armed to the teeth and wearing my flight suit and boots.

Another part of me liked the gobsmacked way he stared at me in my state of undress, as if a herd of Gandarian mule-ox could have come thundering down the corridor and he wouldn't have spared them a glance. In fact, I worried he was going to kneel again and I'd have to shoot him on principle.

Thankfully, he stayed on his feet and focused his gaze on my healed shoulder as if he could see through my skin to the muscles and bones beneath.

"How is it?" he asked.

Gods above, his low rumble went straight to places it had no business going—specifically, my clit and my suddenly rubbery knees. Was this some bullshit side effect of him sharing his blood for healing?

I steadied myself against the doorway and glared at him. "Shoulder's fine."

He tilted his head, seemingly unruffled by my tone and scowl. "One hundred percent fine? Or more like seventy-five percent?"

I hesitated a beat too long in answering, apparently. "Seventy-five, then," he murmured. "Still, we're very lucky the damage wasn't worse, and your ship contains a state-of-the-art medpod."

His use of the pronoun *we* didn't escape my notice. The audacity of this male. We were *not* a *we*.

"You'll want to dress and then eat, I assume?" he continued. His mouth turned up at the corners just enough to reveal the points of his fangs.

“Allow me to prepare a meal for us. I believe I’ve mastered the nuances of your food synth unit.”

“I’ll make my own food.” I brushed past him, intending to head straight for my quarters, but stopped short in front of the port door. “What happened to the mess we left here? Where’s all the blood?”

“I cleaned.” He folded his hands behind his back and nodded at the wall, where slight indentations and faint scorch marks indicated where several errant plasma bolts had struck. “And did some light repairs.”

I opened my mouth to tell him not to do things on my ship without permission, then swallowed the words because I hadn’t really been looking forward to cleaning up all that blood and patching the walls.

“Thanks,” I said instead.

“You’re most welcome.” Jarrix’s smile grew. “I’m useful on board a ship. If there’s anything else that might need work—”

“Nothing does,” I said, cutting him off. “I keep my ship maintained. My livelihood and my life depend on it.”

“I can tell.” He followed me to my cabin, which was just behind the cockpit and across from the galley. “She is a very fine ship, and a true reflection of her remarkable captain.”

I wanted to stab him so he’d stop being so kind. I wasn’t used to kindness and it grated on my nerves. “Jarrix, stop with the compliments and flattery. It’s not that I’m not grateful for everything you did to help me get off Ghira Station alive and in one piece, but—”

“*Barely* in one piece,” he growled, and started to reach for me as if he wanted to touch my arm before letting his hand drop back to his side. “I should have prevented that shoulder wound.”

“It’s my job to protect myself,” I shot back. “Not yours.”

He shook his head. “Fighting by your side is my privilege, Keela.”

“It *is* a privilege, and not one you’ve earned.” I started to cross my arms, then thought better of it when my shoulder twinged. “You don’t get to decide whether you’re my ally. That’s *my* choice. So is…whatever *this* is.” I waved my hand in the air between us.

“You know what this is. If my word wasn’t enough to convince you, then the evidence surely has.” His gaze was solemn now. “And I agree with you: it’s your choice.”

Of all the responses I was expecting, that wasn’t one of them.

“Fate or circumstances caused our paths to cross,” he continued, “and my physiology has identified a mutually advantageous, satisfying, and beneficial pairing. But we each have a choice in the matter. I made mine on Ghira Station. And when I say fighting at your side is the greatest privilege of my life, I mean it. I’m not trying to flatter you or manipulate your feelings. It is simply the truth.”

I rubbed my forehead. This blasted true mate business was giving me a headache.

“You need to dress and eat,” Jarrix said, his tone mild enough that I didn’t bristle…much. “This conversation can wait until you’re settled and have had a chance to process what happened on the station.”

“Fine. Just don’t crowd me.” I pressed my hand to the panel beside my cabin to unlock the door. “I’m going to be processing it for a while.”

“Take all the time you need. I’ll make us a meal while you change,” he said, still gently. “Processing is more easily done on a full stomach.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I had to establish some clear boundaries before he decided it was his job to wait on me hand and foot like I was some kind of princess.

“Ground rule number one for being aboard my ship.” I raised my index finger. “I make my own food.” I raised a second finger. “Ground rule number two: clean up after yourself. This is my home and I keep it tidy.”

“Of course, Captain.”

Oh, I liked it when he called me *Captain*. I turned around and marched into my cabin so he didn’t see my face heat, leaving him standing in the corridor as the doors closed between us.

I took my time getting ready—not because I was avoiding Jarrix, but because my thoughts were spinning in a dozen directions.

As I dressed, I kept seeing flashbacks of Calla’s picture in the file N’vera had shown me. I found myself going still with one leg in my jumpsuit and one still bare, or one boot fastened and the other in my hand.

Since we’d been sent to different training facilities the day after we were sold, I’d only seen my sister twice. Both times were in the halls backstage of an arena between battles. She hadn’t seen me watching her—or at least I didn’t think she did.

For gladiators, it was important not to let it be known if you had blood relations also in the circuit. Fights to the death between siblings were among the highest-grossing events for the promoters, and refusing to fight

meant execution for both. How the fact we were sisters didn't make it into our records, I didn't know, but it was one of only a few lucky breaks either of us seemed to get during our long years in the arena.

Until I'd seen her Alliance Defense file photo, Calla was still not quite fifteen years old in my mind, which was how old she'd been the second and final time I'd seen her. Three months after that final sighting, I'd turned sixteen, bought my freedom from my stable master, and fled Ganai the same day to avoid the many opportunistic predators who targeted newly freed gladiators and turned them into soldiers in private armies—or worse. A team had even followed me out of my keeper's office and attempted to kidnap me. The attack forced me to escape the planet without being able to contact Calla.

I'd tried to get a message to her many times during the following year, but either none made it through or she hadn't been able to respond. And then it was too late—she'd turned sixteen and made her own escape from Ganai, disappearing into the vastness of space without a trace.

Until now.

With my jumpsuit pulled up to my waist and my heart racing, I gave in to curiosity and called up the coordinates I'd gotten from N'vera on the monitor in my cabin. The screen showed a small moon with enormous swirling storms and a purple atmosphere.

Iosa. I'd never heard of it. According to the file, it was a sparsely populated moon orbiting the planet Jakora, which was a well-known resort world just outside Alliance space. Unlike Jakora and several of its sister moons, Iosa had relatively few permanent residents due to its often violent weather. There were a few major cities, some small villages, and one interplanetary port where landings were reportedly dangerous due to the frequency of massive hurricanes.

The second set of coordinates N'vera provided specified a location on the coast of one of Iosa's small continents, many kilometers from the nearest village. It would be a perfect place to live for those trying to avoid notice, like a presumed-dead human and her retired assassin mate.

I touched the image of Iosa on the screen and thought of Calla's face as it had looked in her Defense file. I tried to picture a version of that woman living on this storm-ravaged moon. A lump formed in my throat. What was her life like? Was she loved? Was she happy?

“Siber, compile a file on Iosa and designate it for my eyes only,” I said, my voice rough. “If anything happens to me, destroy the file and remove all traces of these coordinates from the ship’s systems.”

“Of course, Captain.”

I shut off my viewer and finished getting dressed with a new sense of purpose and urgency.

When I finally emerged from my cabin, I felt like myself again, or something close to it. Despite the lingering soreness in my shoulder, I’d successfully braided my hair, put on a clean flight suit fastened all the way to my collar, and polished my boots to a high sheen.

There was no sign of Jarrix in either the galley or his cabin, but the smell of cooked food indicated he’d already made his meal. Sounds from the other end of the corridor alerted me that he was currently in the medbay. He’d mentioned serving as a ship’s medic aboard a privateer vessel, so maybe he was familiarizing himself with the contents of my medbay.

I activated my Bacorian coffeemaker—an upgrade to the galley I’d made immediately after purchasing the *Nivilus*—and chose a protein and vegetable dish at random from the food synth’s standard offerings.

Since my coffee and food would take a few minutes to be ready, I went into the crew cabin. Jarrix had left the doors wide open. To demonstrate that he wasn’t hiding anything from me?

I found Jarrix’s crossbow, gun, and daggers laid out neatly on the small desk, along with the weapons I’d had on me when we’d escaped Ghira Station. All had been meticulously cleaned. The bunk was neatly made and the bedding had clearly been washed because it smelled fresh and not as if it had been left unused for seven years.

Since it was my ship, I blatantly searched the room, making no effort to be quiet while doing so. But the only other sign of its occupant besides the bedding and weapons were two jumpsuits identical to the one Jarrix was wearing, folded with military precision and left on a shelf in a storage cabinet next to a small stack of underclothes that seemed…very form-fitting. Heat crawled up my chest and neck.

Footsteps in the corridor alerted me to Jarrix’s approach. He could have moved silently, but he hadn’t.

“The flight suit is a good design,” he said from behind me. If he was at all perturbed by my search of his cabin, it didn’t show in his voice. “Very practical.”

“I’ve always thought so.” I shut the cabinet and turned.

His massive body and wings took up the entire doorway, and his horns almost grazed the frame. Even with a gun in one thigh holster and my favorite dagger in the other, I should have felt uneasy with him looming so close, but I didn’t. Instead, he exuded security and confidence, and I hated how much I didn’t hate it.

In his enormous clawed hands, he held a giant bowl of what looked like hot, savory dumplings in broth and an equally large mug of what smelled like tea.

“You look lovely, Captain,” he said quietly. “And lethal.”

I snorted to cover the way his frank admiration made my stomach flutter. “Lethal, yes. Lovely? Hardly.”

His mouth quirked, flashing his fangs in a way that shouldn’t have been sexy but inexplicably was. “Lovely as the most spectacular nebula.” He indicated the bowl he held. “There’s no table in the galley. Where do you typically eat?”

I jerked my chin toward the front of the ship. “In the cockpit, or sitting on my bed in my cabin. There’s a desk in there, but it’s usually covered in weapons.”

“Would you like to eat together?” He gestured toward his bed. “I won’t ask to be let into the cockpit or your quarters, but I have plenty of room in here. Well, *enough* room,” he amended with a grin that revealed the rest of his fangs.

That grin felt as dangerous as him wielding a blade pointed at my heart. More so, even, because it was a promise of something big and risky that I really couldn’t afford to let get past my armor.

And yet, I feared it was too late.

I’d already allowed him to have my back and fight beside me aboard the station. I’d let him board the *Nivilus*, when I’d never permitted a passenger before. I’d allowed him to share his blood with me. I’d felt my body’s undeniable reaction to his coo.

I’d noticed the way he looked wearing a flight suit that matched mine, and I liked it. I liked how he smelled too, like smoke and spice and hot skin. It was a scent that would smell good on my pillow. The way his tail swayed and coiled loosely around his leg made me think about all the creative uses for that obviously dextrous appendage.

These…were problems.

If I didn’t put a stop to this right now and drop him off at the next station, I might start liking it all too much.

When I glanced up, Jarrix had traded the pleased expression he’d worn before for the look of a male faced with defusing an explosive ticking down to detonation.

“It’s just a meal, not a marriage proposal,” he said calmly, as if he’d somehow guessed my thoughts or their general direction. “I told you everything is your choice. I don’t expect anything from you.”

“Don’t you?” The words slipped out before I could hold them back.

“There are things I *hope* for.” He leaned against the wall and folded his wings tighter against his body, offering me enough room to slip past him into the corridor if I wanted to. “Hope isn’t the same as expectation. And I certainly don’t believe you owe me anything. What I offer, I do so freely. There’s no ledger here where one of us owes the other anything.”

“Good,” I snapped, since anger seemed like the safest emotion I could have at the moment. “Then I can drop you at the next station without worrying about owing you for anything.”

“You could,” he said, though his eyes tightened as if the thought of me doing so caused him physical pain. “But it wouldn’t be the most logical move on your part.”

“It seems pretty logical to me,” I countered. “I don’t know you. I can’t trust you.”

Jarrix studied me. “Do you *really* feel like you can’t trust me?” He moved away from the wall, closing half the distance between us in a single step. Gods above, this cabin really was small. “You know the science of true mate physiology. I couldn’t betray or harm you even if I wanted to, which I never would.”

The way he systematically dismantled my arguments without dismissing my feelings was as annoying as it was effective.

“You don’t feel anything here—” He indicated my chest with two extended fingers, stopping just short of touching me “—when I’m near that tells you I’d put myself between you and anyone who meant you harm? Do you really not believe I’d end any threat to your life without a second thought?”

I did believe it because I’d seen him do it again and again on the station, but I wasn’t about to admit it.

“You don’t know me any better than I know you,” I said instead.

“I *want* to know you,” he replied, still maddeningly calm. “I want to know everything about you, but I know it takes time to build trust and we’ve only known each other less than a day. As for me, I’ve told you who I am, and I’ll answer any questions you have with total honesty. Whatever I must do to prove myself to you, I will do.”

“Why?” I demanded. “Because your biology tells you so?”

“No, because I *choose* to do so.”

The food synth beeped in the galley to signal that my food was ready. My stomach was grumbling in complete sentences now.

Jarrix took a deep breath. “Can we table this conversation until you’ve eaten, Captain? You are still recovering from your injury, and I know it’s been far too long since your last meal.”

He wasn’t wrong, and those damned dumplings smelled fantastic. “Fine.” I walked past him to the galley, where my steaming bowl of sliced protein and dark green veg waited.

By my mental calculation, we were about six hours from our destination. That gave me a decent amount of time to plan my next move.

But now my next move had to account for Jarrix’s presence too, and that meant unless I truly did intend to drop him at a convenient space station, I should include him in my deliberations.

“I need to check on things in the cockpit,” I said without raising my voice. He’d be able to hear me from his cabin just fine.

“All right,” he called.

I sighed. “Join me.”

A heartbeat later, he appeared in his doorway, soup bowl and mug in hand. If he was trying not to appear relieved about my invitation, he’d failed. “Of course, Captain.”

He followed me to the cockpit door, which I unlocked by scanning my palm. I watched him look over the interior, from the pilot and co-pilot’s seats to the controls and the one hundred and eighty-degree view of stars streaking past at hyperspeed.

I sat in the pilot’s chair, biting back a sigh of relief at being back at the controls. I never took the *Nivilus* or my freedom for granted, but neither ever felt quite so good as when I sat here after fighting to survive and get back to my ship.

I rested my bowl in my lap and gestured at the seat to my right. “Make yourself comfortable. But so you’re aware, just because I allowed you in

here doesn’t mean you can do anything but sit and watch. None of the controls will respond to your touch or verbal commands.”

“Understood.” Jarrix settled in, found a spot for his mug, and picked up his bowl and spoon. “What information are you comfortable sharing with me about where we’re headed?”

As I thought about how to answer, I nibbled unenthusiastically at my food and went through my routine of checking over navigation and all ship’s systems, especially the weapons and shield status reports. I was definitely not jealous of his bowl of dumplings. Not one bit.

“Our current destination is Hidria,” I said finally, sitting back with my bowl in hand. “It’s a small planet that used to have a mining colony before they depleted the planet’s resources and the company moved on. Now it’s just a hunk of rock with no shipping lanes or outposts nearby and the occasional ion storm.”

“A good place to hide,” Jarrix said between bites. “But not for long, given the storms and your fuel situation.”

I might have guessed he’d notice my fuel levels while I was reviewing the ship’s status logs. “True. So no matter where I go after Hidria, I’ll need to make a fuel stop somewhere I can get in and out without being noticed.”

“*I?*” he asked, his voice even. “Or *we?*”

I set my bowl with its half-eaten contents back in my lap and stared out at the passing stars. “I told you when we came aboard that you’d have to convince me not to leave you at the next available station.”

“You did say that.” He was already eating the last of his dumplings. The male could really pack away the food. It probably took a lot to fuel that big body. Not that I was thinking about his body or how big he was.

“I’ve already pledged my life to you and demonstrated how seriously I take that vow,” he added, “so I won’t rehash those arguments. Instead, I’d like to make a proposal.”

I frowned. “What’s your proposal?”

He drained the last of his broth and set his bowl aside. “I would like to request that you allow me to stay with you at least long enough to deal with this bounty matter.”

I picked up my mug of coffee. Jarrix glowered at my half-eaten bowl of food as if it had personally insulted his honor and that of his ancestors.

I tucked one leg under myself and half-turned in my chair. “I’d ask why you want to stick around, but the answer is fairly obvious.”

“Not for just the obvious reason that your safety and well-being are now my top priority.” He sipped his tea and eyed me. “After what happened at Ghira, I’m now a target too. My former captain and crewmates will be hunting me. Word will have already spread that I acted as your ally and we were seen boarding your vessel together. I’ll probably find my face and the name *Tal Noku* next to *Keela* on the bounty posting, if it’s not there already. Which means we both have a strong reason to resolve this situation quickly.”

Everything he said was true. My trainers at the arena would have said that was all the more reason to leave him at the next station and let the bounty hunters and mercs follow his trail hoping to find me while I went in the opposite direction in search of my sister. And they would have been right.

As if he suspected the direction of my thoughts, Jarrix eyed me over the rim of his mug. “I think it’s in our best interest to pool our resources, make the most of each other’s strengths by combining our skills and training, and get ourselves off the target list.” His eyes glowed softly, which was altogether too mesmerizing for my taste. “I’m an asset to you. I’m a weapon and a shield. Use me.”

Despite all my misgivings—of which there were *many*—it was a compelling argument. Which was probably why he’d made it.

During my years in the arena and the more than a decade since leaving Ganai, I was nothing if not aware of the importance of using every weapon and form of defense at my disposal, from hidden plasma guns to my lash and even the occasional table or chair. And on one memorable occasion, an enormous, very ill-tempered, radioactive rat.

Having seen Jarrix in action and knowing his credentials as a trained Alliance Intelligence operative, I had no doubt he was worth every kilo of his considerable weight as a weapon against whoever had put this bounty on my head.

But what was equally true was that by agreeing to let him stay while we dealt with the bounty situation, I was giving him time and opportunity to insinuate himself into my life, hoping I’d cave and let him stay for good.

He’d challenged me earlier to deny that I instinctively trusted him. I’d dodged the question, but the truth of the matter was in my gut I *did* trust him. I had from the moment he’d taken those plasma rifle shots for me. If I hadn’t, I would have shot him outside my ship’s port and left him bleeding

out on the dock while I made my getaway. Whether or not he realized it, I hadn't been injured too badly to have done it.

The fact of the matter was, I had a true mate offering me trust, protection, and utter devotion, and I had no idea what to do about it.

I'd never trusted anyone in my life except for my sister, and we'd been torn apart when we were small children. I didn't want to deal with bounty hunters or whoever had sent them after me. I wanted to go to Iosa, find Calla, and try to salvage something out of the wreckage of my life. I wanted to tell her I was sorry I hadn't found a way to protect her from our mother's greed and indifference and keep us out of the clutches of the arena trainers.

But what was becoming more clear by the moment was that I couldn't go anywhere near those coordinates N'vera had given me with bounty hunters, mercenaries, and privateers on my tail. I couldn't make Calla and her mate targets too. I'd already failed her more than any sister ever should—more than I could ever hope to make amends for.

That meant I had to find a way to get this bounty off my head. Off *our* heads. And fast, before Calla and her mate moved on from those coordinates and I lost track of her forever. My chest constricted at the thought.

But I'd be damned if I'd let Jarrix see me as weak or weepy, so I forced myself to take a deep breath and scowl.

"Fine," I said. "You can stay until the bounty is off our heads. After that, we'll see."

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CHAPTER 9

JARRIX



IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO NOTICE THAT KEELA LOOKED EVEN LOVELIER AT the controls of her ship with the soft lights and colors of the vessel's interior and the starlight streaking past setting her skin and hair aglow.

It was equally impossible not to see and feel the depth of the pain she fought so hard to hide, especially when it played out across her features in unguarded moments.

What was she remembering when she flinched and squeezed her mug of tea so tightly that her knuckles turned white? I wanted to find the source of her pain and kill it and present her with its pieces so she could crush them under her boots.

But then just as quickly as her guard had dropped, her expression shuttered. She was as cool and distant now as she'd been in the maintenance shaft at Ghira Station when I'd asked for a minute's truce and she'd offered me a scant thirty seconds and met me with her dagger at my throat.

The memory of her ferocity in that moment made my cocks stir and throb with need.

To hide my reaction, I settled back into the copilot's seat, trying to find a more comfortable position. In contrast to Keela's chair, which had clearly adapted to her body and was well-worn, the cover and cushioning of mine was stiff and unyielding. Had anyone ever sat in it before me?

“So,” she said flatly, as if those moments of emotional turbulence had never happened. “The bounty is a problem, obviously.”

“A significant one,” I agreed. “The obvious question is who put the bounty on you and where do we find them?”

Her mouth compressed into a tight line. For a moment, I thought she was reluctant to give me a name. When she finally spoke, the answer was worse than I’d expected. “I don’t know,” she said.

I couldn’t hide my surprise. “You don’t *know?*”

“No, I don’t.” She glared at me. I admired her fierceness and all her fire, even when it was directed at me. “If I did, don’t you think I’d already be trying my damnedest to get them off my back?”

“Of course you would,” I said, raising my hands to signal that I’d meant no offense. “I’m just surprised. Generally if someone has a bounty on their head, especially one this large, they’re well aware of why it exists.”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you?” She scowled ferociously. “Believe me when I say I have wracked my brain. I’ve gone back over the jobs I did around the time I first became aware someone was targeting me, but nothing jumps out at me. I’d almost think it was a case of mistaken identity, that either I or my ship were misidentified as being the culprit in something, and someone didn’t do a good enough job of verifying the information. And if that’s the case, it’s going to be difficult to prove.”

Everything she was telling me seemed to be the truth, which meant not only did we have an uncounted number of hunters trying to track us down, but we didn’t even know *why*.

“When did you first become aware of the bounty?” I asked. “I saw the posting and the date it went out on the network.”

“Yes, that’s when I got an alert from an acquaintance.” Keela grimaced. “But I got targeted before that.”

Briefly, she described being betrayed and attacked at Daventi Station, an outpost on a shipping route in the Alpha sector I’d visited twice myself.

I’d known Vinian Ykottaran, the money-grubbing Wundi male who’d stabbed her and attempted to turn her in. We’d crossed paths a few times during my years undercover on various privateer vessels. Sjer had even taken some jobs from him, proving both how small the galaxy could feel sometimes and how wide Vinian’s network had been before his death.

Suddenly, I thought of the odd trophy on the wall above the cargo bay doors. “That wouldn’t happen to be Vinian’s tentacle on display in the

corridor, would it?" I asked when she'd finished the story of her escape from Daventi.

"Indeed it is." She arched her eyebrow as if challenging me to disapprove. "He tried to steal my ship. I took that personally."

"Perfectly understandable." I swirled the tea in my mug. "Altasian soldiers came to the pick-up, you said?"

"Soldiers or mercenaries. It wasn't clear who they were or who they worked for. I didn't get much of a chance to try to extract any intel. Everything went to shit pretty fast." She raised her uninjured shoulder in a half shrug. "Vinian said he planned to collect *favors* as his reward for turning me over alive, which fits with the bounty that showed up on the network the following week. I've been keeping my head down since then, taking jobs on the edges of Alliance space—at least until yesterday, when I had to come to Ghira Station."

I raised my eyebrows. "*Had* to?"

Keela sipped her tea. "Had to."

I waited, but she didn't offer anything more about why she'd visited the station. I doubted it was because the drinks at Final Chance were irresistible.

"So the obvious conclusion is whoever summoned you to Ghira did so to draw you out," I said when she didn't elaborate further.

"That would be a logical deduction, but I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because the meeting was requested by someone with information to sell after seeing a posting made by someone calling herself Asta Irclion, a name that has no connection to me or my ship whatsoever." She shrugged. "I'm not saying it's not possible, but my gut says no."

"Then how did the word get out so quickly that you were on Ghira?" I asked. "Could there be a tracker on your ship? On *you?*"

"Not on me," she said instantly, making me wonder how she could be so certain. "On my ship, unlikely, but I suppose it's not completely outside the realm of possibility. Siber runs constant scans and I had the ship checked by a…friend…after I left Daventi. It came up clean. This friend is usually reliable on such things."

I wondered who this friend was and just how truly *reliable* they were. The ties of friendship, even long-lasting ones, had a tendency to evaporate as soon as credits and/or threats started flying around.

“So my best guess is someone identified me at one of my most recent drops,” she continued. “They probably shadowed my ship and sent a message ahead to a confederate that got intercepted. The word must have spread from there.”

It was a reasonable theory. Still, I suspected there might be a tracker on her ship, and I wanted to find out for sure sooner rather than later.

“Anything else?” I asked. “Any other clues we could follow up on?”

She shook her head. “Not on my end. I don’t suppose you can add anything?”

“Just what’s on the bounty posting,” I said, then reconsidered. “My former captain mentioned that once you were captured, he planned to rendezvous with someone on Forval IX. It sounded like he intended to hand you over to someone there. Does Forval IX bring anything or anyone to mind?”

She frowned and thought. “No, I don’t think so. I’ll look back through my records and see if I can spot any connections.” She tilted her head. “Siber, what general information do we have regarding Forval IX?”

“According to the database, Forval IX is located in sector Delta-nine-eight and is not part of the Alliance,” the AI said. “The planet is categorized as a Class P world. It is extremely isolated and generally considered uninhabitable due to volcanic activity, extremely arid environment, lack of arable land, toxic atmosphere, and exceedingly hostile flora and fauna.”

“Sounds delightful,” Keela said dryly, her lovely green eyes sparkling in a way that made my hearts feel light despite our grim situation. “Jakora might be in danger of losing its reputation as everyone’s top vacation destination. Siber, anything else about Forval IX that might be helpful?”

“I will make the full file available for you to access on shipboard monitors and datapads, Captain,” the AI replied. “One item of note is that within the last decade, the planet was the site of a notorious failed attempt at terraforming for the purposes of colonization.”

“Why is that notable?” I asked. “That’s not an uncommon occurrence.”

“Several organized crime syndicates were involved in the project,” Siber replied. “Their goal was rumored to be the establishment of gladiatorial arenas that would operate extralegally, without oversight from either the Alliance or the Barons Guild.”

The color drained from Keela’s face. She swayed.

Instantly, I went to my knees in front of my mate. I took her mug of tea before it slipped from her fingers and set it aside.

My coo rose in my chest without me needing to consciously reach for it. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and tail and comfort her, but I had no right to touch her without permission. So instead I cooed for her, folded my wings around her chair, and stayed close to offer what comfort and support I could.

Apparently oblivious to Keela's distress, the AI continued, "According to records—"

"Siber," Keela interrupted, her voice rough. "That's enough for now. Please compile whatever information you have on that project. I'll review the file later."

"Understood, Captain."

Keela stared at me in almost a daze. A little of her color was coming back, but her breathing was shallower than it should be. I checked her pulse at her wrist and found it was thready.

"You should lie down," I said in my medic's voice. "We can continue once you've rested."

"I'm fine," she said automatically, as if by saying so she could make it true.

"You need sleep," I countered. "You are exhausted and still recovering."

Her chin lifted stubbornly. "I slept in the medpod."

"Unconsciousness is not the same as sleep, and I'm sure you know that," I countered. "You need to be at your best if we're to continue this investigation. We're likely to have more encounters like the ones on Ghira Station. Your survival and mine depends on you making the correct, logical choices about how you treat your body and mind."

She scowled.

"We are currently—" I glanced at the navigational display "—a little over five hours from Hidria. I'd also benefit from some sleep."

"You didn't sleep while I was in the medbay?"

I shook my head. "I found it impossible to rest while you were undergoing treatment and so much needed to be done on the ship. So as a medic, I prescribe sleep for us both."

"Captain, my scans support Jarrix's recommendations," Siber interjected. "You both require rest."

“Fine.” Keela rubbed her forehead. “But ground rule number three is there will be no ganging up on me. And rule number four is I sleep when *I* decide I need sleep, and after today, no one mentions it again.”

I was starting to notice a theme with these ground rules. “Of course, Captain.”

She gave me a flat look as if she suspected I was mocking her.

“You are the captain, and I am your…crew,” I said, swallowing the words I really wanted to say: *your mate*. “Therefore, I respect your rules and boundaries. Siber, will you rouse us once the ship reaches orbit around Hidria?”

“I will do so if Captain Wren requests it,” the AI said, reminding me that I had no authority aboard the ship. “However, I suggest the captain requires more than five hours of sleep to fully function.”

“I don’t require as much sleep as you,” I told Keela. “Siber can wake me when we arrive. You can take as much time as you need to be clear-headed.”

My mate looked actually pained by the thought of getting adequate rest but she sighed and didn’t argue. “Siber, wake Jarrix when we get to Hidria,” she said. “I’ll try to get some sleep.” After a hesitation, she added, “Make the file on Forval IX available to him as well. And grant him access to the cockpit, but lock out comms and navigation, as well as weapons and shields.”

“Understood,” Siber said.

I started to rise, but Keela stopped me with a hand on my arm. The light touch sent a rush of warmth through me. “We’re temporary allies,” she said. “Nothing more.”

It sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as me, but I didn’t point it out.

I covered her hand with mine and squeezed with what I hoped she felt was gentle reassurance. “Get some sleep, Captain.”

After a beat, she took her hand away. I missed her touch immediately.

“I’ll clean up,” I said when she reached for her dishes. “Go on and get some rest. Would you like me to make you a relaxing tea to take with you to your cabin? I saw some in one of the cabinets.”

“I’ll make my own tea.” Halfway out the cockpit door, she paused and said over her shoulder, “But thank you.”

And then she disappeared in the direction of the galley. The door to the cockpit hissed closed between us.

“You’re welcome,” I said softly. “Mate.”

———

Hidria was indeed a lifeless hunk of rock.

I was already awake and sitting in the cockpit with a mug of tea when the ship dropped smoothly out of hyperspace, approached our destination on a long arcing trajectory, and settled seamlessly into orbit.

I complimented Siber on the flawless navigation. The AI seemed pleased by the praise. I’d win her over yet.

The view from the cockpit wasn’t much at the moment—one stripped planet and a vast field of black space and distant stars—but I preferred it to the blank walls of the crew cabin.

I sat in the copilot’s chair with my boots propped on the edge of the controls and a datapad in my hands, reading over the file Siber had compiled on Forval IX and the failed terraforming project. It made for surprisingly fascinating reading.

Forval IX was a primeval world by any metric. Its land masses had been formed by volcanic activity and were little more than barren rock. During the planet’s winter season, more than seventy percent of the surface disappeared under a thick layer of snow and ice. Due to volcanic activity, the atmosphere was toxic to most life forms. Images and video of the planet showed very clearly that it was inhospitable in the extreme. The few researchers who’d braved a stay on the planet reported the native flora and fauna were as vicious and deadly as the environment.

A Fylorian university had constructed a single habitable research station on the surface in the northern hemisphere. Images of the station showed a heavily fortified facility comprised of four connected domed structures. The weapons mounted on the exterior testified to the planet’s dangers. According to the file, the facility hadn’t been staffed in almost a decade.

Since it was outside Alliance space, Forval IX would be subject to attack from any number of hostile forces—if there had been anything there worth fighting over. But there wasn’t, which made it simultaneously a highly questionable choice for a terraforming project and an ideal candidate

for crime syndicates to establish the kind of arenas that were now illegal on all Alliance worlds.

It had been the mention of arenas that had nearly caused my mate to go into shock.

The doors to Keela's cabin had remained shut and secured for more than six hours now. Siber had responded to my inquiry about my mate's status and reported the captain was indeed asleep and not just locked away brooding or using her datapad. Apparently, the ship's AI and I had found some common ground when it came to Keela's health and well-being.

In the meantime, before Keela emerged from her much-needed sleep, I wanted to know everything there was to know about Forval IX.

According to the file Siber had prepared, a consortium called Rendex had been behind the terraforming project. On the surface, both the consortium and their colonization goals had initially seemed legitimate. It was only when the costs of the project far exceeded estimates and additional funding suddenly appeared that suspicious officials dug deeper and uncovered the connections between Rendex and three known crime syndicates.

An informant from within one of the syndicates—who'd died in a shuttle accident not long after speaking to investigators—had revealed the true goal of the terraforming project: arenas dedicated to unrestrained bloodsport, barracks for fighters that were nothing more than prisons, and luxurious hotels, restaurants, brothels, and other amenities for the wealthy visitors who attended the games and wagered on the outcomes.

With costs skyrocketing and an unwanted spotlight now shining on the project, Rendex had abruptly pulled the plug on their Forval IX plans six years ago and gone quiet.

Once I'd finished reading, I got a fresh cup of tea from the galley, returned to the cockpit, and thought about what I'd learned.

The Alliance might have eradicated all gladiatorial games involving conscripted fighters and enforced those laws, but there were countless worlds outside Alliance space where no such laws existed. Forval IX was only one place where the kind of arenas Rendex and their investors planned could be built. It begged the question: had those plans simply been refocused somewhere else?

And how did Keela fit into all of this, if at all?

Between her reaction to the prospect of arenas operated by crime syndicates outside Alliance jurisdiction, her skill set, and the name she'd given her ship, I had a theory brewing about Keela's past—specifically, her planet of origin. And the more I thought about it, the more the theory fit, and the more rage at those who'd harmed her burned in my gut like plasma.

Given her secretive nature, Keela probably wouldn't react well if I questioned her on the topic. Unfortunately, I suspected it was about to become necessary.

A nagging thought that had burrowed its way into my brain and wouldn't let go was whether Keela's possible homeworld, the bounty on her head, and the failed arena plans were connected. I had nothing to support that theory yet except gut instinct and what experience had taught me about coincidences—namely, that there were no such thing.

About an hour and a half after we'd arrived at Hidria, I heard the soft sound of the captain's cabin doors opening and closing and footsteps crossing to the galley. I listened as Keela prepared something, walked to the other end of the corridor, and went into what sounded like the cargo bay. A few minutes later, she returned to the galley.

Finally, the cockpit door slid aside. The rich scents of fresh-brewed coffee and my mate filled the air.

Keela's chuckle made my tail flick. "I see you've made yourself at home."

I put my boots back on the floor, rested my datapad in my lap, and turned.

With the benefit of sleep, she looked rested and ready to take on the galaxy. Her complexion appeared healthy, even rosy, and her green eyes sparkled. As before, she wore her flight suit, boots, and weapons, but her hair was freshly braided and she'd added a pair of simple earrings that appeared to be made of dark gray stone the same color as her clothing.

My hearts stuttered in my chest. Gods above, how did Keela look lovelier every time I saw her? My tail lashed the air before I stilled it.

"I asked Siber's permission to put my feet up," I said, hoping for the sake of my dignity I didn't look half as besotted as I felt. "She indicated it was acceptable."

"I like that my ship's AI thinks she's in charge of proper shipboard etiquette." Coffee mug in hand, Keela slipped into her captain's chair and ran through the same series of checks I'd seen her do before. Everything

seemed stable, with the only noticeable change being the *Nivilus's* fuel level.

With a satisfied sigh, she leaned back in her seat, drank her coffee, and gazed at the viewscreen, which wrapped around the front and sides of the cockpit and offered an expansive view of our surroundings. "Told you Hidria isn't anything to look at," she said.

"That it isn't," I agreed. "Ship's scanners report no ion storms or other ships in the area and Siber says all's quiet on the comms."

Keela raised her eyebrows and slid a glance in my direction. "You really *are* making yourself at home."

"I want to earn my keep," I said with a grin. "I'm not just a pretty face, you know."

She laughed. It was a real, full-throated, utterly unguarded laugh, and it made me willing to do anything at all to hear it again.

"No, you're not just a pretty face," she said finally. She was smiling, but her gaze was sharp. "You're a lawman, a medic, a privateer, a weapons master, a shadow, a fugitive, and an obvious menace."

What kind of menace? I wanted to ask, but didn't, since I could guess. My presence was certainly a danger to her fierce independence and lifelong refusal to put her trust in anyone but herself. Maybe—hopefully—a danger to her heart.

"I also have impeccable taste in clothes," I said instead to keep the conversation light. "Though you haven't seen that side of me yet."

"I've seen *all* your sides, if you'll recall," she said blandly. "Since you chose to bare your entire…soul to me in a dirty maintenance shaft on Ghira Station." She smirked and sipped her coffee. "As for your supposed taste when it comes to clothing, I'll have to take your word for it."

"Not necessarily," I said. "I have a suggestion for our next move, if you're willing to hear it."

Despite my casual tone, all traces of good humor vanished from her expression as if she'd flipped a switch. Relaxed Keela became deadly serious Captain Wren before my eyes.

"What's the suggestion?" she asked.

"I have a contact on an outpost near the Nalin Nebula," I said. "His name is Byx and he works on ships. Has a private bay and makes it worth security's while to not pay much attention to his visitors."

She frowned. "Which outpost?"

“Trakhan. Delta sector.”

Her fingertips flew over the navigation console. “That’s a long way from here,” she said, studying the screen. “And a long, *long* way from Forval IX. We’d have to get fuel at Trakhan for sure.”

“Byx will handle it.”

She turned her chair to face me, her expression hard. “Why do you want to go to this outpost and see this male?”

“We need fuel and information, and we have to confirm there’s no tracker on this ship,” I said bluntly. “We can get what we need from Byx. It’s quiet out near the Nalin Nebula. Well away from hotspots like Ghira where we’re far more likely to run into trouble.” I leaned forward, resting my forearms on my thighs. “I can’t promise it’s safe, but I *can* swear to you that Byx is one of only a handful of beings I’d trust with my life and yours.”

She said nothing for a long time. I let her think.

Finally, she spoke. “Siber, what is your assessment of Trakhan Outpost?”

“The station is remote and less busy than most stations we have visited,” the AI said. “I cannot speak to the veracity of the rest of Jarrix’s claims, nor to the trustworthiness of his contact.”

“Of course not,” Keela muttered, rubbing the bridge of her nose. She eyed me. “What information are you hoping to get?”

“We need to know who posted the bounty,” I said. I braced myself and added, “And we need to know if there’s a connection between you, the bounty, and the plan for arenas on Forval IX.”

Her expression went glacial and her fingers moved as if she was thinking about reaching for a weapon. “What connection do you think there might be?” she asked, her voice deceptively soft.

There was no answer to that question that wasn’t dangerous, so I simply said, “I know what a nivilus is.”

A half-dozen emotions flashed in her eyes: surprise, anger, suspicion, grief, hatred, and finally resolve.

“So you figured it out,” she said tonelessly. “I forgot to include *smart* in that list of traits I mentioned earlier.”

“Just well informed.” I let the moment breathe while she processed that I’d guessed at least some of her past. “You pick up a lot of bits of knowledge in my former occupation.”

“Your former occupation being a spy?”

“I prefer *professional collector of information*.”

Her thin smile had no humor in it. “You *are* a menace.”

“Not to you,” I stated, my tail lashing. “Never to you. I am your weapon and your shield.”

She turned back to the screen and its view of Hidria.

“Funny how something that seems so long ago can be so present,” she said without looking at me. “I haven’t stepped foot on Ganai in almost fifteen years, but I can still feel the sand. I still hear the crowd.” She took a deep breath. “I still smell the blood.”

I took no pleasure at all at being right about where she’d been born and what had befallen her.

The infamous arenas of Ganai, where child gladiators had fought, suffered, and died for a century, had been the great shame of that planet and the Alliance until their closing a decade ago. As the trainers and owners fled the planet, newly freed gladiators had converged on the arenas and training facilities and burned them all to the ground in a visceral expression of fury and pain. If my estimate of Keela’s age was correct, she’d turned sixteen and earned her freedom a mere five years before the arenas burned.

The majority of gladiators had been human children born into poverty on Ganai, though some had come from wealthy families with private trainers and immense resources. Those privileged fighters were treated like royalty and rarely fought in matches that resulted in death. I doubted Keela had been one of that select group.

If at some point she wanted to tell me her story, I would listen. As terrible as I imagined it to be, the truth would be infinitely worse. Those kinds of stories usually were.

“I obviously don’t know if there is a connection between your past on Ganai, the bounty, and the plan to build arenas on Forval IX,” I said quietly. “But we need to know who posted the bounty and why so we can find a way to get it off your head one way or another.”

“Off *our* heads,” she murmured. She glanced at me. “And no, I haven’t checked to see if you’ve been added since whoever posted the bounty may have a way of tracing those who access the posting. But after yesterday, I’m sure you’re a wanted male, and not just by your old crew.”

She stared into her coffee mug as if she might find answers there. “You think our next stop should be Trakhan, then?” she asked. “You believe we’ll

get the fuel and information we need from your contact and he'll ensure there's no tracker on the *Nivilus?*"

My tail tried to wrap around her calf. I forced it to coil around her seat base instead. "Yes. I've been giving this a lot of thought, and I think it's our best option at the moment."

"All right." She squared her shoulders and drained the last of her coffee. "Siber, plot a course for Trakhan Outpost. We're keeping a low profile, so stay in shadow mode and out of standard shipping lanes. Once we get within a few hours of the outpost, switch to a new ship's registry. We'll be going in as CS *Bandit's Blade*."

"Acknowledged, Captain," Siber said. "Course will take a few minutes to calculate. Given the need for stealth, travel time to the outpost will be approximately three days."

"Three days." Keela took a deep breath, let it out, and turned to me. "Fine. That gives us plenty of time for you to learn some better combat moves."

My brows shot up. "For *me* to learn—?"

"I've been wanting to kick your ass since I met you." She rose and poked me in the chest in a way that made me want to growl, haul her into my lap, and kiss her senseless. "Get up. I've got the cargo bay set up for training and sparring since I'm between jobs."

My eyebrows climbed higher. "You want to spar with me?" My cocks leapt in enthusiastic approval of the idea. "Are you sure you want to face that kind of humiliation?"

Her laugh made me want to purr. "You think you can put me on the mat, little bat?" she scoffed. "Come and try it."

She headed for the cockpit door. As it slid aside to reveal the corridor beyond, I rose from my chair. "*Little bat?*" I rumbled, looking down from my full height at my grinning mate. My tail swished with anticipation. "Who's *little?*"

"Not me." She left her mug in the galley and unlocked the doors to her cabin. "Get changed and meet me in the cargo bay. Last one there does fifty pull-ups."

"That's unfair. I have to synth sparring clothes first," I pointed out as I returned my own mug to the galley.

She clucked her tongue in mock sympathy and turned her back to me. "Hope you like pull-ups, then," she sang out before her cabin doors closed.

Gods above, this female.
I raced to the clothing synth and started punching buttons.

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CHAPTER 10

KEELA



MAKING JARRIX DO PULL-UPS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A PUNISHMENT FOR arriving at the cargo bay after me—among other things—but it was *me* who was getting punished.

When I'd made the wager, I'd neglected to take into account what he might choose as his attire for sparring.

He'd arrived at the cargo bay bare-chested and barefoot, wearing only a pair of black pants that rested low on his hips and clung to his ass and thighs. I couldn't tell if he'd chosen the design based on pure sex appeal or its functionality for hand-to-hand sparring, but either way, he'd chosen well.

And he was doing the pull-ups one-handed, doing five slow, deliberate reps per arm before switching sides. While *smiling*.

All the gods above and below, I was in deep, deep trouble.

I retreated to the opposite side of the cargo bay from the exercise equipment, faced away from him, and began a series of stretches. My shoulder remained sore, but I had full range of motion. A few movements caused twinges, but overall I was pleased by how well the injury was healing.

"You aren't going to watch and make sure I do all fifty?" Jarrix's voice from behind me wasn't even breathless, the bastard.

"You claim to be honest," I said without turning. "So I'll trust you to keep your word."

His low chuckle made me squirm. Damn the male.

I raised my arms above my head, bent over, and placed my palms flat on the mat with a little groan of satisfaction at the stretch.

The rhythmic creaks of the pull-up bar paused for several seconds before resuming. I smirked.

A few moments later, as I began my lower-body stretch and warm-up routine, a surprisingly light *thump* behind me signaled Jarrix had completed his reps and dropped from the bar.

Since keeping my back to him was starting to feel less like I was making a point and more like cowardice, I rose from a deep squat and turned.

He was warming up in the center of the sparring mat, looking surprisingly relaxed. The only sign of strain from the pull-ups was the faint sheen of perspiration that glimmered under the cargo bay's lights in a way that had no business looking that enticing.

If I'd thought when we met the first time that his body looked like it had been sculpted by an artisan, that was nothing compared to how it looked now as he moved seamlessly from one stance to the next. The ripples of his muscles moving under his gray skin could be classified as a weapon in themselves.

I'd called him a lot of things, but *menace* was the most accurate of all.

When he turned away for a series of stretches that looked more like a dancer's movements than warm-up for sparring, I was suddenly very keenly aware of how long it had been since I'd sunk my nails into anyone's back.

I crossed the mat to where I'd left my bottle of water and took a long drink.

"How does your shoulder feel?" he asked from what sounded like right behind me.

"Good." I sealed the bottle and turned around to find him only a meter away.

Exertion had made his smoke-and-spice scent even richer, and his eyes were glowing softly again. His tail swept slowly back and forth in a lazy arc that was almost as mesmerizing as his gaze.

I swayed toward him like gravity had shifted for a moment. The movement was tiny, but it didn't go unnoticed. His hands were on my shoulders, steadying me, before I registered that he'd moved. The warmth I'd felt when he'd touched me in shadow form was nothing compared to the heat of his skin on mine.

Since we'd planned to spar, I'd braided my hair into a tight coil around my head so it couldn't be grabbed. I'd briefly considered wearing a long-sleeved bodysuit that covered all my scars except the one along my hairline on the left side of my face, but decided against it because hiding wasn't my style.

So instead, I'd donned my usual training attire: a skintight, sleeveless top cropped to just below my ribs, matching calf-length pants, and soft-soled shoes designed to grip the mat better than my bare feet. It wasn't a seductive outfit by any stretch of the imagination, but the way Jarrix was drinking me in with his eyes made me feel like I was wearing either a sexy evening gown—which I'd worn exactly once in my life—or skimpy lingerie, which I'd *never* worn because who the hells would I have worn it for?

But on the other hand as I watched him watching me, I got the impression it was my utilitarian outfit and my scars that were affecting him this way and he wasn't envisioning me in anything else, except maybe my bare skin.

"Keela." His voice was so low that it was almost subsonic.

The naked want in his expression and that growl ignited heat in my core and jolted me into action.

I hooked my leg behind his, drove my shoulder into his chest, twisted, and used his off-balanced weight to take him to the mat. He landed on his back with a quiet *umph* and a grin that made my knuckles itch to punch him.

Seething, I rolled away and flipped to my feet. "You let me do that," I snapped.

"Perfect technique." He rose smoothly as if drawn up by some sort of antigrav system and settled his wings, his tail flicking in the way I'd come to recognize as amusement. "Except you telegraphed your move."

I huffed. "I most certainly did not."

"You did. You looked at my shoulder."

I absolutely had *not* looked at his shoulder when I'd decided which way to turn him to throw him off balance. Had I?

Blast it.

I spun on my heel and headed for a storage unit along the far wall. "Come on."

He trailed me to the unit and waited as I pressed my palm to the scanner to unlock the doors. I slid them aside to reveal nearly two dozen weapons neatly arranged by size and type.

I watched him look over the collection, which ranged from small throwing blades to combat weapons like a pair of J'noran intanas, Hardanian scythe-knives, and Tocanian spiked bolos to larger items like swords and various kinds of staffs. He studied them one by one in the same way I did, noting the advantages and disadvantages of each and weighing his choices.

Finally, his gaze moved to the top of the display, where a metal staff with blades at one end and a hook at the other was held in place by clasps. Unlike the rest of the weapons, it didn't show signs of ongoing use and consistent maintenance. No doubt he'd noticed that too.

"A nivilus," he said, and moved closer to get a better look. "The first one I've seen in person."

"So few are left, they're a collector's item now." My chuckle had no humor in it. "Worth quite a lot in some circles, so I've been told. I also heard people try to excavate the arena ruins looking for ones that might have survived the fires. That's a high-stakes game when the locals aren't fond of looters, but maybe they think the payoff would be worth it."

"Something like that should never be a collector's item." The harshness in his voice surprised me. He stared at the nivilus, eyes glowing as if trying to obliterate it out of existence with his will alone. "It's a symbol of an unconscionable practice that was permitted to continue unchecked for far too long. For a lot of collectors, it's a trophy of something they'd like to see return. Maybe even something they have fond memories of attending."

"It's all those things," I agreed. "But that's not why I have it hanging there, or why I gave its name to my ship."

At some point I'd clasped my hands behind my back, raised my chin, and widened my stance. It was the pose I'd mastered at the age of four after many beatings by my new owners—one that embodied all the confidence and bravery I hadn't felt at the time but had to feign because that was what both the trainers and audience wanted to see.

We were children, but we were expected to face training, combat, and even death with the same ferocity and fearlessness as the adult gladiators who'd trained us and performed in exhibition matches in the same arenas where our blood spilled on the sand.

Every former gladiator I'd ever encountered lapsed into this same pose unconsciously at some point during our interaction. Sometimes I'd followed suit without realizing I'd done so. And when we'd inevitably realized how we were standing, we'd exchange a look—resigned, knowing, weary—and change our positions.

I flexed my fingers, shook out my hands, and dropped my arms to my sides. "When I was in the arena, the nivilus symbolized everything I hated. I was very good at using it, but only because I had to be to stay alive. I had to sleep with it, eat with it, even shower with it because mine was better made than most. If I'd left it unattended, someone else would try to take it and I'd have to stop them."

I reached up and touched the tip of one of the blades. It was dull from disuse. "There were many nights when I lay in my bunk and thought about using this weapon to end my life. I wouldn't have been the first gladiator to escape that way. The collars and trackers made sure there was no other way to get away. But I'd sworn they wouldn't win. I'd sworn I would—" I cut myself off before I could mention my vow to find Calla. "I'd sworn I'd survive to sixteen and get off Ganai," I said instead. "And eventually I did."

Jarrix was listening to every word, though he was studying my collection of weapons rather than watching me or getting too close. I appreciated that he was giving me both physical and emotional space when his instincts were probably howling at him to comfort me with touches and his coo.

"Now it signifies that I survived when all the odds were against me and that I never gave in," I finished. "And I named my ship the *Nivilus* because I wanted to take a word that once symbolized my captivity and powerlessness and make it stand for my freedom."

"I can understand that." He gestured at the Hardanian scythe-knives. "May I?"

"Of course."

He took them from the display and spun them flawlessly, one in each hand, testing their balance. "Perfect," he murmured and glanced at me. "It's been a while since I've held blades like this."

My mouth quirked. "Looks like you remember what to do with them."

"Muscle memory." He put them back. "I imagine you'd still be deadly with the nivilus if you picked it up."

“I imagine so, though it’s in no condition to be used anymore. I’ve let it age.” I gestured at the weapon in question. “When I fled Ganai on my sixteenth birthday, I had the clothes on my back, a few credits, and my nivilus. There was still blood on it when I boarded the ship that took me off-planet.”

“Whose blood was it?” Jarrix asked from where he was examining the hilt of a plasma-edged broadsword.

“Never knew who they were.” I shrugged. “Just three males who followed me from my keeper’s office after my collar and tracker were removed and tried to kidnap me.”

He turned to me, his expression thunderous. “Why did they try to kidnap you?”

“Most newly freed gladiators had no money and no skills other than the ability to fight and kill,” I said matter-of-factly. “People felt sorry for us, but most wanted nothing to do with us and called us monsters. So it was common for former gladiators to find work as personal security or hired muscle, or even end up in fighting pits across the galaxy. Some took the jobs willingly. Most didn’t.”

Judging by his grim silence, he hadn’t known that. Few people outside Ganai did. As bad as the arenas were, sometimes even worse things had lain in wait for those who survived to adulthood.

“The second-most lucrative industry on Ganai after the arenas was kidnapping—either to fill the arena stables or to get former gladiators off-world where we could be bought and sold for premium prices.” My brittle smile made his tail lash like a whip. “I was one of the lucky ones who made it all the way to the port without ending up unconscious in a cage or stasis pod. And I still had to get past port security personnel, who’d all been bribed to search departing ships for freed gladiators they could turn over to brokers.”

“Where was the Alliance in all this?” Jarrix demanded. “How could this have gone on for so long?”

“The same way things usually do,” I said with a wry smile. “The right people get paid the right amounts, and the ones who don’t matter vanish into the void.”

I could still taste the fear and adrenaline of that long, desperate day of slipping through seemingly endless dirty alleys, tunnels, vents, and loading docks, clinging to hope that at the end of it all I’d find a ship captain corrupt

enough to bribe to get me off-planet but not corrupt enough to hand me over to port security.

“I found a Wundi ship captain at the port,” I said finally. “He let me join his crew in return for a pallet on the floor of the cargo bay and two meals a day. Once he saw how quickly I learned to be useful fixing things and keeping the ship clean, he also paid me a salary. I saved enough credits that I had a tidy little bankroll when I eventually made it to Yavamir.”

Jarrix’s expression turned incredulous. “You were a sixteen-year-old human female when you arrived at the most lawless pirate stronghold in the Omega sector?”

“I was seventeen by then.” I shrugged and studied my nails. I kept them trimmed short. Better for fighting. “And I have fond memories of Yavamir. I learned nine new ways to stab someone on that planet.”

I’d also joined my first smuggler crew on Yavamir—a grizzled old band of four-horned Havelians who’d laughed uproariously when I’d approached their ship at the dock looking to work for a share and ended up treating me like their collective granddaughter.

The interval between my arrival on Yavamir and my departure aboard the Havelian ship was a blur of violence, booze, and gambling in dark, back-alley dens where blood was spilled so regularly that no one blinked when it happened and the floors were designed with drainage so they could be hosed clean. It was the best my life had ever been.

I had no idea what Jarrix’s life had been like up to now, but I couldn’t imagine it had unfolded anything like mine.

Part of me thought that proved just how incompatible we truly were, despite all the science and his unwavering faith in his own physiology.

The rest of me thought our jagged edges might fit together in surprisingly satisfying ways.

“Pick a weapon,” I said.

Without hesitation, he reached for the Havelian staff that had been a gift from my first crew when I left them to serve as first mate on another ship. The staff was heavy and designed for a fighter his height. One end held a stunner and the other a hidden blade that could be extended.

When he whirled the staff back and forth between his hands, then spun it behind his back to do the same before spinning it over his shoulder to his front, it catapulted me back ten years to watching the captain of the Havelian smuggler ship doing the same.

I'd demanded the captain teach me the move. Despite my extensive weapons training, I'd hit myself on the forehead on my first attempt, and it took me a full year until I could match his speed.

"What are you remembering?" Jarrix asked, the staff held loosely at its precise balance point in one hand as he studied me.

I had a sudden vision of us in the cockpit, of him drinking tea and me sipping my coffee while I told him about my years aboard the Havelian ship. I'd learned my trade from six foul-tempered males who would have cut their way through any enemy to keep me from getting so much as a scratch—and had done so more than once.

The fact I could not only envision such a scene with Jarrix but felt a strange warmth in my chest thinking about it left me more confused than I'd ever admit.

"Another life," I said finally.

Under his watchful gaze, I chose the pair of J'noran intanas and moved away to warm up with a few spins of my own. Like Jarrix, I didn't give away any of my moves during my warm-up.

I was more than proficient at all the weapons in my collection, but the intanas with their curved blades were an ideal size for my height. I loved their natural flow as well, which combined with their length made them feel as if they were extensions of my own arms.

When my attention returned to Jarrix, I discovered my warm-up had accomplished far more than demonstrating my competence. He was spectacularly hard under his sparring pants and making no effort whatsoever to hide his sincere appreciation.

And despite my uncertainty about…literally everything…I was appreciating his appreciation.

I raised my eyebrow and spun my intanas one after the other, letting them catch the cargo bay lights and feigning nonchalance while my clit throbbed. "So, blades turn you on?"

"Not at all." He stalked toward me, eyes suddenly glowing like supernovas. "But seeing you holding those blades turns me into something I've never been before."

I held my ground as he approached and pointed one intana straight at him. He stopped with his abdomen a few millimeters from its deadly edge.

"What's that?" I asked, my voice pitched low.

“A male with everything to gain,” he said roughly. “And everything to lose.”

Slowly, he raised his hand and guided the intana’s blade to the side so he could close the distance between us. And I let him.

Weapons in hand and nearly toe to toe, we stared at each other.

“A wager,” he said. “One match, to yield or first blood. You choose.”

“First blood,” I said automatically. “What’s the wager?”

His lips twitched. “When I win, I get to kiss you.”

I might have guessed that would be his demand. “And when I win?” I asked.

He smiled and tilted his head. “What would you claim as your prize in that unlikely scenario?”

I studied his mouth. The tips of his fangs were just visible between lips I could ravage much like my old Havelian crew would have plundered a fully laden Gandarian merchant vessel.

“When I win, *I* kiss *you*,” I said.

Very suddenly, he looked like a male giving serious consideration to losing rapidly and on purpose.

“But if I think for one moment you let me win deliberately,” I added, “I will choose something else as my prize, and I assure you it will be far, far less appealing. In fact…” I raised my voice slightly. “Siber, will you judge our match and alert me if at any point our Fortusian guest attempts to throw the fight?”

“It would be my pleasure, Captain Wren,” the AI said.

The speed of Jarrix’s attack made thought impossible. I simply reacted, slipping into training and muscle memory as everything but my opponent and his weapon disappeared from my field of focus.

I ducked under his swing, hit the mat, and rolled fast, avoiding three attempted strikes of the stunner end of his staff by a few centimeters or less each time.

I rolled to my feet, blades at the ready, just in time to block a swing by trapping his staff between my intanas.

I sensed the move coming before he made it: a jerk and twist of the staff designed to not only free his weapon but to catch my hip or thigh with the stunner. Instead, I moved with him, forcing the staff away from my body and swinging a blade at his knee. But when my intana sliced through the air, his knee wasn’t where it was supposed to be.

He was a meter away now, the staff whirling fast and its stunner end sparking in an attempt to distract me. But only an inexperienced fighter would fall into that trap.

I did allow myself a glimpse of his expression: hard, focused, and calculating, with fangs bared. All traces of smoldering looks and flirtatious smiles had vanished.

Good.

He wanted me. He wanted the woman who'd survived Ganai and emerged from its horrors defiant and determined. He wanted the woman who owned a fast ship and an arsenal of weapons.

I wanted a battle. I wanted him to be as fierce and uncompromising as me. I wanted blood on the mat.

Maybe we could both get what we wanted.

Blades spinning, I attacked in a flurry of flowing circular movements, attempting to hook his staff and pull it aside with one blade so I could slice with the other. He blocked me from every angle, switching between single-handed and two-handed grips on the staff and striking out with the stunner end several times.

One of his strikes made contact with the intana in my left hand and sent a jolt up the blade that ended at the hilt, which was designed to absorb energy pulses. Otherwise, I might have lost use of that arm for the remainder of the match.

The seconds stretched into minutes as my blades and his staff clashed again and again, moving so quickly at some points that they blurred. Sometimes I thought he was holding back, but then his staff would hit one of my blades and nearly knock it from my grip or his stunner missed me by millimeters. And Siber never called foul, so maybe he'd decided to follow the rules after all.

I was dripping sweat and my heart raced and my shoulder ached and for the first time in all my years of captaining this ship, the sounds of combat echoed throughout the cargo bay and the corridor beyond. I would have been grinning if I could have spared the energy.

And then somehow the stunner end of Jarrix's staff slipped between my blades and hit me square in the diaphragm.

Between one heartbeat at the next, I was on my back on the mat, vision hazy, unable to speak or get breath into my lungs.

Jarrix dropped to one knee at my side, staff raised with its blade exposed and pointed at my throat. I couldn't see him clearly but he obviously expected me to yield.

Never.

Despite teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, I managed to grip the handle of my intana and move just enough to slice a shallow cut across his calf.

First blood.

Not that I could say it. My lungs still refused to draw in air. My vision had gone gray around the edges.

"Keela." Jarrix's grim face appeared above mine. He cupped my face with a hand so large it almost cradled my entire head. "Breathe."

Despite muscle spasms and my uncooperative lungs, I managed a shallow, shaky inhalation.

His sigh of relief was so loud I heard it over the ringing in my ears. "Medbay?" he asked.

I jerked my head *no* and rolled my eyes. Medbay for getting the wind knocked out of me? Ridiculous.

"Captain Wren drew first blood," Siber said, her tone formal, as I focused on breathing. "Based on my observations, your opponent did not underuse his abilities in any significant way. I find the match to have been fair…and nearly even."

I rested my hand cautiously on my abdomen. My skin was already discolored and the ache was bone-deep.

Jarrix was looking at the mark too, and I didn't like the regret and self-recrimination in his expression that he was trying and failing to hide.

"Ground rule number five," I rasped. "When we're sparring, injuries will happen. As long as they're inflicted fairly, I don't want to see remorse."

He was stroking my hair now, offering comfort. I didn't mind it. "Understood," he said.

"How's your leg?"

He barely glanced at the injury. "Superficial wound. You should have cut deeper. Taught me a lesson."

"I thought that's what I spent the last ten minutes doing." My words probably would have had more bite if they hadn't sounded quite so rough. My lungs still weren't fully cooperating with my need for a full, deep breath.

“A lesson about letting down my guard, I meant.” He offered me his hand. “Can you stand?”

“Of course,” I said automatically. His lips twitched.

I could have risen without help, but I let him take my hand and draw me to my feet because I liked the strength in his grip and the way it reminded me that he’d vowed to be my weapon and my shield.

He wasn’t the first male to admire my skills or will to survive, but he was the first to see the whole of me—or at least as much as I’d been willing to share up to now. Which was far more than I’d ever shared with anyone.

I’d been his weapon and his shield on the station too, acting on instinct when I’d seen the cyborg bounty hunter coming up behind him about to shoot him in the back.

Jarrix tucked some loose hair behind my ear and cupped my face, his expression somewhere between tender and cautious. “As a medic and your crewmate, I recommend letting me heal the injury to your abdomen so it doesn’t impede your ability to fight. Or have I run afoul of an as-yet unspoken ground rule?”

I compressed my lips so I didn’t chuckle and forced myself to scowl. “As a matter of fact, ground rule number six is the captain knows better than anyone when she needs to visit medbay.”

He ran his thumb across my lower lip, and the touch wasn’t gentle. “And when will you claim your prize?”

There it was again: that low, almost subsonic rumble that combined with the soft glow in his eyes went straight to my clit. I was tempted to take him down to the mat again and not let him back up until he’d satisfied me.

Instead, I slid my hand around the back of his neck and drew him down until our noses nearly touched. His skin was damp with perspiration and heated with both exertion and desire.

I twined my fingers through his hair and tugged until his gaze darkened with need and a subtle vibration ran through his body. His dark gray tongue darted out to moisten his lower lip right where I wanted to bite.

He folded his wings around us, forming a cocoon. Because Siber was watching? Or to saturate me in his smoky-spice scent? Maybe both.

His tail coiled gently around my ankle and calf, making it clear I could tell him to let go and he would.

Suspended in time, we gazed into each other’s eyes within the warmth of his leathery wings. Judging by his fierce expression, he wasn’t just

waiting for me to move. He wanted me to take my kiss on my terms. He liked my terms. He liked my rules.

"Good little bat," I murmured.

The smile he gave me displayed all of his sharp teeth and both of his fangs and set fire to my core.

I closed the distance between us and kissed him.

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CHAPTER 11

JARRIX



EVERYTHING BEYOND THE SHELTER OF MY WINGS VANISHED FROM MY SENSES the moment Keela's lips touched mine.

She didn't take control of the kiss; I never had any control to begin with. Her mouth commanded mine. Her lips plundered without mercy. Her teeth nipped and tugged in ways that fell just short of brutality. Her little pink tongue demanded not only entry to my mouth but my utter capitulation.

Surrender had never felt so good.

In my visions of our first kiss—and I wasn't ashamed to admit I'd had *many* such visions from the moment I'd first seen her in action in that bar on Ghira Station—I'd been the one to kiss her, to take what she offered and revel in her touch.

Every vision I'd had paled in comparison to the reality of Keela Wren's utter ownership of my mouth.

Her taste…her ferocity…her *will* were in this kiss and her vise-like grip on my hair. Without hesitation, she bent and broke and remade me in the endless moments between the first touch of her lips on mine and when she sucked hungrily, almost violently, on my lower lip and then finally freed it with a slick *pop* that made both my rock-hard cocks spasm and drip.

At some point, her nails had dug into the back of my neck, my tail had tightened around her leg, and my wings had wrapped so snugly around us that neither of us could move.

Every breath I took was full of her scent combined with my own. The perfume of her arousal threatened to bring me to my knees.

My chest was heaving harder than after our sparring match, but her breaths were even and she was smiling and satisfied as if she'd won something of spectacular value.

My mate.

If she decided to keep me, I'd be the luckiest bastard in the whole damn galaxy.

"Medbay," she said, her tone husky as she slid her hands slowly down my arms, tracing my muscles with fingertips that seemed to leave sparks in their wake. "You're bleeding all over my mat."

I swallowed hard and found my voice. "Ground rule number two: clean up after myself. I remember."

She patted my chest, green eyes sparkling. "Good bat."

My wings and tail vibrated and my spine straightened. Gods above and below, did I just *preen?*

Reluctantly, I drew back my wings and uncoiled my tail so we could pick up our dropped weapons, clean them, and return them to her cache.

"Tail," she said, pointing to her calf.

Obediently, I wrapped the end of my tail around her leg. Her smile made my hearts lose their rhythm.

Together, we left the cargo bay and went directly to medical. She let me treat her injury first when I argued that the captain's health must come before the crew's.

As she lay on the exam table, shirt raised to just below her breasts so I could heal her, her eyes followed my every movement. Not in the suspicious way she'd watched me during my first day on her ship, but as if she was trying to figure out what I was thinking.

My thoughts veered wildly between how profoundly good it felt to have my tail wrapped around her leg, how much I still disliked the sight of the injury I'd given her during our sparring despite ground rule number five, and how much I wanted to disembowel Captain Sjer for nearly killing this magnificent woman. Maybe we could track down the *Fleeting Fancy* once we dealt with the bounty—

Keela's hand closed on my tail near its base, bringing all those thoughts —and my hands—to a sudden halt. A guttural groan escaped before I could hold it back. I steadied myself with one hand on the table.

“Is it sensitive?” she asked innocently.

“What do you think?” I said, my voice rough. My cocks, which had remained at various stages of engorged since our sparring match, became hard as a meteorite once again.

“I think your brain was going somewhere I didn’t like,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Need I remind you that I’ve had hundreds of injuries worse than this one?”

I frowned and resumed treating her abdominal contusion. “None of them were given to you by your…crew.”

She laughed. “What kind of crews do you think I’ve served with? Privateers, smugglers, and intergalactic rapscallions, the lot of them.” Her smile transformed from humor to something warmer. “You can say *mate*, Jarrix. It doesn’t offend me as long as you know I haven’t agreed to anything yet.”

Yet was light-years better than *temporary allies, nothing more*.

“Is that another ground rule?” I asked with a grin.

“Sure, add it to the list.” She winked. “Ground rule number seven: you can say *Mate*, but I hear *My highly esteemed Captain Wren, for whom I am a weapon and a shield*.”

Gods above, did that make my cocks even harder. And the absent way she was stroking my tail did nothing to alleviate the situation. Judging by her smirk, she knew.

The contusion proved to be worse than I’d thought, requiring lengthy treatment. I learned not to let my thoughts about being the cause of the injury show when Keela’s nails bit into the flesh of my tail in warning. She had a remarkable but not surprising ability to read my tells, no matter how small they were.

An unspoken ground rule had become clear, and it was one I was going to struggle mightily to follow. She’d let me care for her, but within strict limits, and she didn’t want me feeling guilty about injuries inflicted during sparring. She clearly didn’t feel bad about the cut to my leg—nor did I expect her to be, since we’d agreed to fight to first blood—but this wasn’t really about me at all.

This was about Ganai.

She’d trained with and fought other child gladiators for years—exactly how many years, I didn’t know because she hadn’t told me. She hadn’t been there by choice and neither had they. To survive and not collapse under the

weight of the misery and trauma, she'd had to bury her emotions so deep they barely saw daylight even now. Sympathy, regret, and guilt had to go, or she would have crumbled long before her sixteenth birthday.

She was my mate. I didn't want to hurt her in any way, even when we'd agreed to spar and we'd both enjoyed every second of our combat. And when she saw that in my expression or read it in my body language, she wasn't really seeing *me*—she was seeing her fellow gladiators, most of whom hadn't wanted to inflict wounds on her any more than she'd wanted to hurt them.

Someday, maybe, she'd be able to separate the two. Until then, I'd do my best to follow her rules, even the most difficult ones. All the gods above and below knew she deserved nothing less.

"All done," I said, turning off the equipment and setting it aside. "Is it all right if I touch the injured area?"

"Yes, Medic." She was smiling again. I treasured every single one.

Carefully and methodically, I palpated her abdomen, checking for any lingering tenderness. She watched my face as I worked, her fingers trailing along the length of my tail in a way that felt both sensual and comforting.

I found myself enjoying treating my mate. I didn't like that she'd been injured, but using my training and skills to care for her was deeply satisfying in a way I'd never experienced with any other patient. It didn't feel the same as cradling her and cooing when we'd fled Ghira Station. I hadn't been as much a medic then as a desperate male holding his badly wounded mate, who he'd just discovered and feared he would lose all in the same day.

Now I was a medic restoring her to good health, and I'd never felt prouder. If it hadn't been wrapped around Keela's leg, my tail would have swished in satisfaction.

"It feels good," she said as I finished my examination. "No pain."

"What about your shoulder?" I'd noticed her favoring it slightly during our match.

"Sore, but that's to be expected from a healing injury. I didn't re-aggravate anything." Keela patted my hand. "I'd tell you if I had."

"All right." I helped her sit up, ensuring she did so slowly to avoid straining newly healed muscles.

She tugged her shirt back down over her abdomen. "Commendable work, Medic To'vok. Now hand me the dermal regenerator and sit." She

raised her eyebrow, daring me to argue.

We switched places, managing to do so without me needing to unwrap my tail since I'd laid out the necessary equipment beforehand. She tended to the cut on my calf with speed and efficiency, cleaning the wound and wielding the regenerator as precisely as any medical professional. It wasn't a serious injury—far from it—but I liked being tended by my mate far more than I thought I would, especially since she was, in a way, usurping my territory as the *de facto* ship's medic.

Not that Keela probably thought of it as such, given as the sole individual aboard the *Nivilus* she'd had to be everything from captain and navigator to medic to engineer and everything else in between, with Siber's assistance.

I gave myself a moment to imagine a near future where Keela and I crewed this ship together, crossing the galaxy as couriers or smugglers or some combination of the two. Sparring in the cargo bay when it wasn't full, sharing stories in the cockpit as the stars blurred by, tending to each other's occasional injuries, and sleeping soundly in each other's arms to the thrumming of the ship's engines.

I had no idea what awaited us between this moment and that future, other than someone—*many* someones—were trying to take my mate from me, and there was no way in any one of the many hells I would allow it.

I knew Keela was going to squeeze my tail well before she did it. I hadn't done a very good job of hiding my thoughts.

"Come back," she said, her fingertips digging into my skin as her bright green gaze searched my face. "Tell me why you suddenly look angry enough to spit plasma."

I rose from the exam table and started putting away the equipment we'd used, moving slowly enough that she could move with me, guided by my tail. "Thinking about who posted the bounty," I said, which was true. "Any thoughts about connections with Forval IX?"

"None at all." She shrugged. "You know, that information about a rendezvous on Forval IX isn't on the bounty posting, so it's something your former captain found about some other way. He must have been in contact with whoever posted the bounty or one of their agents. Maybe he knows more."

"That occurred to me too." I returned to her side and risked pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "If I get a chance, I'll ask him before I kill him.

In the meantime, hopefully my contact at Trakhan will come through for us when we get there."

She chuckled. "Ah yes, your good friend Byx with the private docking bay and the proper payoffs. I look forward to meeting this male." She stretched. "We need to hit the cleansing unit and get changed. Captain's prerogative to go first."

"Is that ground rule number eight?" I asked.

"Absolutely."

"I need to make a record of these," I said, feigning exasperation.

Keela chuckled. "Siber, have you been tracking the ground rules?"

"Affirmative, Captain Wren," the AI said. A display came to life in the corridor, showing all seven—now eight—"ground rules" listed in numerical order. "Is this list complete?"

"No, it's ongoing." Keela gently unwound my tail from her leg and headed for her quarters, hips swaying. "Keep adding to the display as necessary. I have a feeling there will be plenty more rules that need codification. I run a tight ship."

"Of course, Captain," Siber replied.

"Ship's status?"

"All systems are nominal. We are on course for Trakhan Outpost. ETA is seventy-one standard hours."

"Thank you, Siber." Keela unlocked her cabin doors and turned back to me. "Meal in the cockpit when we're clean and changed? Or do you have something else you need to do?"

What else she thought I might have to do, I had no idea. "A meal would be perfect," I said.

"Good." She disappeared into her cabin, then stuck her head back out. "I'm suspending ground rule number one for today. I want a bowl of those dumplings you made yesterday. Extra sauce."

I folded my hands behind my back and gave her a little bow. "Of course, Captain."

"Right answer." She disappeared again. The doors to her cabin hissed closed.

On the corridor display, rule number one blinked out and then reappeared with an addendum: *Exception made for dumplings with extra sauce*.

Chuckling, I returned to the cargo bay to clean my blood off the mat.

———

I spent the next seventy hours getting to know my mate and her ship.

Keela and I shared meals in the cockpit three times a day, trading stories from our pasts. She'd admitted her eating habits involved doing the bare minimum necessary to fuel her body, a lingering effect of her many years eating plain rations in the food hall of the gladiator barracks. I was more than happy to prepare meals for us that were simple but delicious and offered more than merely nutrition. She grumbled as she ate, but she ate with gusto.

Between breakfast and the midday meal, she acquainted me with the ship's operations and its engineering level, though I remained locked out of essential systems. I didn't press the issue and I didn't take it personally. She trusted me, but she was clinging to control and safety where she could.

It helped that if Keela were to be incapacitated, Siber had proven capable of running navigation, weapons, and defense systems, as well as critical operations. For now, that would have to be enough.

Once our midday meals had settled, Keela and I spent hours in the cargo bay, training individually and then sparring. I improved my ability to mask how much I disliked seeing Keela hurt. It helped that we ended up about equal on the number of injuries sustained and that we healed each other in the medbay after.

Unfortunately, there were no more wagers about kisses—and no more kisses. At her request, though, my tail stayed wrapped loosely around her leg or ankle unless we were in training or in our separate quarters.

Late in the day, after the final meal, we sipped tea either in the cockpit or while walking around the cargo bay as she told me about her recent jobs. We'd sifted through her records and found no ties to Forval IX, so the bounty and its origins remained a mystery.

As did Keela's reason for visiting Ghira Station, which was one of the few things about my mate I found truly frustrating. The moment the subject came up, she shut down, and Siber offered no clues either.

And so on the long ship's nights alone in my cabin or in the cockpit, where I kept watch for several hours prior to when Keela emerged from her cabin precisely at 0600 each day, I found myself speculating as much about that mysterious visit to Ghira Station as the bounty. Something about it

seemed deeply personal and deeply painful. Keela hid her emotions well, but twice I'd glimpsed a profound level of grief and shame in her eyes before they shuttered and she changed the topic.

The secret bothered me like a splinter I couldn't extract. Something was causing Keela pain, but she wouldn't let me anywhere near it.

Three standard days after we'd left Hidria, the *Nivilus* dropped out of hyperdrive an hour from Trakhan. Both Keela and I were in the cockpit when the stars transitioned from streaks of light to distant pinpricks in the black void and the sound of the ship's engines changed from a deep thrum to a quiet, higher-pitched hum.

"Deactivating shadow mode," Siber said as the interior lights and control panels returned to standard illumination levels. "Ship's registration now broadcasting as *CS Bandit's Blade*. We will be entering shipping lane FX-8934-Hira soon. ETA to Trakhan is 1610 hours."

"Thank you, Siber," Keela said, sipping her coffee. It was her third mug since the midday meal, and the second since we'd finished our daily sparring match. Today's session had been abbreviated to give us time to clean up and dress prior to our arrival at Trakhan.

She glanced at me. "Do you need to contact your friend before we arrive?"

"Yes." I raised my bare arm where my wristcomm used to be. "I'll either need access to ship's communications or another device capable of reaching the station."

She took a deep breath and let it out. "All right. Siber, grant Jarrix access to the ship's comms."

"Yes, Captain Wren."

A panel lit up on the controls in front of my seat. I tapped in the contact information for Byx's dock and sent a request for audio comms.

After a lengthy wait, a familiar female voice responded. "CS *Bandit's Blade*, this is Trakhan Bay 2406. We are currently full and not available for docking."

"I have a standing invitation," I said, which was a coded phrase Byx and I had established long ago.

There was a brief pause. Byx's mate Felina was probably very surprised to hear my voice. "For which platform?" she asked, her tone cautious.

"Platform nine," I replied, completing the code. "This is Garon, formerly of the *Fury*, now traveling aboard the *Bandit*."

“Very well, you are cleared. Welcome back, Garon.”

“I’m glad to be back,” I said. “I need to speak to the deckmaster.”

“Wait, please.”

I muted the comm while we waited.

“Garon?” Keela asked, brows raised.

“Code name,” I explained. “We don’t use our true names over comms.”

“Ah.” Her fingers were toying with the dagger on her thigh as she eyed the star field in front of the ship. I’d noticed that habit a few times during our journey, most recently last night when the shields went out of alignment and it took Siber nearly ten minutes to diagnose and resolve the problem.

Finally, a familiar burbling voice spoke. “Garon, you’ve been a ghost.”

I unmuted the comm. “And you’re a greedy bastard, but for some reason, your mate must still love you.”

The laugh that came through the comms sounded like bubbles rising through a thick, viscous fluid. Keela wrinkled her nose adorably.

“That I am, and that she does,” Byx said with obvious satisfaction. “I’m the luckiest sod on the Outer Rim. You coming in for a visit, old friend?”

“I am. The ship I’m on needs a thorough wash, inside and out. And I’m in the market for fine Gandarian cloth. The best you’ve got.”

Wash was code for checking for trackers, and *fine cloth* meant dangerous-to-get intel.

“I can do the wash. The cloth might be tricky.” Byx made a rough sound that might have been a cough or might have been a word in his native language. “Set your approach for Bay 2406, *Bandit’s Blade*. We’ll take over your guidance system and bring you in from five hundred meters.”

“Understood. See you on the ground, Deckmaster.”

When the comm ended, Keela eyed me. “This ship breaks weapons lockdown protocols and remote guidance systems.”

“If we need to break them to get away from the outpost, break them,” I said firmly. “You and this ship are my priorities. Byx will understand. He melted down a reactor and destroyed an orbital station for his mate, Felina.”

Her brows shot up. “Now that’s a story I think I want to hear.”

“Buy him a bottle of Bacorian wine and he’ll tell it,” I said. “Buy him two and he’ll reenact it.”

She snorted. “A reenactment seems excessive. Maybe just the story.” She stroked my tail where it wrapped around her thigh. “So we go in, get

the ship checked for trackers, and see what Byx can find out about the bounty?"

"Yes." I flicked the very tip of my tail. "And I'd like to show you around the outpost."

"We need to keep our heads down," she reminded me. "We're wanted. Or at least I know *I* am."

"I know." I leaned forward. "I'm going to talk to Byx and try to make some arrangements that'll keep us safe. You have my word I will do *nothing* that puts you in danger."

"I don't mind a reasonable amount of danger." She toyed with the tip of my tail, which had a predictable effect on my cocks. "Even an unreasonable amount if the situation calls for it."

"If in the end you say we stay aboard the ship or in Bay 2406, that's where we stay. But I'm hoping we can do better than that."

Keela squeezed my tail gently in a move that had rapidly become one of my favorites of her little habits. "Then we'll see what Byx can come up with and go from there."

She sipped her coffee and pulled up the set of Trakhan Outpost schematics on her main display. She'd studied them during our journey here. I'd refreshed my memory as well despite my many visits to the outpost. I wouldn't leave anything to chance when it came to Keela.

By the time the outpost appeared on the viewer, we'd left open space and joined the shipping lane. A few ships passed us by, including a frigate so large that it made the *Nivilus* feel like an escape pod and several merchant vessels, but the lane was one of the least busy in the sector and none of the ships were exiting toward the station.

As we got closer, I noticed there didn't seem to be more than a dozen ships in port on the outpost's docking rings. Trakhan was a fraction as busy as Ghira Station. I was counting on that because I had a hidden agenda for our visit.

Byx would have intel on everyone docked at the station. He always did. If the coast seemed clear of bounty hunters, I wanted to walk with my mate on the outpost's promenade, take her shopping, and provide her a fine meal in my favorite place not only on the outpost but in the entire sector.

Our visit to Trakhan might be my one and only chance for a proper courting outing in the midst of this bounty business and whatever had forced Keela to emerge from hiding and risk her life at Ghira Station.

My mate deserved more than fighting mercenaries and dodging bounty hunters. She deserved the very finest a former spy and privateer could give her.

I intended to make the most of our time here, and I needed the help of a hard-drinking, hard-loving outpost deckmaster who'd melted down a reactor on behalf of his own mate to show Keela I could be so much more than a weapon and a shield.

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CHAPTER 12

KEELA



BAY 2406 WAS UTTER AND COMPLETE CHAOS.

When Jarrix and I opened the *Nivilus's* cargo ramp to reveal Byx's cavernous domain, we found a half-dozen ships in various stages of being dismantled—or rebuilt; it was impossible to tell. There were teetering stacks of cargo crates, towering scrap piles, a motley crew of deck workers of all different species, and a dozen repair 'bots, all hard at work accompanied by some kind of cacophonous music I'd never heard before and hoped to never hear again.

And in the center of it all, an enormous Wundi grandmale with more than a dozen tentacles directed the entire circus from a large, open-topped tank of water that smelled surprisingly pleasant, like the ocean.

"Garon!" Byx boomed as we descended the *Nivilus's* ramp. "I see you've upgraded the company you keep, you scut. Who do we have here?"

I'd chosen a different disguise than I'd worn on Ghira, one that matched this particular false identity: black hair, dark eyes, and a maroon flight suit with matching weapons holsters for my plasma gun and dagger.

"Adelaide Shaw," I said, giving Byx a nod. "Captain of the *Bandit's Blade*."

"And a very fine ship she is." His tentacles moved pieces of equipment where they needed to go while three of his eyes remained focused on us as we approached the tank. "Niven class, if I'm not mistaken. They don't make them like this anymore. Looking to sell, Captain?" His enormous

mouth stretched wide in a very toothy grin that I read as friendly and nonthreatening. “I can make you a very generous offer.”

“Not even in your dreams,” I said with a smile. “She and I are much too fond of each other.”

“Fair enough, fair enough.” He burbled. “Garon here said she needs a thorough cleaning. It will be my privilege to sort her out as a favor to one of my best and oldest friends. If she needs maintenance or any special features, Garon’s companions always get my best rates for all services.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I had a lengthy want list of upgrades—all ship captains did—but with my credits depleted until my next job, I’d have to settle for fuel and a modest restock of supplies.

Thinking about what that would leave in my account made my stomach hurt.

Beside me, Jarrix moved restlessly, his tail twitching and wings stretching before he folded them tightly to his back. He’d probably scented my distress and had to fight the urge to wrap his tail around my leg or coo. I didn’t want to broadcast that we were anything more than crewmates in public, so he kept a respectful distance.

I’d gotten used to the sensation of his tail wrapped around my leg, and I missed its warm reassurance.

“My best crew will see to your vessel’s cleanliness,” Byx was saying, drawing my attention back to our host. “You mentioned you were looking for some fine cloth?”

“Yes.” Jarrix handed over a data chip containing the bounty posting. Byx took it with the very tip of one tentacle and reached for a datapad perched precariously on top of a stack of empty fuel cells with another. As the Wundi male inserted the chip, Jarrix added, “I’d like a full crate if you can locate one.”

I took that to mean he was looking for anything and everything Byx could find out about the posting and whoever was behind it.

“My specialty,” Byx said with another of his grins. He glanced at the screen with two of his eyes while the others watched three deck workers approach the *Nivilus* with antigrav sleds stacked with scanning equipment. “Ah, this is a rare textile,” he told Jarrix after reading the posting on his datapad. “A true challenge of my skills. I approve.”

“Not so rare that it will require increasing your price,” Jarrix said with a grin of his own, his tail flicking while my stomach sank. “We have a deal.”

“No, no.” Byx waved his tentacles, splattering water across the deck at our feet. “I’m a male of my word, young Garon. Best prices in the sector for fuel for your ship and only the most reasonable fee for this cloth you seek.”

“Good. I’ll hold you to it.” Jarrix glanced at me, his gaze searching mine. His eyes had tightened in worry. “If you’d like a closer look at the Nalin Nebula, Byx has a private observation lounge just off the docking bay. Would you like to see it, Captain?”

I kept my expression neutral to hide my rising agitation. “If that’s all right with our host.”

“Of course,” Byx said, two tentacle tips dancing over his datapad screen. I’d spent enough time around the Wundi captain who’d gotten me off Ganai and Vinian—may he rest in pieces—to not be amazed anymore by how dexterous those tentacles could be. “Later, I’m sure you would like to do some shopping and have a meal while you’re here on the outpost.”

“We would,” Jarrix said. “If there aren’t any visitors aboard who are likely to cause us trouble.”

“I’ll confirm it,” Byx promised. He gestured with a tentacle at the far side of the bay. “You remember the way to the lounge, of course. Make yourselves comfortable.”

After thanking him, Jarrix escorted me along a maze of walkways that led away from the noise and activity of the bay’s platforms. We walked silently side by side, with Jarrix in front of me in the areas where the walkway was partially blocked by crates or equipment.

As we reached a pair of doors at the end of the walkway, they opened to reveal the lounge.

As utilitarian, cluttered, bright, and loud as the docking bay was, the lounge was nearly pitch-dark and noiseless except for the gentle *whoosh* of the air cyclers. When the doors closed behind us, the abrupt silence was unsettling.

The space was dominated by a large window and several enormous sofas and loungers. The biggest sofa, which was crescent-shaped and centered in front of the window, was clearly designed to move to the back of the room, presumably to make space for Byx’s tank.

I walked straight to the window.

On our approach to Trakhan, I’d been too focused on our mission and my concerns about Byx’s trustworthiness to really appreciate the sight of the Nalin Nebula, on whose doorstep the outpost had been built. But now,

even as my worries gnawed at my insides, I could lose myself in the beauty beyond the window.

This nebula was like nothing I'd encountered in all my travels across the stars. In its center was a bright orange gas giant that dominated the view. The clouds of gas and cosmic dust that formed the nebula were brilliant hues of blue, pink, and purple, with darker regions that were made all the more dramatic by the brightness of the clouds. The scale of it all was truly breathtaking.

The nebula was the most beautiful and humbling thing I'd ever seen. A tear escaped before I could blink it away.

Jarrix let out low sound I'd never heard him make. In the next breath, his tail coiled around my leg, his arms went around my middle, and his wings formed a warm cocoon around us both.

And of course before I could say a word, he cooed. All my conflicting emotions washed away, replaced by a profound sense of peace and quietness. I sagged in his arms.

A distant part of me—the part that lurked beyond the reach of that soft coo, the part forged by so many years of suffering and anger and grief—wanted to curse at him and demand he stop and let me go. The urge was strong enough that I stiffened in his embrace.

But he didn't stop cooing, and he didn't let go. And for the moment, I let him.

Moments became minutes, and we ended up standing like that for a long time, gazing out at the nebula in silence. His coo eventually tapered off, becoming a vibration deep in his chest that soothed me. Soothed us both, judging by the way the tension seeped out of Jarrix's body. I wished I could see his expression, but the window had no reflection.

"The Nalin Nebula is a star nursery," Jarrix murmured. The low rumble of his voice made me shiver despite the warmth of his embrace. "Stars are born here. Over millions of years, they form and eventually ignite. Beautiful, isn't it?"

I snorted inelegantly, the sound almost obscenely loud in the silence of the lounge. "*Beautiful* is far too inadequate a word for something this… breathtaking."

"True." He rested his chin lightly on top of my head. "There are better views on the outpost than this one, but this room is always my first stop after I arrive in Byx's bay."

“You’ve been here many times?”

“Many, but not since the year before I joined up with the *Fancy*. It’s been far too long.” He pressed his lips into my hair, which I’d braided tightly to keep it out of the way during our visit to the outpost. “Every time I see the nebula it’s like the first time, but this visit it’s even more breathtaking than usual because I’m sharing it with you.”

He clearly wanted this to become a romantic moment, but reality was crashing back in. I straightened and pulled away until he reluctantly let me go.

I turned to face him, putting my back to the window. However he’d looked when we were gazing at the nebula, now his expression was full of concern.

I didn’t want to say what I needed to say. The truth of my situation was humiliating and infuriating and I almost would have rather spaced myself out the nearest airlock than speak the words. But it had to be done.

First, though, I ran a series of scans using tech in my wristcomm to ensure the lounge was secure and no one was listening or watching us. When the scans were all negative, I returned my gaze to Jarrix’s, fought a rising tide of nausea and something like panic, and forced myself to talk.

“At the moment, I can’t pay for Byx’s intel, or for any work on the *Nivilus*.” My voice was toneless. “I have enough credits to refuel the ship and purchase minimal supplies, with very little left over. I may be able to find courier work in the area, but I won’t be able to use any of my regular booking agents or contacts to do it because of the bounty. Until then, there will not be any shopping on the promenade or meals in restaurants or anything else. I pay my own way. I always have, and I always will.”

He listened to every word, eyes glowing softly and without interrupting or attempting to touch me, even with his tail, though it was swaying in the way I’d learned meant he desperately wanted to wrap it around my leg.

I waited to see surprise, or anger, or worst of all, pity. I waited for him to demand an explanation I wasn’t willing to give.

Instead, he gave me a small nod.

“Thank you for telling me,” he said, his voice a warm rumble. “As I’m sure you recall, it was my idea to come here and reach out to Byx for information. My agreement with my friend is between myself and him, for intel on the bounty that no doubt also includes me. You are not and never were under any obligation to pay for it.”

When I opened my mouth, he raised his hand. “I know the bounty is primarily on you and you believe the intel should be your cost to bear. And I understand why you think so. Will you let me explain my point of view?”

“I know what your point of view is,” I said, and now something dark and angry was building inside me that felt like a tidal wave getting ready to crest and break everything in its path. “You believe I’m your mate and it’s your duty to take care of me. You’d fuel up my ship, buy me clothing, pay for the intel that might save my life, stock my galley with real food, and do it all while cutting down mercs and taking plasma rifle shots meant for me.”

My hands were shaking and I hated that almost as much as I hated having to admit my situation. “I can’t let you take over and do all that, Jarrix. I *cannot*. I suffered too long and fought too hard to live my life on my terms. You don’t understand that giving it up would break me.”

I expected him to coo, and I was ready to explode at him for it—not that he’d deserve it, but because something that had been strained since the moment he’d knelt before me in the maintenance shaft on Ghira Station was starting to crack wide open.

Instead, Jarrix went to the crescent sofa and sat. He gestured at the cushion across from his. “Please?” he asked, his voice still that warm, calm, low tone that tempered my anger and tension without sweeping them away like with his coo.

I dropped onto the sofa. There was a little over a meter between us—a comfortable enough distance for me, though judging by the strain in Jarrix’s expression he would have preferred to be holding me right now rather than giving me space. That as much as anything settled me because he was putting my needs above his own in a way that wasn’t threatening.

Because everything else he wanted to do *was* threatening—far more so than any trainer’s whip or bounty hunter’s gun—even if I hadn’t applied that word to how I felt until just this moment.

Strangely, I was glad we were having this conversation here and not aboard the *Nivilus*. Byx’s lounge was neutral territory and not imbued with seven years of memory.

“I would do all those things,” Jarrix said, forearms on his thighs and gaze intense. “I *want* to, not because of something physiological or biological, but because I believe you are worthy of them and so much more. I have a clear vision of what I think you deserve in a mate. But I’ve also come to understand enough about you to know that’s not what you need or

want from me, and trying to force you to accept it will do nothing but harm you and destroy everything I want so badly for us to share."

I stared at him, stunned into silence.

"I think of our sparring sessions," he said, and now his mouth had turned up at the corners. "The give and take, the synchronicity, the even match we make. How we sense each other's moves before we make them. My blade at your throat and your intana slicing into my calf. I would be a fool if I didn't understand that we fit together perfectly only if we meet each other as we are and I don't ask you to be anyone else but yourself."

He reached out his hand, palm up. "Anything you need, you may have it from me, but I will never force you. I will be the mate you need, not the one I *think* you need. That begins today, *now*, as we decide together how to settle our account with Byx. As for how we wish to spend our time on the outpost, I request that you permit me to court you in a way that pleases you."

A hundred thoughts crashed together in my head. Of all the ways I'd thought this conversation might go, what had just transpired was not one of them.

I'd had no idea how truly threatened I'd felt by the idea of a mate until suddenly the threat disappeared, replaced by his promise to be the mate I needed.

His hand remained outstretched, waiting as I processed his words. And he was smiling just enough to show the tips of his fangs.

I slid my hand into his. "I didn't hate it when you knelt in front of me."

In a blink he'd crossed the distance between us and dropped to his knees on the plush rug. He was so enormous that he was still taller than me.

I tugged him forward until he was between my thighs. "I want to divide the cost of Byx's intel," I told him. "I can raise funds by selling some of my weapons. There will be dealers on the outpost."

"I will buy them," he said immediately. "For a fair price. They will be mine, but they will stay on the *Nivilus* with us."

Once again, I'd expected an argument, and instead he offered a solution that met my needs. It felt so easy that the wind went out of me and I sagged forward. He leaned down until our foreheads touched.

"I could sell the nivilus to a dealer," I said softly. "Maybe I don't need it anymore."

“Keep it until you’re sure,” he murmured. “When it’s time—if it ever is—you won’t say *maybe*.”

We closed our eyes and breathed together for a while. I drank in his scent and let it soothe me.

“What kind of courting did you have in mind?” I asked eventually. “What was your plan, before this conversation?”

“I wanted to take you shopping on the promenade,” he said, lacing our fingers together despite how much larger his hand was than mine. “I wanted to buy some clothes for myself that *aren’t* a flight suit while you choose a beautiful dress and all the lovely accessories that go with it. And then I wanted to have dinner alone with you in the arboretum while Byx bribes security to close it down for a couple of hours for ‘repairs.’” He tipped my chin up and gazed into my eyes. “I hoped to kiss you under the stars with the nebula around us, and feel like the luckiest male in the whole damned galaxy.”

Maybe it was his vow to be the mate I needed, or the relief I felt knowing he wasn’t going to try to take over my life, or the brilliant colors of the nebula outside the window, or the glow of his eyes, or the rough edge in his voice that betrayed just how important this courting was to him, but suddenly the vision of us together in the arboretum was crystal clear in my head.

No opponent’s weapon had ever floored me as quickly or as thoroughly as how much I wanted this for him. For us.

“I will pay for my clothes,” I said, smiling as I cupped his cheek. “And for half the meal.”

He made a sound like a groan and drew me to his rumbling chest. I burrowed my face into the side of his neck and inhaled. He groaned again, louder and rougher this time. And his cocks were growing hard against my core.

I rested my head on his shoulder. “You really want me to wear a *dress*, though? *Me?*”

“I want you to wear whatever you want to wear,” he said into my hair, and I knew without seeing his face that he meant it. “You can wear a grain sack and go barefoot if you want.”

“I’ll look for a shop that sells grain sacks, then.”

He chuckled. “Shall we see if Byx thinks we can venture out safely to the promenade?”

“In a minute.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “So, when we get up to the arboretum in our new clothes and have our meal, you expect a kiss?”

“I *hope* for a kiss,” he corrected me.

“Is that all you hope for?” I teased.

“No.” Jarrix nuzzled my hair and pulled me closer until I felt his cocks throbbing against me through our clothes. I stifled a little whimper. “No, my mate,” he rumbled. “That is not all I hope for.”

Byx’s mate Felina was a gorgeous female Archan with pink fur, jeweled fangs, eight shapely segmented legs, and pink polish on all her many, many tiny claws.

Less than five minutes after we met, she kissed Byx passionately in front of everyone in the docking bay, wrapped one delicate leg around my shoulders, and declared herself my new best friend.

The panicked look I gave Jarrix as Felina swept me away into a private lift destined for the promenade made him shake with barely suppressed laughter.

My eyes narrowed. *Bad bat*. My fingers twitched toward the dagger sheathed on my thigh just as the lift doors closed, saving Jarrix from his bloody fate.

“I was a princess,” Felina confided as the lift rose smoothly from the outpost’s docking levels toward its uppermost habitat ring.

All ten of her eyes had purple lashes with matching shimmering dust on their almost transparent lids. They blinked in sequence, and I found myself blinking along with her in a strange kind of camaraderie.

“My mothers wanted me to wed a princess from another province,” she continued with a dramatic wave of four of her legs. “I refused because I wished to marry for love and ended up imprisoned on my family’s orbital estate awaiting my fate. And then Byx Klettirian, the greatest of all the Wundi corsairs, heard of my plight and came to rescue me. He destroyed the estate and freed me.”

“I did hear about that,” I murmured.

“He let all of the staff evacuate first, of course. He is a true gentlemale.” She clasped two of her many-fingered hands, her expression rapt, as if she

was reliving the moment she and her mate had met. “Byx is the most magnificent male in all the Goddess’s many realms.” All of her eyes focused suddenly on me. “And how did you meet your beloved Garon, Adelaide?”

“Er…” I coughed. “In a bar? On a space station.”

“Oh, how *wonderful*,” she said with what might have been actual awe. “The Goddess weaves her threads so perfectly. Imagine…in all the vast universe, you and Garon met at a single point in time. Simply *marvelous*.”

The lift doors opened, saving me from needing to come up with a response. Felina guided me out onto the single-level promenade.

After evaluating the rest of the ships currently docked at Trakhan, Byx was reasonably certain none contained bounty hunters or mercenaries. Even so, to go shopping with Felina, I’d donned a plain maroon hooded cloak over my flight suit. My nanotech cloak had been destroyed getting off Ghira Station, but this one offered some limited camouflage capabilities.

To blend in with a crowd or disappear into the shadows, though, first I’d have to separate from the pink eight-legged female at my side who drew attention from the moment we emerged from the lift.

“So, what would you like to wear for your visit to the arboretum?” Felina tucked one of her legs into the crook of my arm and gestured with another at the shops and stalls lining the promenade. “And would you care for a drink while you decide? Byx enticed a Bacorian wine merchant to open a small establishment. The selection is woefully limited, but the quality is quite excellent. And of course our drinks will be *gratis*. The proprietor is a dear friend.”

She was already herding me in the direction of the shop.

Minutes later, we emerged with glasses of dark purple wine that smelled heavenly. I’d barely managed not to wheeze at the price listed for a single glass of this particular vintage. The merchant had the grace to pretend not to notice my reaction and instead smiled politely as Felina complimented the wine using terms known only to connoisseurs.

Once we left the shop, though, she immediately reverted to the language of the unrefined.

“It’s simply delicious, isn’t it?” she said, beaming as I sipped from my glass. “And quite strong! Have you eaten, Adelaide? No? Oh, then we must have a light snack as well while we find you the right clothes!”

Which was how I found myself in a private room in Felina's favorite clothing store, eating hors d'oeuvres made by a chef at one of the nearby restaurants, browsing the shop's inventory of human-friendly apparel, and listening to my new friend's wild stories of her adventures traveling with Byx aboard his corsair vessel before they'd decided to make their permanent home here.

Despite how much I would have thought otherwise before we'd arrived at Trakhan, shopping with Felina was a thoroughly pleasant experience, as long as I didn't dwell too much on the creeping realization that I'd never had a female friendship that was more than serving together as crewmates. I'd certainly never shopped for clothes while drinking wine and eating tiny plated foods. The fact I didn't hate it was causing a mild existential crisis.

And of course Felina proved to have utterly impeccable taste. Once I'd made it clear the shop's more unusual designs were not for me—including a dress made entirely out of iridescent pebbles and another outfit that consisted of hundreds of triangles of fabric tied together piece by piece directly onto the wearer—she helped me choose what she referred to a "lovely, classic piece" with shoes to match.

When I hesitated about purchasing jewelry, citing how rarely I wore it, she waved her front legs and insisted she had the perfect pieces in her own collection and I must borrow them. She also declared she would style my hair.

The shop's owner, an effusive Ivarian who had ambulated in and out of our private room a half-dozen times, came in literally glowing when she heard I'd made my final choice and handed the dress over to one of the employees for some quick alterations.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" the Ivarian exclaimed, her voice coming from somewhere within her blue gelatinous body. "I'm so pleased you found the perfect clothing for such a momentous occasion! You will *devastate* your mate with your beauty."

Face warm from embarrassment or too much wine, I waved my hand. "*Devastate* might be overstating things."

"Nonsense!" Her body rippled with excitement. "Mark my words: *absolute devastation* will occur."

"Well, thank you," I managed to say despite the strong urge to laugh. "Has my…has Garon been shopping too?"

“Oh, yes!” the shopkeeper said with a distinct note of aggravation in her tone. “He has just left Oparion’s shop with his own purchases. That contrary male will not tell me what Garon bought, but if Oparion has made it, surely it will be magnificent.”

“Oparion,” Felina gasped, her front hands clasped to her chest. All ten eyes wide, she turned to me. “Oh, Adelaide, your beloved wishes to look his very best for you indeed. I am so glad we found the perfect gown. Now we must go to my rooms and complete your ensemble!”

The situation had gone from strange to surreal to almost comical thanks to the shopkeeper’s assertions about *absolute devastation*, but knowing Jarrix was doing so much to create a perfect evening for us gave me a bubbly feeling in my stomach that had nothing to do with the wine or hors d'oeuvres.

I finished the last of my drink and set the glass on the tray next to my plush chair.

Shopping excursions with pink-furred best friends and a romantic rendezvous in a deep space outpost’s arboretum were not who I was or who I’d ever been. I’d been born in the dust, fought in the sand, and bled on dozens of worlds. The only devastation I’d ever wrought was with the weapons in my hands.

But maybe for just one day—just one *evening*—I could let go of all that, put on a lovely gown and borrowed jewelry, let a princess style my hair, and have dinner with a male who’d met a scrap from Ganai in a bar and promptly walked away from everything for the chance to be her weapon, her shield, and the kind of mate she needed him to be.

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CHAPTER 13

JARRIX



At 2100 hours, I stood alone in Trakhan's spectacular arboretum, awaiting the arrival of my mate.

Our meal, which I'd personally carried here from the outpost's finest restaurant, was laid out on a small but elegant table Byx's people had set up in a grassy area surrounded by brilliantly colored foliage. The only light came from floating orbs and bioluminescent plants and flowers. A clear dome offered an unobstructed view of the nebula and the stars beyond.

A glowstone walkway led through the foliage to a private viewing area next to the enormous windows overlooking the Nalin Nebula. There, I'd meticulously created a nest of the finest and softest materials Byx could source on such short notice.

Everything was perfect.

I was sweating.

My tail twitched nonstop. My horns tingled. And my cocks…my cocks were utterly *unruly*, and had been ever since the scent of Keela's arousal had perfumed the air in Byx's observation lounge.

Byx had reported Keela had purchased clothing and put herself completely in Felina's hands to be pampered and dressed prior to dinner, but neither he nor Felina would reveal a single hint as to what I might expect to see when my mate arrived. In a way, it didn't matter. I would be equally thrilled if she wore a flight suit, a grain sack, or the most couture clothing available on the outpost. I only wanted to see her. We'd been

parted for hours after many days in each other's close company. The necessary separation from my mate had felt interminable despite everything I'd needed to do to make this evening match my vision.

In the distance, through the thick foliage and at the other end of another illuminated walkway, the private lift that connected the habitat ring where Byx and Felina lived to the arboretum activated with a distinctive hum. My hearts sped up their rhythm and my cocks leapt.

Keela was almost here.

I glanced down at myself one last time. The clothing I'd chosen was a calculated gamble. It wasn't what Tal Noku would have worn, certainly. Nothing about the outfit suited a GAIS operative either.

But the stylized open jacket, trousers, and tall cuffed boots, all black as space, were perfect for Jarrix To'vok, who wanted to join the *Nivilus's* crew as its medic, weapons master, second engineer, cook, and—hopefully—first mate.

I folded my hands behind my back and tried unsuccessfully to still my swishing tail.

Out of sight, the lift doors slid open almost soundlessly, a testament to the luxuriousness of the passenger system that carried the outpost's wealthiest residents directly to its most beautiful location on the very top of the station.

"Jarrix?" Keela's voice floated through the leaves.

I cleared my throat. "I'm here. Follow the path."

Her footsteps approached. The quick little taps on the glowstones were so utterly different from the familiar sound of her boots that it sent a little shiver of anticipation through my wings.

Like a vision, she appeared through a gap in the foliage. My breath caught in my chest.

My jaw might have dropped and certainly my tail was lashing like a whip, but nothing registered but her.

While her gaze raked me over from the tips of my horns to my new boots, I drank in her beauty.

My mate had chosen a sleeveless floor-length gown with a deep-V neckline, made of sheer, iridescent fabric that caught every little bit of light and color in the arboretum and shimmered like starlight. The only part of the dress that was completely opaque was the area from her breasts to just below her hips, so her shoulders and the sinuous lines of her toned thighs

and calves showed through the fabric. Her delicate shoes matched the dress perfectly.

She'd abandoned her brunette disguise and left her long hair uncharacteristically loose in red waves down her back. The sides and top were braided back from her face in an intricate design.

As she approached, I noticed gold adornments woven throughout the braids that matched her earrings, necklaces, and bracelets. And they in turn matched my own body piercings and even the buttons on my greatcoat, making me wonder if someone had found out what clothes I'd bought at Oparion's shop and styled Keela to match. I wouldn't put it past Byx to have whispered intel into Felina's ear.

When she reached me, Keela ran her hands over the sleek fabric of my coat and then along the many buttons that lined the entire length of its front, plucking each one with her fingertips before raising her gaze to meet mine. Those green eyes with their round black pupils, so human and so different from my own, undid me more than anything she could ever wear.

And when her hands slid up my bare chest under the open coat, brushed over my nipple piercings, and came to rest on my pectorals, I shuddered hard, my tail coiling around her legs.

I had no words for how lovely my mate was, or how deeply I appreciated her willingness to allow me to court her in the proper Fortusian way.

I'd been wrong, though, to think kissing her under the stars would make me the luckiest bastard in the galaxy. I already held that honor, and had from the moment I'd flown through the closing doors of the Final Chance bar on Ghira Station.

Maybe some of that showed in my expression or in my eyes, because Keela's lips turned up at the corners in a smile that echoed the one she'd worn in the image that accompanied the bounty posting.

"You look good," she said, curling the tips of her fingers just enough for her short nails to bite into the rapidly heating skin of my chest. "Like a male who's auditioning for a long-term position aboard my ship."

I finally found my voice. "You look…" *Beautiful? Breathtaking? Captivating?* None of those words seemed adequate. "Stunning," I finished.

Her smile widened into a grin, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "I'll tell Felina and the shopkeeper they were right about the gown."

“It’s not the gown,” I said roughly. “Gods above, the gown is lovely, but it’s not the gown.”

I sank to my knees in the soft blue grass and rested my hands on Keela’s hips. The silky fabric of the dress was so perfectly frictionless that I felt as if I couldn’t hold on and my mate might slip away.

“Oh, dear…more kneeling.” Keela ran her fingers lightly along the length of my right horn. Her touch ignited a blaze of heat and need that made both my cocks bead with lubricant, ready and eager to please her.

She tilted my chin up with her fingertip and smiled. “Careful, Jarrix. If you make a habit of this, I might start to think you’re hopelessly devoted.”

“Devoted, but not hopeless.” I captured her hand so I could press a kiss into her callused palm. It was so much smaller than my own, but mine bore very similar textures and scars from a lifetime of fighting and weapons training. “I’ve never been more hope*ful* in my life.”

“Me too.” Keela’s voice was uncharacteristically soft. Something flitted across her expression—wistfulness? Regret? Longing?—before it was gone and her smile returned. “I’m hopeful that our dinner tastes as good as it smells.”

For all the care I’d taken with the meal—the first truly fine dinner I’d shared with my mate, and finally one not made by a synth unit—I would have said to hells with it and stayed on my knees. Or, better yet, swept Keela into my arms and carried her to the nest I’d prepared. But I could no more allow her to go hungry than I could send her uncaringly into danger.

So I rose and ushered her to the table.

“There’s only one chair,” she said, looking up at me and raising her brows. “Do you plan to stand?”

“No.” I sat and drew her to my side. “After our long separation today, I would like you close. A separate chair would be too far away.” I patted my lap. “Would you do me the honor of considering me your seat?”

Her laugh made my tail swish and wings flutter. “Ridiculous bat.” She eyed the tented fabric of my trousers. “Are you sure that will be comfortable?”

“Comfortable, perhaps not.” I smiled and flashed my fangs. “Thoroughly enjoyable, absolutely.”

“Ridiculous,” she repeated, and heaved an exaggerated sigh that didn’t match the twinkle in her eyes. “I suppose I’ll allow it, just this once.”

I settled her sideways on my lap, arranging her gown so it draped smoothly over my legs and marveling at how perfectly she fit against me. I coiled my tail loosely around her calf and exhaled in contentment.

The only other time we'd sat like this, in the emergency jump seat aboard the *Nivilus* during our escape from Ghira Station, I'd been much too focused on her survival to spare more than a thought for how it felt to hold my mate in my arms. Given her distrust, the prospect of a moment like this had seemed nothing more than a distant dream.

Now, she was in my lap and in my arms by choice, and I wanted for nothing.

I'd felt her weight on me before during sparring sessions when she'd ended up on my chest after putting me on the mat. Those fleeting moments were just as satisfying because I treasured all aspects of my mate, from the fierce fighter to the lovely dinner companion and everything in between. Even the grime-covered female with scraped knuckles who'd emerged yesterday from the bowels of the ship's engineering level had made my hearts race.

One by one I removed the covers from the various dishes and set them aside to reveal our meal. Keela's little gasps of awe turned the quiet rumble in my chest into a deep vibration.

I'd selected a menu I hoped my mate would enjoy. There were savory dumplings—with extra sauce, of course—accompanied by fresh greens, thinly sliced roast, sautéed veg, baked tubers stuffed with meats and sauces, and a perfectly prepared fish with delicate purple flesh. And for dessert, a sweet cake with one hundred layers, each only a millimeter thick.

The chef, who'd been trained by monk-gastronomists on Bacora and opened a restaurant on Trakhan at Byx's urging, had bemoaned the "naivety" of the dishes, all of which—except the cake—she'd claimed were simplistic enough to be made by the least experienced of her assistants.

"Do you not wish to woo your mate?" she'd said, wringing all of her six-fingered hands. "You can woo *no one* with such provincial fare!"

Before I'd come to know Keela so well, I might have agreed. My instinctual desire to lavish my mate with the finest things was powerful. I would have demanded the chef make the most complex and awe-inspiring dishes in her repertoire, from gravity-defying towers of atomized fruit to sculptured creams atop razor-thin slices of the rarest meats. A molecular

gastronomist could create true wonders, and the patrons of her restaurant demanded to experience awe with every airy bite.

Keela Wren, however, wouldn't have gazed hungrily at a table covered in those kinds of dishes.

And so with a huff the chef promised the finest provincial meal we'd ever taste and swept back into her kitchen in a whirl of spiky head tendrils and flashing bioluminescence.

I slid a plate closer. "What would you like to try first?"

"Dumplings," Keela said immediately, and craned her neck to give me a soft kiss on my jaw as I reached for the serving spoon. "I want my own utensils, though. Don't even *think* about trying to feed me."

"The possibility never crossed my mind," I lied.

We ended up sharing a plate, which I kept filled between bites. The chef had been true to her word. Every dish was objectively flawless down to the last detail: the flavors complex, the spice levels ideal, the textures perfectly contrasting to maximize enjoyment. Maybe after her initial reluctance, the chef had thrown herself into the challenge of creating masterpieces from simple ingredients.

Our conversation during the meal was light. Keela told me about her shopping excursion with Felina, including her first extended interaction with an Ivarian.

"She looked so *gloopy*," my mate confided in a conspiratorial whisper despite the fact we were alone. "But she didn't leave a slime trail when she moved. I wanted to ask if I could touch her, but I decided that would probably be rude and I didn't want to embarrass Felina."

I chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "They are in fact very gloopy," I confirmed. "And they *do* leave a very thin layer of slime as they move. It's just hard to see. The trail gets thicker when they are in a state of heightened emotion, which is why the species focuses so much on mindfulness and maintaining emotional equilibrium. Losing too much of their mass could result in serious illness or even death."

"Ah, yes—I forgot you are a professional collector of information as well as a medic." She rested her head against my chest as I sliced a thick piece of cake and put it on a clean plate. "You also claimed to have impeccable taste in clothes." She ran her fingers over the many small buttons that lined the front of my greatcoat and smiled up at me. "Is this how you plan to dress from now on? No more jumpsuit?"

“Only if my captain approves.” I tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. “Do you like the look?”

Her lips twitched. “I do. It’s very…smuggler couture. Very *you*.”

Chest rumbling in pleasure, I risked offering her a bite of cake from my own fork.

She eyed me before opening her mouth and accepting the bite. When her lips closed around the fork, she shut her eyes and moaned. My cocks, which had been hard and lubricated since she’d touched my horn, began to throb in earnest.

Despite the impeccable quality of the rest of the food, the cake proved the most delicious creation of all. Surely each thin layer couldn’t have been a unique flavor, but it seemed possible given the symphony of tastes that exploded on my tongue.

I’d only managed one bite, though, before Keela’s hands were on my face and she was pulling my mouth down to hers.

Our first kiss in the *Nivilus’s* cargo bay had been a fierce demand for capitulation—one I’d gladly given in to. This kiss was far more complex, and full of everything that made Keela her wondrous self: fierce, sweet, demanding, capable, fearless, determined…and her taste made the meal we’d just finished seem as bland as the worst protein and veg the food synth on the ship could produce.

I was so lost in sensation that when the coppery tang of blood landed on my tongue, my entire body twitched.

Keela drew back, smiling. A tiny bead of blood welled up on her lower lip. “I’ve never kissed a male with fangs,” she mused. Her little tongue slipped out to lick away the blood.

“I’m sorry,” I said, horrified to have drawn her blood.

“Don’t apologize.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and drew me close again. “I liked it,” she murmured against my lips before kissing me again—this time more roughly. “You can heal me, right?”

I absolutely could.

I caressed that perfectly plush lower lip with my tongue between kisses, careful not to nick her again despite her whimpers and little pleas. My fangs were tingling now in a pulsing rhythm much like the sensations in my horns and the throbbing of my cocks. A new, intense, and almost painful strain at the base of the upper shaft was making it increasingly difficult to think.

With a shaky breath, Keela drew back, her nails digging into the back of my neck under my collar. “Are we done with dinner?” she asked, her heated green gaze searching mine. “Because I’m hungry for something else now.”

We need to be in the nest.

Driven by instinct, I was already moving before the words finished coalescing in my head. I rose with Keela in my arms, knocking over my seat in the process, and strode across the grass to the glowstone walkway that led deep into the dense foliage. With my mouth on hers and my senses filled with her scent, I barely noticed the beauty around us. Even the nebula faded into the background.

My mate was hungry for me. Nothing else mattered but that.

I would have been pleased to share a bunk on the *Nivilus* with my mate, or a bed in a hotel room, or any other comfortable place, but my Pallasian shadowbat DNA demanded I provide a fine nest, especially for this first mating. In fact, every part of me that was genetically shadowbat had never been as insistent about the proper ways of mating as they were now, from my horns and fangs to my cocks and tail.

I lay Keela in the nest as if she were made of the finest Fylorian crystal instead of tristeel and knelt beside her, taking in the sight of her body cradled on the cushions and silks I’d arranged so carefully.

She smiled up at me as the soft colors of the arboretum and nebula shone on her skin and that lovely gown. “What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said roughly. “There’s not a single thought in my head. You make me incapable of thinking.”

“Then I’ll think for both of us.” She raised her foot, parting her legs just enough for me to see she wore nothing under the dress. My hearts raced like I’d just run ten kilometers up a mountainside. “Shoes off first,” she said.

I removed her shoes and set them aside with care. She rubbed her bare feet on the silks beneath her with a groan of pleasure, teasing me with more glimpses of all the bare skin under her gown.

“Coat,” she murmured, gesturing at me with a flick of her fingers. “But stand up first, and take your time.”

Body thrumming harder than the *Nivilus’s* engines at hyperspeed, I rose and slid my greatcoat from my shoulders, letting it glide slowly down my arms to bare my upper body to my mate. She’d seen me without a shirt

numerous times during sparring and training, but this was intimate. Hungry. A seduction.

Her gaze drank me in as much as I devoured the sight of her in our nest. She studied the flex of my muscles, the glimmer of my nipple piercings, all the scars from wounds so severe even my enhanced healing ability couldn't banish them completely.

I let my coat fall to the grass.

"Turn," she said, her voice husky.

I did, remembering how she'd demanded I show her my back after we'd escaped Ghira Station. She'd wanted to see the wound I'd gotten from Sjer's rifle while protecting her from his rage. His shots had left small scars I could have healed with a dermal regenerator if I'd wanted to, but I wore them with pride.

How did Keela feel seeing them? I wondered. Did she feel guilty, or did she understand?

When I turned back around, the raw desire on her face nearly sent me crashing to my knees.

"Boots," she commanded.

Hands not quite steady, I removed my tall boots and set them next to her delicate shoes. The difference in their sizes was almost comical—or would have been if I'd been capable of anything but need.

Her gaze held mine when she rasped, "Trousers. *Slowly*."

Eyes on her, I unfastened the waist of my pants and pulled apart the seams at the front and over the base of my tail, every move as slow as possible. As much as part of me wanted to remove my clothes and hers quickly so I could feel her skin on mine and begin hours of worship, I relished this slow reveal of my body to the female who would be my only lover for the remainder of my life.

As slowly as I'd removed my greatcoat, I slid my trousers past my hips, freeing my cocks to the air and her hungry gaze. I guided the pants down my thighs and calves until they reached my feet and I could step out of them.

I was bare before my mate, and it was nothing at all like when I'd knelt in front of her in the maintenance shaft when she'd met me with blades and a gun.

Keela's pink tongue slipped out to wet her lips and her soles slid more slowly against the silks in sensual movements that made my cocks twitch.

Both shafts were harder than I could recall them ever being, so engorged that the flesh felt uncomfortably taut as they arched toward my abdomen. Lubrication beaded along their lengths, and blue-tinged precum welled from both heads to drip down the shafts toward my aching balls.

And speaking of aches…

My upper cock, the one through which I could sire offspring, was swelling near the base, forming the knot that would lock inside my mate. It was one of many physiological changes my body was undergoing in Keela's presence, and I reveled in it despite the discomfort.

"You're a masterpiece," Keela said, her breathless voice almost unrecognizable. "Gods, you are a gorgeous menace."

Had I better control of my faculties, I might have chuckled. Did she not realize the only masterpiece here was herself?

"I think this dress needs to go next," she said, sliding it slowly up her legs. "Would you like to help with that?"

"Yes." I knelt beside her, raised her body with one arm, and helped her draw the gown up and over her head without catching on her hair or any of her jewelry. Unlike my own clothes, which I'd set aside without thought, I carefully draped the gown over a nearby bench.

Keela was naked now except for the gold on her ears and around her neck and wrists. And the end of my tail, which had coiled around her calf without me realizing it.

Her beauty left me speechless.

Keela's body was toned by training and bore many scars that testified to a lifetime of being a warrior. To my medic's eye, some scars were minor, and some signified injuries that might have been fatal had medical help intervened even minutes later.

I drank in every inch of her, from her ten tiny, clawless toes to that vibrant red hair. The curve of her hips, the perfect strength of her thighs, her small breasts with their pretty pink nipples that would fit so naturally between my lips.

The tantalizing patch of red hair at the apex of her thighs glistened with the same slickness that dripped down the lips of her cunt. The scent of her arousal banished every other thought from my head.

Eyes half-lidded with desire, Keela raised her knees and spread them wide, revealing all of herself to my admiring gaze.

“Jarrix,” she murmured, and reached for me with a hand as unsteady as my own. “Beautiful bat, I want you. I *need* you. I need my mate.”

My hearts thundered in my ears. *My mate*.

Gods above, Keela Wren, ship captain and warrior, had claimed me.

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CHAPTER 14

KEELA



JARRIX *MOVED*.

One moment, he was kneeling at my feet, his glowing gaze locked on my face in some combination of disbelief, wonder, and all-consuming hunger.

And the next his head was between my thighs, his tail drawing my calf up and onto his shoulder to make room for his enormous torso. He ran his nose and mouth along my inner thighs, kissing and licking a trail from behind my knee all the way to my hip. When the tips of his fangs scraped lightly over my skin, I shuddered hard, my hands flying automatically to his horns without me needing to think about what to do.

I would hear the guttural sound he made when I grabbed his horns in my dreams.

As Jarrix caressed me, his touch sparked softly as if he carried a low electrical current in his body. Given how he'd manipulated and even fried equipment aboard Ghira Station, I supposed it wasn't impossible.

And then he delved that long, sinuous, hot tongue between my folds, parting them so carefully that I felt delicate for the first time in my life. I nearly levitated off the silks.

For all the almost-feral hunger in his eyes, he licked me slowly—slower than he'd moved while removing his trousers, slower than the coalescing of a new star—from the sensitive skin below my opening to the already throbbing bundle of nerves at the top of my slit.

My cry made him rumble deep in his chest. The vibration traveled through my own body, igniting everything it touched.

When he circled my clit with his tongue and then sucked gently in rhythmic pulses, I writhed and gripped his horns more tightly. “Jarrix,” I moaned. “Yes.”

With a groan, he retracted his claws before reaching down to stroke himself.

“My lubrication is an aphrodisiac for my mate,” he grated, showing me his gleaming fingers. “It will help prepare you for my cocks. May I?”

I shivered at the heat and raw want in his eyes. “Yes.”

Rumbling, he slicked his fingers with the sweet-smelling lubrication I’d seen beading on those beautiful, thick, ridged cocks and rubbed his fingertips along my slit, painting me in clear blue liquid. Every touch left a trail of heat that began to tingle and then pulse in waves that matched my racing heart.

When he smoothed it gently on and around my clit, it felt like a lightning strike directly to that tiny bundle of nerves. My body convulsed and I wailed.

“Gods,” I cried out, yanking on his horns. “Please, Jarrix. *Please*.”

Growling, he plunged one finger into me, and I lost the ability to breathe.

Tingles raced through my core. My inner walls fluttered and squeezed. The tingling became heat, and the heat made me scream and scream.

He pumped his finger in and out of me as his mouth returned to my clit, and then he added a second finger, stretching me until the burn gave way to pure pleasure and they glided in and out with ease. I was fighting against his hold while simultaneously begging for more. He gave me everything I demanded without hesitation.

The prickling heat spread through my body, down my legs to my toes and through my insides all the way to my head until my scalp tingled. My nipples formed tight, almost painful points.

When Jarrix moved up my body and drew one nipple into his mouth, rolling and pinching it between his lips as his fingers plunged in and out of me, all the competing sensations sent me careening wildly toward my climax.

“Jarrix.” I nearly sobbed the word. “So close.”

He released my nipple with a wet *pop* and scraped his fang over the tip, making me writhe. His free hand gripped the back of my neck in a way that shouldn't have heightened every sensation tenfold but did, because it grounded me and reminded me he'd sworn to keep me safe.

"I know," he grated. "And I want to see you let go and come for your mate."

His thumb swirled around my clit as his fingers worked their magic inside me, and I was rising, and rising, and crying out…

And with a scream, I flew apart in my mate's embrace, squeezing his fingers inside me while he held me to his hot, rumbling chest.

My entire body climaxed, or so it seemed: the heat, my muscles tightening and releasing in waves, and the intense pleasure formed a vortex so strong I fell into it. My vision turned dark, and the soft sounds of the arboretum and the rumbling in Jarrix's chest faded away, replacing by the roar in my ears.

I might have been thrashing, or maybe I was slumped boneless in his arms—I had no idea. All I knew was Jarrix had given me the best orgasm of my life, and for the first time in a very, very long time I didn't care where I was or who was hunting me or even who I was because Jarrix had me in his arms.

I felt safe.

When awareness returned, I found myself lying on Jarrix's heaving, rumbling chest with his hands on my hips and his cocks trapped and leaking between us.

I pushed myself up onto my hands and knees and pressed kisses from his hard pectorals to the muscles in his abdomen.

"Keela," he said, his hand cupping the back of my neck. His eyes gleamed. "Please put your hands on me."

I licked his nipple, twirling my tongue around the bar piercing that had been such a temptation since our first sparring session. As he moaned, I slid my hand down his stomach, over all that gorgeous, hot, dark gray skin and muscle toward something even more tempting.

He shuddered hard before my fingers found his upper cock, as if even the anticipation of my touch might be too much for him to bear.

And when my hand wrapped around him—or tried to, because his upper cock was so thick—his back arched and he made a sound somewhere between a growl and a groan.

“Mate,” he rasped. “Take me. I am yours.”

I kissed him deeply, swallowing his moans as I stroked him and explored all the textures of his piercings and the raised ridges that ringed his cock.

On the head of his upper cock, he had a curved vertical piercing with balls at each end that promised delicious stimulation. The sweet lubrication made him slick. My hand glided over his blazingly hot flesh, from the wide head to the swelling near the base that made my pussy clench in anticipation.

“What is this?” I murmured against his lips, giving the swelling a gentle squeeze that made his next inhalation a ragged gasp.

“My knot,” he grated out, his hand tightening on my ass. Another tingling rush of electricity ran through me from where his fingers pressed into my flesh. “It will expand inside you and lock us together when we mate.”

I reared back. “It will get *bigger?*”

His hand tightened on my neck and drew my mouth back down to his. “Much,” he rumbled, and my entire body trembled with a dizzying mix of trepidation and arousal. “Your sweet cunt will take it so well, my mate. My lubrication will ensure it. And you will come so hard when you do.”

Jarrix sucked gently on my lower lip and then released it. His eyes reflected the glow of the nebula outside the window above us. “I will never hurt you, Keela. My body was made to fit to yours.”

It was a solemn vow in the midst of rushing, thunderous desire, and the sense of safety I’d felt when he held me while I climaxed returned to wash away my apprehension.

With a moan, I caressed his growing knot and teased one of his fangs with my tongue. On its razor-sharp tip, I tasted something smoky and sweet. His venom?

I must have spoken aloud, because he groaned, “That is…not my venom.”

Whatever it was, I liked its taste enough to lick off another drop. The rush of warmth reminded me of the effect of his lubrication, but more localized and far more intense.

My hand slid from his upper cock to the slightly smaller one below it. It had a similar curved piercing, but this one was on the underside of the head at its base, running vertically through the ridge. The head was more tapered

and curved than his upper cock and there was no knot. My fingers still didn’t quite meet around the girth, though, and my pussy was clenching around its own emptiness as I envisioned taking first one and then the other of these beautiful cocks.

Jarrix rumbled, his back arching as I slid down his body and began stroking him in tandem. And when I kissed the head of his upper cock and drew its tip into my mouth, he let out something close to a roar.

He tasted so good: the sweetness of his lubrication combined with concentrated smokiness and a hint of something that reminded me of sun-warmed stone. I couldn’t take much of him into my mouth but he writhed under me as if I’d swallowed him whole.

And then his tail slid between my legs, gliding over my dripping pussy to gather up slickness before slipping just inside me to rub against my inner walls. I wailed around his cock in my mouth.

“Keela,” he ground out. His hand rested gently on my head until my lips released him. “My mate. *Please*, I can take no more. I need to be inside you.”

I crawled up his body and kissed him again. He tasted of me and I of him, and the combination was a better flavor than anything he’d served me at the table tonight.

“Then take me,” I murmured against his lips. “Show me how well you can please your captain.”

With a growl, he rolled us, bracing himself on his elbow above me as he replaced his tail with his fingers. I was soaking wet for him now, nearly shivering with arousal that consumed my entire body from my tingling scalp to my toes that were curling into the silks beneath us.

Jarrix had made this nest for us. The moment I’d seen it, I’d known every cushion, every swath of fabric, and every detail had been meticulously chosen and placed just so. No one had ever done anything like this for me. Nothing even came close.

Tonight wasn’t just about pleasure, though there’d been plenty of that so far and the gleam in Jarrix’s eyes promised much, much more. Nor was it just about him providing the kind of courtship he believed I deserved or me allowing him to serve me in ways I’d never been comfortable being served.

This was about forging a true bond and feeling how fulfilling it would be for both of us.

Looking up into his softly glowing gaze, I felt like a pitcher that had been nearly empty for as long as I could remember but was now being filled.

I reached up and cupped his face. He covered my hand with his and closed his eyes, focusing on my touch. I wasn't cold, but he was so much warmer than me that it made me want him to cover me with his body until I was blazing too.

He pressed a kiss to my palm and guided my hands to his forearms. "Hold on tight, my beautiful mate. And keep your eyes on me."

I gripped his arms and locked my gaze on his.

Slowly, he stroked the head of his lower cock through my folds, blending my arousal with his hot precum and electrifying lubrication, taking my desire and stoking it higher with every smooth glide.

And then he was pressing against my dripping pussy while his upper cock rested against my slit. I squeezed his arms as he braced himself on his hands on either side of me, my nails digging into his flesh.

He pressed into me, so hot and so big, and his groan blended with my cry. His wings unfurled, blocking my view of the plants and stars above us and reminding me just how enormous he was.

Enormous in *all* ways. My head fell back and my back arched.

"Keela," he growled, stilling with just the head of his cock inside me. I writhed, wanting more. "Look at me, lovely."

With a gasp, I opened my eyes. I didn't remember closing them.

He rewarded me by rocking inside me, going deeper each time as the piercing and ridges on his heavy upper cock rubbed against my clit. I was so slick and his lubrication had prepared me enough that the stretch was pure pleasure.

"So perfect," he groaned, his hips driving a little harder now, his ridged cocks stimulating every inch of my inner walls and my swollen clit. "You're taking me so well, beautiful Keela. Hold me tighter. Let me feel your little claws in my skin."

I dug my nails more deeply into his forearms and he rumbled deep in his chest. He felt so good inside me and against my slit. There were so many sensations I couldn't begin to catalog them all.

And then the tip of his tail brushed against my ass, circling the tight hole, and I cried out, body spasming.

Jarrix was buried to the hilt now, his lower cock fully sheathed inside me and his knot pressed to my folds as his upper cock dripped precum onto my belly. Above me, his eyes were still fixed on mine. Maybe he was watching for any sign of discomfort or pain.

"So good," I managed to say as his tail teased my ass, the very tip slipping inside. "Move. You need to *move*, Jarrix."

His grin showed his fangs. Twin drops of something leaked from the tips and landed on my chest. Warmth spread from where they landed.

"As my captain commands," he said.

He began slowly, drawing back and thrusting in an even rhythm that matched the nudges of his tail. My ass welcomed his intrusion quickly, possibly because of his lubrication, or because all the sensations he was giving me felt so good that I wanted more of everything.

My cries, his groans, and the slick sounds of our bodies joining filled the arboretum. He hooked one of my legs over his arm, allowing him to go a little deeper. And when he moved something underneath me to change the angle of my hips and began stroking back and forth over my G-spot and my clit simultaneously, the climax that had been slowly building crescendoed with terrifying speed.

I wailed as I came, the sound some combination of his name and a plea to whatever gods or thread-spinning goddesses who might have played a role in causing our paths to cross.

And in the midst of my orgasm, Jarrix withdrew from me completely, pressed the broad head of his upper cock to my fluttering pussy, and pushed in.

My wail rose in pitch and volume, becoming a wordless scream of ecstasy as I stretched around his blazing hot shaft.

Like before, with every thrust he drove himself deeper, but this time his cock was so thick and that piercing rubbed my inner walls so perfectly that every movement made me shake and cry out. The burn and pleasure of the stretch was simultaneously too much and not enough because I wanted to feel all of him heating me from the inside.

His tail had slipped from me at some point and now his lower cock was rubbing against my ass, heating me there too until I felt like I was going to come out of my skin.

"Keela," Jarrix said roughly, cupping my face with his hand to draw my attention. My eyes had fallen closed again.

I stared up at him, lost in a haze of pleasure and desire so far beyond anything I'd ever experienced that for several beats, I had no words.

He slowed his thrusts, his thumb stroking my lower lip with that electric touch that I was beginning to crave as much as the devotion in his gaze.

"Tell me what you want," he said, and his tone was gentle despite the fierce hunger that possessed us both.

"I want both your cocks," I said, my voice hoarse from screaming. I was trembling with my need to be full of him. "Give me both. And then give me your knot. I am temporarily sterile."

"As am I, but you must be sure," he said, still thrusting gently, still caressing my lip. "Everything is your choice. I want no regrets between us. My hearts could not take it if you ever looked at me with remorse or accusation in your eyes."

I'd been so afraid of giving Jarrix power over me, of surrendering my autonomy to a male who would call me *mate* but treat me as less than he. And yet here he was again proving he valued my choices and needs over his own.

"This is my choice." I hooked one of my legs around his hip and urged him closer, feeling the muscles of his ass flex as he thrust harder into me. Oh, gods, that felt so good. "I want your cocks," I said, breathless with exertion and desire. "I want your knot. I want all of my mate. I want to be *filled*."

He dipped his head and grazed his fangs very carefully along the side of my neck, sending a shiver through my entire body. "And perhaps someday…" he murmured, his lips against my ear. "I feel the urge to bite you, and today my fangs have produced a new fluid that is not venom. But we need not do that yet, until we know what its purpose is."

"Yes," I gasped as he rocked inside me. "Bite later. Cocks and knot *now*."

With a ragged laugh, he kissed my forehead. "As my mate commands."

He withdrew slowly from me until his upper cock slid free. Suddenly empty, I made a sound that was almost a whine of complaint, making him chuckle again.

And then he was lining up his lower cock against my ass, nestling the curved, tapered head against the opening until hot liquid dripped inside me. My entire body pulsed like a star going nova and I cried out his name.

"Eyes on me, lovely," he reminded me, and pressed inside.

Slowly, inexorably, and deliciously, he claimed my ass, his slick, hot shaft gliding easily despite his size. I felt no pain, not even discomfort. Only pleasure and the sensation of being wonderfully full in a way no other lover had come close to achieving. The ridges and that perfectly placed piercing felt even better in my ass, igniting a symphony of nerves I'd never known I had.

He watched me writhe under him, his thumb circling my clit almost lazily as he filled me. "Beautiful," he murmured, trailing the claws of his other hand lightly over my upper body to bring out goosebumps all over my flesh. "No nebula can compete with your loveliness, my mate. No star cluster shines as brightly as you."

He rocked inside me, back and forth, in and out, with shallow thrusts and then deeper ones, ensuring I was ready for more. Then he withdrew his lower cock completely, notched his upper cock once again at my pussy, and pushed in until his lower cock rubbed against my ass.

Lost in a tide of pure sensation, I watched him watching me, my eyes half-lidded. Gods, he was gorgeous. And he was mine.

"Ready?" he asked, his hands on my hips. His thumbs stroked the insides of my thighs, gliding over our combined slickness.

My voice was breathy but firm when I said, "Yes."

He pressed in.

My mouth fell open in a soundless cry as he filled me, stretching me slowly, again with that gentle rocking motion that let my body adjust to a level of fullness it had never come close to experiencing. He was shaking with the effort of moving so slowly, his own eyes nearly falling closed as his chest heaved.

It was too much, too much, and so, *so* good.

When he was buried to the hilt, his knot pressed tightly against my pussy, he let out a ragged exhale. "Gods," he breathed, gazing at me in awe. "You are exquisite. A male could die like this and not care."

"No one is dying today," I managed to say. I tried to wriggle and we both groaned. "Jarrix, I need you to stop looking at me like I'm some kind of deity and *move*."

"I will look at you as my captain, my mate, and my guiding star," he said, and began a slow withdrawal that made me shudder. "But I will also move."

When he thrust into me fully a second time, I climaxed hard and fast and almost without warning, ripping a cry from me that I didn't recognize as my own voice until Jarrix kissed me and stole the last of my scream.

That climax rolled into another, or maybe it was the same one taken to impossible heights by the unending waves of pleasure caused by those ridges plunging in and out of me.

In the midst of my cries, the fullness lessened as Jarrix's lower cock slipped free, and then my legs were both draped over his thick forearms and he was thrusting hard up to his knot…and then deeper.

I let out a new kind of wail—one of pleasure and the best kind of pain—as his slick knot stretched me impossibly. For a heartbeat I teetered on a precipice, the knot halfway inside me and my pussy stretched around its thickest point.

And then Jarrix slammed home, and I lost my breath. I was *full*.

He rocked inside me, grinding against my inner walls in new, seemingly impossible ways, that piercing on his cock head rubbing some magical place so deep inside me that nothing else had ever touched me there. I climaxed again, harder than before, fluttering and squeezing his knot. He groaned my name over and over, his claws digging into the silks and cushions beneath us.

And then he threw his head back and came with a thunderous growl that vibrated through his entire body and into mine. Heat surged inside me with every pulse of his release—perfect liquid heat that filled me until my lower abdomen bulged slightly. Tiny trickles escaped our knotted joining, leaving trails of heat that ran down to my ass, where they joined the hot cum that had spurted in what felt like a much smaller amount from his lower cock.

With a ragged sound, Jarrix gathered me in his arms and rolled us away from the wetness. He lay on his back and settled me on his chest, moving much more gracefully than I would have been capable of at this moment.

Chest rumbling in a deep purr, he drew a silky cloth over us, held me close, and caressed my back with a warm and trembling hand.

Despite how thoroughly sated I felt—and how rubbery my legs would likely be—my body rebelled against his embrace.

Habit demanded I find my discarded clothing and depart because the encounter was over. Both parties had their needs met and it was time to go.

And another set of instincts said *You are safe. He sees you. This is where you belong.*

I felt displaced and disoriented, caught between the reality of my life before this and the new path I was choosing. I'd staked a claim and been claimed, and I didn't know exactly how I felt about it, other than still quivering from orgasmic aftershocks and full of Jarrix's knot.

So I just closed my eyes and breathed.

Jarrix stroked along my spine in a slow, even rhythm as we both caught our breath. The difference in our sizes felt especially noticeable right now. His hand covered what felt like more than half the width of my back, and since I was held in place by his knot, I could neither reach his face to kiss him if I wanted or rub my toes against his feet. So instead I slid my bare foot along his calf, enjoying the texture and heat of his skin.

He bent one knee and cupped the back of my head with his free hand, forming a kind of warm nest with his own body. Maybe I should have found it claustrophobic given my longtime preference for solitude and avoidance of all post-coital cuddling, but instead it was comforting.

"Any pain?" Jarrix murmured. "Or discomfort?"

I took a moment to assess myself. Pleasant soreness in a few expected places, maybe a lingering twinge in my shoulder from our earlier sparring session, but nothing worth mentioning.

"No." My voice was soft. "You?"

He chuckled. The sound reverberated through his chest. "None at all. I appreciate your concern, though, Captain."

"Don't mention it." I curled my fingertips against his warm skin as if trying to burrow into his chest. "First Mate To'vok."

His breath hitched and the hand that had been rubbing my back stilled.

"Would you prefer simply 'Medic To'vok'?" I asked, feigning confusion. "Or 'Weapons Master To'vok'?"

"I will accept any and all ranks or designations the captain sees fit to bestow upon me." His voice was warm and his hand resumed its caresses. "Up to and including Cargo Inventory Officer, Second Engineer, or Executive Officer in Charge of Sanitary Systems Maintenance."

I trailed my hand over the silks beneath us. "How about 'Executive Officer in Charge of Cabin Refurbishment and Nest Construction'?"

"Any and all," he repeated. "With gratitude in my hearts."

I closed my eyes and listened to his twin heartbeats. "When you touched me, I felt a little electric current," I murmured. "Where is that from?"

“My biological makeup includes genetic material from a Dekaran eel.” When I twitched in surprise, he chuckled. “It’s just a trace, but it allows me to be able to manipulate circuitry and electrical fields.”

“Like door controls and bioscanners.”

“Exactly.” Deliberately, he trailed his fingertip down my spine, and a tingling sensation made me quiver. “I didn’t realize it also came into play during mating. It must have been instinctual with you.” His body tensed. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, the opposite.” I flicked his nipple piercing. He jumped and rumbled. “I would tell you if you hurt me in a way I didn’t like.”

He exhaled. “Good.”

Some time later, as I was dozing while he kept watch, he spoke. “I take it Felina told you Byx’s scans of the *Nivilus* came up clean?”

“Yes.” My voice was rough with sleep, so I cleared my throat. “I thought as much, but it’s a relief to know for sure.”

“And you’re certain you haven’t been tagged?”

“Correct. I have the medpod set to scan automatically every time I use it.” I hesitated, then added, “And I have Delta-grade nanobots in my bloodstream. If anything got implanted, they would swarm and deactivate it, like the tracker the Atolani darted me with at Final Chance.”

“I see.” His caresses of my back didn’t miss a beat. “I wondered how you could be so sure. Thank you for taking me into your confidence.”

I thought of all the other information I was keeping from him.

Now that he was to be the *Nivilus’*s first mate, I would need to grant him access to all ship’s systems. Despite our mating, that still felt hard to do because my instinct to control and protect my livelihood, environment, and ability to escape a dangerous situation was so strong.

Still, sharing control of my ship was much, much easier than sharing information that could be used against me.

Jarrix had told me everything about himself without hesitation when I’d asked, from his genetic engineering to his life aboard the *Fleeting Fancy*. I hadn’t asked for much detail about his career with the GAIS because I respected his need to keep classified information secret, and because that life was behind him now—even if only just. I also felt reasonably certain he’d tell me about anything that became relevant to this new life we were starting to build.

He’d listened to my confession of my financial woes and responded considerately and without pity or demanding an explanation, and just now he’d taken the news of my nanobots in stride. If I told him about Calla, he’d likely not only understand my need to pay for those coordinates, but would move entire planets to help find her.

My instincts, as well as what I knew about Fortusian true mate bonds, told me this male would never turn against me, but sometimes betrayal happened without there being a choice. He could be made to give up information. Calla’s secrets weren’t mine to share. Her safety wasn’t mine to gamble with. If she’d deserted the Alliance Defense for whatever reason, she’d be subject to prosecution and imprisonment. I’d heard many rumors about the Defense’s penal colonies, including those built to house soldiers who’d violated their oaths or broken laws, and absolutely none of those whispers were of anything good.

If and when we made it out of danger, reached Iosa, and found Calla, I’d tell Jarrix who she was.

Until then, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him why I had so few credits to my name or where we’d be going once we no longer had bounty hunters haunting our steps.

Maybe sensing I wasn’t going to share anything more, Jarrix spoke again. “We can sleep here tonight,” he murmured. “Or we can return to the *Nivilus*. Or Byx has offered us his guest suite, which is heavily guarded. He believes he’ll have information for us on the bounty by the morning, or midday at the latest. What is your preference?”

I wanted to stay in Jarrix’s comfortable, beautiful nest, but despite being closed for our use, the arboretum wasn’t a secure location. Though I’d dozed a bit, I wouldn’t be able to really sleep. The same would go for Byx’s guest suite. Jarrix trusted him, and I supposed I did too to a certain extent, but I wanted to be back aboard my ship…with my first mate, who was my true mate. Two things I’d never planned or intended to have, and now did.

Something warm seeped out between us. I inhaled sharply.

“My knot is easing,” He caressed my hair carefully, obviously trying not to undo the intricate braids Felina had created. “We’ll be able to move soon.”

I was unprepared for the mix of relief and disappointment his words caused. And following that, anticipation of what being knotted might feel like next time. Would it feel just as good? Or even *better?*

My hands tightened on Jarrix's arm. He hunched forward, tightening all those glorious abdominal and chest muscles, and was able to press a kiss to the top of my head.

"Was your courtship outing everything you dreamed of?" At least my voice was steady even if my breathing was not.

"No." He held me tighter as the trickle between my thighs became a flood. His knot was noticeably deflating now, the extreme fullness and ongoing pleasure giving way to a dull ache. "This was infinitely better than I could have imagined."

When his knot suddenly slipped free, I cried out at the strange sensation and he groaned.

Something else caught my attention. Startled, I raised my head to look at him. "Are you still hard?"

"For you? Of course." Jarrix smiled, flashing his fangs. "Shall I make you scream again, my lovely mate? The nebula is exceptionally beautiful tonight, and I believe I can find some dry silks to put beneath you."

Well, I wasn't quite ready to go to sleep yet, and it *would* be a shame to not make the most of our time in the arboretum after Byx had gone to so much trouble on our behalf.

I raised an eyebrow. "Or perhaps I can find some dry silks to put beneath *you?*"

His gaze darkened with need as if he was thinking the same thing.

"Let's find those dry silks," he growled.

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CHAPTER 15

JARRIX



According to my new wristcomm, it was 0540 station time when I woke suddenly in the makeshift nest I'd created on the floor of my cabin.

After two more passionate matings in the arboretum—one with Keela atop me, riding my cocks, and the other with her bent over the plush bench near the window—she and I had re-dressed and almost staggered back to Bay 2406, where Byx's night crew was working on a ship overhaul.

In an attempt to cling to shreds of dignity, we'd feigned nonchalance as we crossed the enormous bay to our vessel. Judging by the knowing grins and chortles among the night shift crew, we'd fooled no one about how we'd spent the evening and part of the night.

When the *Nivilus's* cargo bay door had closed behind us, sealing us inside and away from onlookers, Keela had buried her face against my chest and giggled. *Giggled*. My hearts might never be the same after hearing that effervescent sound.

Then she'd scowled and ordered me to build us a nest while she took off her dress and "these ridiculous shoes."

I'd fashioned the best nest I could manage from my bunk's detached mattress and our combined bedding and pillows while Keela made use of the cleansing unit. Despite its woeful inadequacy, we'd collapsed into the nest naked and exhausted, leaving our clothing on the bare bunk platform in my cabin. The offending shoes now had a place of honor on my desk.

I’d fallen asleep with Keela in my arms and my nose against her hair, and I was quite certain I’d never slept more deeply or contentedly in my life. The same might be said for my mate, who’d turned during the night so I could curl around her with my arm across her middle and her perfect ass snuggled against my well-used cocks. Her light snore was one of the best sounds I’d ever heard because it meant she trusted me enough to sleep soundly.

She’d promptly commandeered my bicep for use as her pillow and dragged my wing over us as a blanket. I was quite content to be her bedding—not just because this nest was inferior in size and comfort, especially compared to the one I’d made in the arboretum, but because to not provide for her was unthinkable.

For the first time since we’d met, she’d left her lovely long hair loose and unbraided. It spilled across my arm and our makeshift nest like a lake of fire. I’d fallen asleep toying with the silky strands, letting them slide between my fingers and twirling the ends until they slipped free.

With its engines and all but a few systems shut off, the ship was silent except for the air circulators and my mate’s quiet sleeping sounds. None of the racket from the docking bay could be heard through its hull.

So what had woken me up from a much-needed sleep? I listened, ears straining to catch any hint of noise.

There.

Somewhere deep within the ship, something moved. The sound was tiny, but my entire body went from relaxed to high alert in an instant.

Beside me, Keela’s light snore cut off abruptly, as if she’d somehow felt or sensed my sudden tension and snapped awake. Her survival instincts were as strong, if not stronger, than my own.

My arm tightened around her middle. I pressed my lips to her ear. “Movement on the ship.”

“Where?” Her voice was barely audible, even to me.

“Engineering.” I heard no more sounds from below, but something was down there. Or some*one*.

Keela raised her wristcomm to her lips. “Siber, quiet mode,” she murmured. “Scan the ship for life forms besides Jarrix and me.”

A schematic of the ship appeared on the screen of her wristcomm. A series of colorful lines showed Siber’s scans moving through the vessel.

A green dot appeared on the engineering level in the aft section of the ship. Starboard side, near the engine.

Biological anomaly detected, the AI reported with text below the schematic. *Bioscanner unable to identify species or determine level of threat*.

Keela's quiet huff mirrored my own thought. Anything hiding aboard the vessel was likely to be a threat.

"Can you seal engineering and deploy countermeasures?" Keela asked in a low voice.

Negative, Siber replied via text. *Without identifying the species, I cannot determine the type of gas needed to induce unconsciousness. The anomaly is too close to the ship's engines for any kind of stun field deployment.*

"Damn it." With a fighter's grace, Keela slid from my arms and rolled smoothly to her feet as if she hadn't been sound asleep only moments ago. I stood as well, taking my cue from her.

"Jarrix and I will be going into the engineering level via the hatches," she murmured to Siber. "Once we drop in, lock them behind us and seal the level, then await instructions. And alert Deckmaster Byx we've detected an intruder aboard and ask him to review surveillance in the docking bay."

Acknowledged, Captain.

Perhaps given the threat, her cool aura of command shouldn't have made blood rush to my cocks, but it did.

My reaction didn't go unnoticed. None too gently, she patted the side of my stiffening upper cock—whether in reassurance or admonishment, I wasn't sure.

"No time," she murmured. "Dress and gear up, weapons master."

Without waiting for my reply, she spun on her heel and strode from my cabin, headed for her own. I watched the sway of her hips and the hypnotic movement of her ass until she disappeared from sight.

Since speed was of the essence, I opted for my jumpsuit and standard boots, over which I fastened a holster that circled my hips and both thighs. By the time I emerged into the corridor with weapons in place, Keela was standing next to the midship engineering hatch, fully dressed, hair braided, and similarly armed.

She pointed at me and at the hatch, indicating I would be the one to go through it. That meant she intended to use the aft hatch in the cargo bay herself, which would put her much closer to the intruder than me.

I didn’t like it, but it wasn’t my call. She was my mate and my captain. I wouldn’t disobey her orders—not today, and not in the future. Unlike a number of captains I’d served under, she’d earned my respect and my deference.

And besides, I looked forward to any and all rewards she might bestow upon an obedient bat.

I took my place by the midship hatch. She signaled with her hand that we would drop into engineering in one minute. I set the timer on my wristcomm and watched her stride across the cargo bay toward the other access point until she was out of sight.

The engineering hatches remained sealed at all times unless someone was on that level doing maintenance or repairs, but yesterday a scanning crew had been aboard the ship looking for trackers. I assumed that was when our intruder had gained entry and hidden themselves. Perhaps Byx would see something on the bay’s surveillance.

The timer was approaching zero. I crouched next to the hatch, ready to scan my palm.

My wristcomm buzzed.

I unlocked the hatch, watched it swing down to reveal the engineering level, and dropped three meters feet first to the deck below, landing with a solid *thud* that reverberated.

Above me, the hatch closed and locked. In the distance, I heard the aft hatch do the same. A hum and a hiss indicated Siber had sealed the deck.

I was already making my way toward the starboard engine, moving as silently and quickly as I could manage given how densely this level was packed with all of the ship’s many systems. Neither the passageways nor the ceiling height were designed for a being my size, much less one with wings and horns.

Despite the many obstacles in my path, I tucked my wings tightly against my body and managed to reach the engine in less than a minute, and without banging my head or horns on a pipe.

When I turned the final corner, my plasma gun set to heavy stun because firing a full-power plasma bolt near an engine would be both disastrous and suicidal, I nearly skidded to a halt in surprise.

Given Siber’s inability to identify the intruder or categorize the threat, I’d prepared myself to confront almost anything, but the sight of Keela

sitting cross-legged on the deck with a warbling pink…creature…in her lap was not one of them.

I'd never seen such a creature. It was relatively small—maybe a half of a meter in length and round almost like a slug, but with shimmering flesh that changed colors from pink to red and then aubergine before cycling back to pink. It didn't appear to have any eyes or appendages except two antennae that curved up from the top of one end of its body.

Keela looked up when I appeared, her expression somewhere between bemused and…relieved?

One end of the creature whipped in my direction as its flesh turned dark gray to match the deck. Three enormous, round eyes suddenly opened wide and stared straight at me from what was apparently the being's head.

A wide mouth opened below the eyes, full of long serrated teeth. A dozen small appendages erupted from the flesh of its belly to form what were probably the equivalent of legs and feet. And it hissed.

I took a slow step back, trying to decide what my next move should be.

"She's a young gorga," Keela announced, as if the word should mean something to me. "She leapt into my arms," she added with a rueful smile. "So now we have a…situation."

I crouched, hoping appearing smaller would make the creature less likely to attack me or turn all those teeth on my mate. The gorga's maw closed, but those eyes remained fixed on me in a clear warning.

"What is the situation?" I asked.

"Gorgas are native to the Wundi homeworld," Keela explained, her hand resting on the creature's back as if she was trying to reassure her. "The captain who transported me off Ganai had one to guard his ship. I haven't seen one since. They're rare anywhere but a Wundi ship, but I bet Byx has one. Maybe it had a litter of offspring, and now one of them belongs to us—well, to me."

I frowned. "She belongs to you?"

"Well, she probably thinks I belong to *her*." She sighed. "They choose who they bond to, and they bond for life. They're incredibly territorial. So unless I kill her, the *Nivilus* has acquired a gorga guardian."

Everything she'd said made sense in an intellectual way, but I was still processing this new development.

"You say she's young?" I asked finally. "How big do they get?"

“About this big.” She made a circle with her arms and my eyes widened. “Lots of teeth, lots of…well, I guess you could call them legs, but they’re actually technically something else. Sort of like a cross between tentacles and cilia?”

I eyed the gorga’s appendages. “That does seem like an apt description.”

She grinned. “Also, in addition to changing color, they can change shapes when they get older to camouflage themselves, and they’re very fast. Absolutely a terrifying foe for anyone who tries to sneak aboard my—*our*—ship.”

The creature had been watching me during the conversation, her flesh gradually returning to the pink coloration it had earlier. She blinked at me, her eyelids closing from both right and left.

“So we have…a pet?” I ventured.

Keela waggled her head from side to side in a so-so gesture. “*Guardian* is the better word. She might not seem very threatening at this size—”

“I saw her teeth,” I pointed out. “I felt moderately threatened.”

“I’ve seen the teeth of an adult gorga,” Keela said with a wry chuckle. “And I watched that adult eat a Kurutan who tried to hijack the Wundi captain’s ship. Exoskeleton and all.”

Kurutans were essentially one-tonne armored vehicles. If anyone else had made that claim, I wouldn’t have believed a word of it. But since it was Keela and I saw no humor at all in her expression, I was forced to believe the story.

“Come here,” Keela said. “Once she smells us together, she should know we’re…mates. And *crew* mates. She probably won’t attack you.”

“*Probably* won’t?”

“Probably won’t.” She grinned. “You’re a spy turned pirate turned smuggler. You want guarantees of safety?”

“Fair point.” Slowly, I rose and approached warily as if the gorga was an ill-tempered Hardanian lava squid. At least with a lava squid I’d have time to get out of reach. They were deadly but extremely slow-moving. The gorga apparently had the potential to move quickly.

The gorga let me get close this time. I saw no wariness in her eyes, though—only suspicion and warning. My instincts made it clear this was a fellow predator that happened at first glance to look like an overgrown Ngaran slug.

Two nasal slits opened in the flesh above her eyes as I neared. The gorga let out a strange groan that made me freeze in mid-step.

“Keep coming,” Keela said, and now her mouth was twitching as if she was fighting to suppress laughter at my expense. “That was a good sound.”

The lowing sound and flaring nostrils continued until I was crouching in front of Keela and our new guardian.

After about a minute of inhaling our scents, the sense of impending explosive violence lessened steadily. Eventually, the gorga let out a chirp and closed her eyes.

“I think we’re good,” Keela said, and moved the gorga from her lap to the deck. The gorga opened one eye and stared at Keela in what I would have called a grumpy expression if that emotion could be attributed to such a being. “She needs a name,” Keela said with an unexpected note of cheer in her voice, as if gaining a murderous slug guardian had put her in a good mood. “Any thoughts?”

“I believe naming should be the captain’s prerogative,” I said, rising.

I offered my hand. Keela pulled herself up and dusted off the seat of her jumpsuit before I had a chance to offer my humble services.

“Hmm…I’ll have to think about it,” she said, tapping her lower lip in a way that made me want to bite and then lick it. “In the meantime, we’ll need to tell Byx that we’ve apparently adopted one of his gorga’s offspring. And speaking of your friend…” She raised her brows. “Have we had any word about the bounty?”

If it weren’t for our new guardian, I wouldn’t have minded sleeping at least another hour, and surely Keela would have benefited from additional rest since she required more sleep than what was sufficient for me, but our day had clearly begun.

“None yet,” I said in answer to her question. “He probably assumes we’re still sleeping. We can check with him now if you’d like.”

“I would like to do that.” She headed for the ladder beneath the aft hatch. “Siber, we’re all clear. Also, we have a new companion and guardian aboard the *Nivilus*.”

“I was monitoring the situation, Captain,” the AI said. “I have downloaded and processed all information on the care and feeding of gorgas from the appropriate databases. The food synth has been updated with recipes for producing nutritional fare for your guardian.”

“Thank you, Siber,” Keela replied, blinking in surprise. “That was… very thorough. You can unseal the engineering level and unlock the hatches now. We’ll be leaving the ship to speak with Deckmaster Byx once I set up a place for the gorga to live.”

“Acknowledged, Captain.”

Once we’d climbed back to the main level, Keela and I watched the gorga ascend the ladder with astounding speed and dexterity. Its ungainly appearance was thoroughly misleading. And in fact it was rather adorable as it scuttled down the corridor ahead of us toward what I assumed would be the galley.

Instead, it turned and went into my cabin. When we caught up, we discovered it had climbed into the middle of the nest and wriggled into the blankets, eyes closing in contentment.

When Keela tried to reclaim one of her pillows, the gorga opened one eye and quietly hissed. I tensed, but those potentially deadly teeth didn’t make an appearance.

“Well, then.” Keela put her hands on her hips, studied the gorga, and then turned to me. “We may have lost ownership of this nest and everything in it.”

I wrapped my tail around Keela’s leg, which the gorga watched with open suspicion. At the moment, I seemed to be on probation rather than fully accepted by our new guardian. “I have been named Executive Officer in Charge of Cabin Refurbishment and Nest Construction, remember? If you will grant me permission, Captain, I will begin plans for creating a nest in your quarters that is worthy of you.”

She caressed my tail, wrapping her fingers around it near the base and stroking along its length. Her touch sent a lightning bolt of pleasure straight to my cocks. The rush of arousal was so powerful my abdominal muscles contracted and I had to suppress a grunt.

“Permission granted,” she murmured, and if there hadn’t been a razor-toothed creature in this nest and a dozen tasks demanding our attention, I would have divested my mate of her clothing and spent the next hour doing things between her lovely thighs that were illegal in at least three star systems.

Instead, while Keela set up water and food and a place for waste for our new guardian, I changed from my hastily donned jumpsuit into a cobalt

blue greatcoat with gold buttons and matching trousers. They went very well with the same tall boots I'd worn yesterday.

As I slipped a fourth dagger into hidden sheaths inside the boots, Keela reappeared back in her brunette disguise with her hair in a single long braid. I very much looked forward to the day she no longer needed to resort to such measures—for the bounty's sake, at least. Disguises were a key element of smuggling.

At least she let me give her a long kiss before we headed for the ship's hatch.

"You know," Keela mused as we stepped through the hatch into the already bustling and extremely noisy docking bay, "you said you have impeccable taste in clothes, but I didn't expect you to buy an entire *wardrobe*."

"I represent this ship and my captain now," I said with a grin. "I feel compelled to make a favorable impression."

"You make an *impression*, all right," she grumbled. She came close enough to murmur, "But we're in hiding. Surely you're not using your credit account?"

"Not ones the GAIS or my former crew know anything about." I treated myself to touching the small of her back, the move hidden from view by my wing. "It would be exceedingly foolish of someone in my position to not have funds hidden away for eventualities such as this one, when I find myself suddenly changing careers and on the run with the most beautiful of smugglers."

Keela snuck her hand behind me and pinched my ass. I growled. After ensuring no one was watching us, I lashed her bottom with a snap of my tail. She squeaked and glared at me with such injured dignity that I struggled not to laugh.

"Garon! And the lovely Captain Adelaide!" Byx's voice rolled through the dock from its far side, where his mobile water tank was on a dais surrounded by terminals. His tentacles danced across the screens as we approached. He grinned down at us. "You've found your intruder, I believe?"

"We did." Keela cast one more baleful look at me before turning her attention to our host. "Apparently, one of your gorga has decided to leave her parent's nest."

“So it seems, so it seems,” Byx chortled. “Zwee took advantage of the scanning crew’s comings and goings to sneak aboard. She’s always been restless, that one. Wants to travel.”

“Zwee? That’s a good name. I like it.” Keela folded her arms. “Any news for us?”

“Yes indeed, Captain.” One of Byx’s tentacles retrieved a datapad from somewhere out of sight and handed it to her. “Per your first mate’s request, I’ve used extreme caution while looking into this strange bounty. The party behind the posting seems *very* motivated to find this *friend of yours* named Keela, who is apparently in the company of traitorous murderer Tal Noku.” Byx winked at me with half of his many eyes. “The unlucky bastard Tal has a bounty on *his* head as well—this one funded by his former captain and crew.”

I read the datapad over Keela’s shoulder. It displayed confirmation of what Byx had said. Keela’s bounty posting had been updated with information about her visit to Ghira Station, including a few images clearly taken from station surveillance. Only one had a good view of her human face with its false tattoos and brown eyes. Another image showed her disguised as a Gandarian, heading to her ship with the antigrav sled.

The third and final image was from the Final Chance bar and showed her meeting with a Kurutan. A tremor ran through Keela’s body at the sight of that image, and then she was stoic once more.

This must be the contact who’d drawn her out of hiding. I had to stifle a snarl at the sight of the being who had put my mate in such danger.

Expressionless, Keela scrolled to the next file, which was my dead-or-alive bounty posting courtesy of Captain Sjer and the remaining crew of the *Fleeting Fancy*. It included the false background information about Tal Noku I’d provided to Sjer, plus two images: one from aboard the *Fancy* with me in my medic’s garb, and the other from Ghira Station, showing me in L’mel’s bloody kilt firing his crossbow at Boorginamai.

Their description of my actions was that I’d murdered three of my shipmates and nearly killed a fourth before absconding with the bounty the crew had been seeking.

So Jonor had somehow survived his wounds, then. I growled. Highly annoying.

Mercs, privateers, and bounty hunters were a cutthroat lot with very few scruples, but betraying one’s own crew was perhaps the only act universally

recognized as a violation of the unspoken code among those who operated consistently outside the law. Even mercs who wouldn't blink at shooting a family member in the back if it meant a bigger share of a prize would now consider me vermin in need of eradication simply on principle. The bounty was merely a gratuity.

For those hunting us, Keela's bounty was just business. Mine was personal.

I'd known that would be the case when I made my decision to fight alongside Keela and get her off Ghira Station. I'd had no real loyalty to Sjer or my crewmates, after all—I was a spy in their midst, not a true corsair with mercenary hearts. I *had* sworn an oath, but as I'd spoken the words before Sjer and the crew I'd known I was speaking false and if need be I would turn against them because I served the GAIS. Of course, I'd had no inkling I would turn my weapons against the *Fancy's* crew because I'd found my true mate.

As for the GAIS…that allegiance and my path to freedom was a bit more complicated.

Other than the image of Keela in the bar with the unknown Kurutan, there'd been no surprises in anything Byx had shown us so far.

The information on the next screen, though, hit Keela like the stunner end of the Havelian battle staff I preferred to use for sparring. Maybe Byx didn't notice her flinch because she hid it so well, but I shared Keela's shock and horror so clearly I would have sworn something kicked me right in the chest.

Given every Fortusian's genetics were unique and the effects of human-Fortusian pairings were so difficult to predict, I had no idea how much our mate bond would allow us to sense each other's emotions or physical sensations, or even if it would be possible. But at the moment, I didn't have the luxury of ruminating on our nascent bond.

According to information Byx had uncovered, the Kurutan Keela had met on Ghira Station had been identified and detained after our departure by an agent working for the party who'd posted the bounty on her. A security informant later revealed the agent had been overheard interrogating the Kurutan, whose name was N'vera, in an attempt to discover their connection to Keela and the content of their discussion, but N'vera had refused to disclose anything.

The agent had left Ghira Station soon after the failed interrogation. According to station security logs, N’vera’s body had been found at the bottom of a disused maintenance shaft two days later.

All I knew from Keela of this Kurutan was they’d contacted her to sell information, but her reaction indicated there was far, far more to the story than she’d revealed to me. I’d already surmised the cost of that information had left her credit account drained almost completely.

And in the midst of her agitation at the news of N’vera’s death, I’d sensed a spike of fear and then relief, followed by shame. Fear that N’vera hadn’t told the agent what they’d discussed? Relief that they hadn’t, and then shame for feeling relieved?

What information had N’vera sold Keela, and why was she so reluctant to share it with me?

The need to wrap my arms, wings, and tail around her was all-consuming. Holding in my coo caused a stab of pain in my chest. I was designed at the cellular level to comfort my mate and ease her pain. Not being able to do so because I knew she wouldn’t want me to show that level of intimacy publicly was as physically painful as it was emotionally difficult. Understanding her reasoning didn’t make the discomfort any easier to bear.

With fingers that trembled, Keela closed that file and opened the next. She took one look at the screen and made a ragged sound that would likely haunt me for a very long time.

The datapad slipped from her hand. I caught it before it could hit the deck.

“Your adversary,” Byx said, his normally booming voice suddenly quiet in the wake of my mate’s reaction. “According to my informant, this is who posted the bounty on Keela.”

The image that had so affected my mate was of a hulking Ganaian with gray fur and two thick horns. The tip of one horn was broken and capped with metal.

I did not know this male, but Keela clearly did. The mere sight of him had kindled a visceral response in her. Hatred for this male swelled within me.

That loathing built as I read the information below the image, combined with a growing sense of dread.

The file stated the male's name was Orqiel unha'Feste and he was affiliated with the vicious Liktarr crime syndicate. Given his age and physique, I expected him to be a head enforcer, or perhaps one of the syndicate's generals, overseeing its many soldiers who served the organization's interests on various worlds.

Instead, he held the title of High Beastmaster at a notorious gladiator arena on Saistea, a planet well outside the reach of Alliance laws. In fact, it was located in the disputed zone between the Alliance and the Xeox Empire.

The next bit of intel caused my hearts to nearly freeze solid in my chest.

Before swearing his oath to the Liktarr syndicate, where he'd worked his way up from fighter acquisition to his current role, Orqiel had been a procurer for the arenas on Ganai. That was likely how Keela knew him. My tail lashed the air.

Like most affiliated with the arenas—those who'd survived the riots, anyway—Orqiel had apparently fled Ganai and found another way to use his skill set while working for one of the galaxy's most despicable crime syndicates.

This High Beastmaster was hunting my Keela and he wanted her alive. I didn't know why, and I didn't know why *now*, but I'd find out. And then I'd crush his throat with my boot while she put her blade through his vile heart. Or hearts. However many Ganaians possessed.

The vision was so clear in my head that when Byx exploded out of his tank and landed on the deck beside us with a bellow that shook the entire docking bay, I was very uncharacteristically taken off-guard.

A familiar mocking voice came from the entrance to the bay behind us. "Hello, *Tal*."

Guns drawn, Keela and I spun to face the intruder.

Flanked by a squad of Alliance soldiers, Gitto, my GAIS handler, met my furious gaze and smiled.

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CHAPTER 16

KEELA



FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE WE'D ARRIVED AT TRAKHAN, BAY 2406 FELL utterly silent. Even that awful music shut off.

Byx's many tentacles swayed menacingly as the Tivoran female who knew Jarrix as Tal entered the bay, followed by a dozen armored soldiers wearing Alliance insignias.

Like all Tivorans, this female was tall and lithe, with very pale skin, two oversized eyes, and hair that lacked pigment. She wore a nondescript blue suit without any emblem or distinctive design but still managed to make it look like some kind of uniform.

In my peripheral vision, I noticed most of Byx's dockworkers had either picked up heavy tools or drawn weapons of their own.

After seeing what Byx had uncovered about my bounty, my chest ached and my gut felt hollow, like I'd been eviscerated. But I couldn't afford to think about any of that—not Orqiel unha'Feste, not the Liktarr syndicate, not Ganai, not even the mental image of N'vera's corpse left to rot in a dirty maintenance shaft.

None of it could matter right now because a new threat had emerged—one apparently tied to Jarrix's past rather than my own.

Beside me, Jarrix was rigid, his gun aimed squarely at the female's chest as the soldiers trained their rifles on all three of us. Their helmets prevented me from seeing their eyes, but they were likely keeping a wary eye on Byx's dockworkers too.

The doors that led to the station closed and locked behind the newcomers.

The female tilted her head and studied Byx. She seemed amused rather than angry. “You think to hold us prisoner, Deckmaster Klettirian?”

“You provided false identification to be granted clearance to dock at Trakhan,” Byx said coldly. “And you do not have permission to enter my bay.”

“I think you’ll find my credentials grant me leave to go where I please,” the female countered, still with that light tone that made my trigger finger itch. “I have no quarrel with you or your crew. I am only here to arrest a murderer and take him to the proper authorities.”

Jarrix’s expression was like Vorcian granite. The only indication of his anger was the tiny flick of the tip of his tail.

I didn’t believe for one moment that her presence was due to the privateers Jarrix had killed on Ghira Station. This was something else. The female’s arrogance and aura of smug authority reminded me of the pit masters in the arena, who’d believed themselves untouchable and their power absolute.

“There is no need for you to involve yourself, Deckmaster,” the Tivoran continued smoothly. “It is better for everyone concerned, including Tal, if he comes with us rather than take his chances with bounty hunters or his former shipmates. At least I can guarantee no harm will come to your crew or him. If the others hunting him arrive here…” She raised her shoulders in a careless shrug that didn’t match her calculating gaze. “Well, it will certainly be a bloodbath.”

Byx made a grating sound. “You involved me when you stepped aboard this outpost, *Gitto*.”

The Tivoran female’s long fingers twitched. He’d scored a hit by identifying her by name. My respect for his intelligence network increased yet again. I wondered if he had a transdermal implant through which his people could give him information, or if he somehow already knew who she was.

“You underestimate my willingness to protect my bay and all those within it,” Byx continued, his tentacles swaying. “This male is Garon Vorduk, first mate of the *Bandit’s Blade*. I have known him for many years. I do not know this *Tal* of whom you speak.”

Gitto smiled, but the expression had no trace of humor now. “We both know who this male is, Deckmaster. Must I demonstrate the folly of claiming otherwise?” She gestured at the soldiers. “I see a clear advantage on my side.”

“That is because you see only what you can see.” Byx made that rough grating sound again. “This is not Catugo Prime, Gitto. This is *Trakhan*.”

This time Gitto’s jerk of surprise was much more noticeable. I didn’t know what the reference to the planet Catugo Prime meant, but clearly Byx’s intel was serving up the goods today.

We needed to get to the *Nivilus* and leave Trakhan. Once our ship went into shadow mode, we couldn’t be tracked. Then—and only then—could I begin to attempt to process what I’d learned from Byx’s sources and make plans.

But first we had to get out of this stalemate.

I wanted to know what Jarrix was thinking, but he hadn’t looked at me since Gitto had spoken his name. His body language was hard and cold.

If Byx was going to make good on his threat to neutralize Gitto and the soldiers, now would be a good time. I braced myself for a firefight.

Instead, Byx apparently had given the matter consideration and landed on a much different idea for how to respond to the threat.

“In my capacity as a venerated Grandmale of the Wundi,” he said, drawing himself up to a truly astounding height, “Protector of the Infinite Spiral, and ordained Speaker of the Immutable Word, I grant the male known as Tal Noku and Garon Vorduk and all those who travel with him sanctuary. You will remove yourself from this temple immediately.”

Beside me, Jarrix twitched as if a power current had passed through him.

Gitto laughed. “This is no *temple*, Klettirian. You have no authority—”

Byx bellowed a word in his native language. My translator didn’t offer an equivalent in Alliance Standard.

The walls of the bay lit up with columns of symbols that ran from the deck to the ceiling high above us. They blazed with blue light so bright that I squinted. The symbols also appeared around every doorway, including the one through which Gitto had entered, and even around the massive docking bay exterior gates.

“*Aforuti mai*,” Byx said to Gitto. His tone managed to sound both reverent and like a threat. “Beyond our homeworld, we make our temples in

our places of work because when we work, we serve our gods in heart and deed. You are ignorant not to know this."

A flash of uncertainty showed in Gitto's silver eyes before her expression steeled once more. "Be that as it may—"

"*No*," Byx said with finality. "There is no other truth or power greater here than that of my gods. I have granted sanctuary and by the laws of the Alliance, you must respect my decision or face the wrath of my people."

In all my years of traveling the galaxy, I had never been granted sanctuary by an ordained…whatever Byx was. Protector of the Infinite Spiral and Speaker of the Immutable Word, apparently. And judging by the way Gitto looked like she'd just bitten into something sour, she'd never been thwarted by such a move.

I neither believed nor disbelieved in either Farina's thread-spinning goddess or Byx's gods, but power was power, and if it kept us from taking on a dozen highly trained Alliance specialist soldiers, I was more than willing to go along with it.

"You realize this 'sanctuary' only protects you from me within this bay?" Gitto said to Jarrix, her expression haughty. "It will do nothing at all to stop the bounty hunters who will no doubt converge on this place once word gets out. This safe haven will become a slaughterhouse." Her eyes flicked to me and her gaze turning appraising. "You are no fool, Tal, but perhaps you have become one."

My hunch that they knew each other became a certainty. Was she from the GAIS? It would explain her heavy-handedness and why she had an opinion on Jarrix's level of foolishness.

As much as I wanted to demand what the hells this was really about, I kept my mouth shut. Anything I said would be to Gitto's benefit, not ours.

"I am not a fool, so do not treat me like one," Jarrix said. His voice was colder than I could have imagined it could be. "I take it you haven't spoken to Bruska."

The shape of Gitto's eyes changed. It was the most minimal of reactions, but for those of us whose lives had long depended on reading the tiniest of tells, she might as well have shouted.

"You have." If possible, Jarrix's tone had flattened even more. "And yet, you're here."

Gitto's aura of cold command cracked. The soldiers, who she had yet to tell to stand down, reacted by adjusting their aims ever so slightly.

“You are *my* asset,” she hissed. “And you do not stray from mission parameters without my leave!”

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. Her tone and expression reminded me of being back in the arena facing an overzealous trainer who’d been warned not to go too far punishing one of us but fully intended to do so anyway the moment the boss’s back was turned, knowing we could do nothing about it and would lie if we were asked about our injuries later.

Seemingly unperturbed by her outburst, Jarrix indicated his wristcomm with the hand not holding a plasma gun. “Everything that’s transpired in this bay since you arrived has been recorded and is ready for immediate transmission directly to Bruska. And I can assume our illustrious Deckmaster can make a similar promise?”

“I can,” Byx said, and gave Gitto the kind of too-big smile that probably made most beings take an uneasy step back. “At a moment’s notice.”

“So you have a choice,” Jarrix said, his stony gaze never leaving Gitto’s face, which now had a green tinge of fury. “Take your leave from the outpost without further antagonizing a venerated Wundi grandmale and risking your…*position*, or make the wrong decision and we’ll have to settle this in a more energetic way.”

For a long moment, I thought Gitto was going to opt for the latter. I dropped a dagger into my empty hand and waited for anyone in her group to so much as twitch. Byx and Jarrix’s tension increased as well.

Finally, Gitto’s long-fingered hands both clenched into fists. “I will not forget this,” she spat.

She signaled with two sharp hand movements. The soldiers took a collective step back toward the door that led to the rest of the station. Their rifles didn’t lower a millimeter, though. “Whatever arrangement you’ve made with Bruska by going over my head, it won’t keep you alive. *Either* of you.” She turned her glare on me. “I look forward to hearing your bounty has been claimed.”

It was a transparent and rather feeble attempt at triggering an angry reaction, which showed how well Jarrix and Byx had outmaneuvered someone who wasn’t used to being outmaneuvered and how personally she was taking the situation—as if the latter wasn’t already abundantly clear.

We’d made a spiteful enemy today. Those were the most dangerous kind to have.

I didn’t see Byx move, but someone unlocked and opened the docking bay doors behind Gitto’s group. A third of her elite soldiers spun instantly to face the empty corridor beyond, weapons at the ready, while the rest remained focused on us.

“The corridors between here and your ship are clear,” Byx said. “Your vessel has ten standard minutes to depart. And at a running pace, it is a seven-minute journey to the docking port.”

With a final stare at Jarrix that promised retribution, Gitto spun on her heel and left not at a run but a walk, surrounded by the soldiers. The rear guard kept their weapons on us until the doors closed and locked between us.

For several beats, no one moved.

Slowly, I lowered my gun to my side and returned my dagger to its sheath on my forearm.

Every muscle in Jarrix’s body was whipcord-tight, his jaw so rigid it made mine ache. And now that Gitto was gone, his tail lashed the air so rapidly that the movement was audible.

I wanted to touch him, to offer support and calming comfort the way he’d done for me. It wasn’t something I’d done since being separated from Calla, and not something I really felt comfortable doing in public…yet.

But I did it anyway, because my mate’s needs had to come before my own.

I tucked myself under his wing and slid my hand under his coat to rest on his back. At my touch, he let out a breath and relaxed just a bit.

“We need to debrief,” I said. “But first, how did she find you?”

Jarrix wrapped his tail around my leg and looked at Byx. “I used untraceable funds,” he said. “We’ve been running silent since leaving Ghira. You said the *Bandit* is clean. We know Captain Shaw—” he nodded at me “—doesn’t have a tracker on her.”

“Then *you* do,” Byx said, his voice grim. “Come with me, both of you. We’re going to medbay.”

It took more than an hour and seven different scans in Trakhan's state-of-the-art medical bay to find the tracker hidden in Jarrix’s body. Only after

four additional scans were Byx, Jarrix, and the head physician finally convinced it was the only one.

At some point—Jarrix wasn't sure when—someone had taken advantage of him being injured and undergoing medical treatment at a GAIS facility to drill into his right horn and implant a tracker so advanced that numerous medpod scans and other checks hadn't located it. The repairs to his horn had been flawless as well. I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen its outline on that seventh scan myself.

Neither of us had to wonder who'd ordered it done. I heard Gitto's furious voice in my head in a loop: *You are* my *asset*. *You are* my *asset*. *You are* my *asset*.

I stood in a white corridor outside the surgical suite, watching through a window as Jarrix underwent the procedure to have the tracker removed. Byx had a plan to use it to draw Gitto away from us when we eventually left the outpost. The device had to be handled in a way that wouldn't alert her that it had been removed—hence the necessity for an extremely controlled environment and for Jarrix to be unconscious in addition to the use of strong painkillers while the physician did his work.

The tracker was such a sickening violation that my stomach hadn't stopped churning for two straight hours.

"Are you all right, my friend?" Felina asked, her voice soft.

She and her children had been rushed into the station's most impenetrable safe room the moment security realized who was *really* disembarking from the supposed merchant vessel they'd allowed to dock. Once Gitto's ship was well away and Byx determined it was safe, she'd emerged to keep me company.

I would never have said I wanted or *needed* company until perhaps today, when I had to stand out here and watch a solemn Haboori physician wearing a full-body sterile suit cut into my unconscious mate's beautiful horn.

Felina's soft fingers brushed my hand. I was tugging at the collar of my flight suit without realizing it. I folded my arms and focused on Jarrix's still form, also covered by a sterile suit, but the ghostly sensation of my gladiator collar remained.

You are mine. My fighter. My asset.

"He is in the best of hands," Felina said, unaware of the memories clawing at the inside of my skull. "Doctor Kel'parigan is the finest surgeon

in this sector.”

I cleared my throat, grateful for the distraction. “This is a surprisingly advanced medbay. Most deep-space outposts don’t have facilities nearly this good, or top physicians on staff.” And I had the scars to prove it.

“When I became pregnant, my beloved Byx wanted me to have the best medical care,” Felina said, still in that quiet, soothing voice. “It is good that others benefit as well.” She rubbed my upper arm. “Byx will ensure you and your mate can leave the station safely and evade this person. He is quite good at what he does.”

“I believe it,” I said absently. I was rubbing my throat again. I abruptly dropped my hands to my sides. “I wish I could have shot her.”

I hadn’t really meant to say it aloud, but Felina let out a little hiss of agreement. “I believe she would have deserved it.” She tugged gently on my arm. “Come have tea with me, Adelaide. They will tell us when the procedure is finished and Garon is awake.”

I was suddenly done using false names with Byx and Felina. Pseudonyms weren’t for friends like these.

“My name is Keela,” I said. “And his is Jarrix.” I put my hand on the window. “I need to stay here. He would stay if it were me.” Nothing could have dragged him away, in fact. Not even Byx.

Siber had told me Jarrix had tried to stay by the medpod aboard the *Nivilus* after we left Ghira Station, and had only left when she’d threatened to unleash *aggressive security measures*.

“I would not leave if it were my Byx.” She made some gestures at one of the security officers who were guarding us on her mate’s orders.

Two of them disappeared and returned moments later carrying seats for us—one designed for a humanoid, and the other for Felina’s much different body and number of arms and legs.

I sank into my plush chair and fought the urge to drop my head into my hands. My tattered pride and my need to keep watch over Jarrix won out over the weariness and overwhelming emotions cascading through my body.

“Thank you,” I told Felina. “For the chair, and for staying.”

“Of course.” She caressed my arm and folded herself comfortably into her seat. “You need not talk. I am simply here.”

Those four words—*I am simply here*—meant more to me than I could possibly have expressed. Never had anyone simply *been here* for me until

Jarrix and now Felina.

I fixed my gaze once again on Jarrix and tried to deal with the chaos in my head.

I'd fully expected the source of the bounty posting to be someone I'd encountered as a smuggler. Someone whose stolen cargo I'd ferried to another buyer, maybe, or someone who felt I'd failed them. Never had it occurred to me the bounty would be tied to my past on Ganai. Why would it? That was a lifetime ago on the other side of the galaxy. The arenas had burned and most who'd run them had died in the aftermath.

But not the Ganaian male who'd bought Calla and me from our mother. *Orqiel unha'Feste*. A name I hadn't heard in fifteen years. A face that haunted my nightmares and appeared in flashbacks kindled by words like *scrap* and *mother*. No, of course he'd survived.

I'd gone into shock when I'd seen his image on Byx's datapad. My world had gone silent and my vision had tunneled until all I saw was that face and the broken horn. And I couldn't even care how much I was giving away to Byx with my reaction because I felt as if my legs had been kicked out from under me.

All the accompanying text that explained who he was had blurred, though I'd picked out some key words, enough to piece it together. Liktarr crime syndicate. High Beastmaster at the Aiphelevia, one of the most infamous arenas on Saistea.

What the hells did Orqiel want with me now? What did he want with me at all?

You are mine, he'd hissed into my ear as he dragged Calla and me by our thin arms down the dusty street and onto his ship. *My fighter. My* asset.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to rage and scream and take all my fury and grief and pain out on someone until we both lay exhausted and bleeding on the sparring mat. Jarrix would have volunteered in a heartbeat and gotten us both to medbay afterward if he wasn't in that fucking sterile room having his horn drilled out. And I couldn't make myself ask Byx for sparring partners from among his security staff because the thought of leaving this chair made me feel even sicker.

So I sat and forced myself to think instead of tearing something apart.

The bounty on my head had to be dealt with. Jarrix and I would be hunted to the ends of the galaxy until it was. I couldn't even try to find Calla first, as much as I desperately wanted to.

Nausea surged at the thought of what had happened to N’vera. I would be a liar if I claimed my reaction wasn’t largely due to how close Orqiel’s agent had apparently come to finding out about my sister’s alleged location. I had no idea why he was seeking me and no reason to think he might have gone looking for Calla too, unless he *had* and had located the same death record N’vera had shown me.

And N’vera had died rather than tell Orqiel’s agent what we’d discussed.

As a species, Kurutan were known for their strong sense of honor and loyalty. Apparently that had extended to me despite the transactional nature of our business.

It wasn’t my fault N’vera had been killed, not really, but guilt gnawed at me anyway.

Hard on the heels of that guilt came anger at myself. When had I become so weak? When did I start letting sentiment make me feel vulnerable? I was not vulnerable. I was a survivor of the arenas. A fighter. A smuggler captain. I hadn’t been a victim in a very long time, and yet in this moment I felt very much like one. I felt *fear*—for me, and for Calla. And even for Jarrix, who was now a target of the Liktarr crime syndicate as well as his own former crew.

I focused on Jarrix’s still form and let his presence ground me.

I had to grab hold of this fear with both hands and turn it into a weapon, just as I’d done in the arena. I had to conquer it and sharpen it and take it to the person who posed a threat to me and those I cared about.

A week ago, I would have gone straight to my ship and flown away from Trakhan, headed for Saistea. I knew how to infiltrate an arena. I might have fought as a gladiator before vast audiences, but I could do my work in the shadows too. I’d honed that skill on the pirate world Yavamir, along with several other talents. Given the opportunity, I could slip a blade between Orqiel’s ribs or separate his head from his body once we’d settled the business between us. And I would have done it all alone.

Jarrix would probably never know how close I came to doing just that. My boots planted firmly on the deck as I started to rise and head for the docking bay while he lay unconscious.

What stilled me, though, was the thought of how he would react when he woke and found me gone. How he would *feel*.

And how I would feel if the situation were reversed and he'd left me behind.

It had been such a very long time since someone else's feelings factored into my decision-making that despite how very illogical it was, I resented Jarrix for it. Everything had seemed so much simpler when I was a crew of one.

Simpler, and more dangerous, and lonely as fuck, no matter how much I'd told myself differently.

"Keela, they are done," Felina murmured.

I was on my feet with my hand on the window before I realized I'd moved. The physician was at the door of the room handing a black metal box to Byx. Our Wundi friend took the box in one tentacle, thumped Dr. Kel'parigan heartily on the shoulder with another, and disappeared down the corridor, moving far faster than I would have thought possible for a grandmale his size.

Kel'parigan met Felina and me at the door as we approached. "Your mate is fine," he rasped, his rough voice muffled by his suit. "The surgery went smoothly and I have repaired his horn. There should be no pain. I am moving him to a private room for recovery. You may meet us there and be at his side when he wakes." He huffed. "I know there is little point telling those of your kind to ensure he rests well for a day or so, but I shall say it anyway."

"Those of *our* kind?" I asked, arms crossed, eyeing him through the face shield of his sterile suit. "And what *kind* would that be?"

"The kind who are my most frequent customers." He gave me a fanged grin. "Go to room five, Warrior. We will bring you your mate."

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CHAPTER 17

JARRIX



I WOKE FLAT ON MY BACK WITH MY MATE LYING ON MY RUMBLING CHEST.

I didn't need to open my eyes to know who'd curled up against me with her nose and mouth pressed to my sternum as if she could burrow inside my ribcage. Keela's scent and her now-familiar weight had drawn me back to consciousness like a tether. Her little breaths caressed my skin.

As the effects of the sedation faded, a sharp ache remained in my chest. It took me a moment to realize I was feeling *her* pain and not my own. My own body had no complaints, not even a twinge in my horn. Physician Kel'parigan clearly knew his business. I'd expected nothing less from the doctor Byx had recruited to provide his mate and offspring the best of care.

I wrapped my arms and tail around Keela, and after taking a moment to ensure we were secure in a private room in the outpost's medbay, I wrapped my wings around us as well.

For these stolen moments, nothing and no one existed but us.

Keela let out a shaky breath. "Jarrix."

Now that we were in private, there was no reason to hold in my coo. The low, sweet sound poured out of me. My chest grew warmer as well, as if my body knew my mate needed as much comfort as I could give her. Keela melted against me, the tension seeping from her like a tide going out. It was a heady and humbling kind of power being able to provide this for her. Far more so than any material thing I might have obtained on her behalf.

I could not yet remove Orqiel unha'Feste from her life, or assist with whatever she'd learned from the Kurutan N'vera, or quiet the ghosts of her past, but I could do *this*.

I set my own grievances aside as well, preferring to focus all my hearts and soul on my mate than waste these precious minutes of peace thinking about the tracker Gitto had put inside my body without my knowledge or consent, or worrying what form her vengeance might take. There would be time enough for those thoughts later.

As I stroked her back and cooed, Keela's breathing evened out. The pang in my chest that was her pain faded to a dull, distant ache. I needed to tell her I could sense some of her emotions, but I would wait until she was ready to talk and we'd spoken of more pressing matters. I would rather slice off my own wings than disturb this moment.

She stroked my chest, tracing the contours of my muscles and my collarbone with maddening slowness. My rumble grew, and my tail tightened around her leg. The aroma of her arousal bloomed in the cocoon made by my wings. My cocks stirred immediately beneath what felt like the same loose-fitting pair of medbay patient pants I'd donned prior to the surgery.

When Keela wriggled carefully up my body so she could meet my gaze with her own, her eyes were full of desire, hurt, grief, determination, and that fire that had drawn me in from the moment I'd first glimpsed her. I drew her close so I could press my mouth to hers.

Her kiss didn't feel like the blazing inferno of our first such touch, or the sweeter demand she'd made after dinner in the arboretum, but a plea for comfort and touch.

"Mate," I murmured against her lips. "I dreamed of you."

"Did you?" She pressed kisses along my jaw toward my ear, where her teeth closed on one of my piercings and tugged. "What did you dream?" she whispered. The puff of breath in my ear sent a shudder of need through me. My cocks leapt against her thigh, already beading with lubrication.

"I dreamed I took you flying through the skies of my homeworld." I cupped her perfect ass with one hand and squeezed. "It was a good dream. One of the best I've had in a long time."

"It may be some time before we visit Fortusia." The tip of her little tongue glided over the ridges of my ear, making me shiver hard. "But there

are other ways of making me fly," she said, and blew across the areas she'd moistened with her tongue.

I wrapped my arm tightly around her and flipped us on the bed. From somewhere beyond the curtain of my wings, medical monitors beeped in a symphony of alerts before falling silent.

"Making you fly is one of my great purposes in life." I trailed my fangs carefully down her throat. They left tiny red marks on her skin and a few drops of what I now believed was mating fluid that I longed to share with her.

She moaned, her body arching up against me and her leg hooking over my hip in a blatant demand. "Oh, it's so *warm*," she breathed. "It feels so good. I want more of that, whatever it is."

I returned to that beautifully plush lower lip and pricked it gently with one fang, injecting a single drop of mating fluid before pulling away.

She gasped and writhed beneath me. She was so beautiful, even with the dark hair and brown eyes and the maroon jumpsuit with *Shaw* emblazoned on the upper right chest.

"I need you," she said, one hand pulling my hair so tightly that it hurt in the best kind of way. Her gaze was full of desire and pleading now. "It's all too much," she said with a shudder of her own that belied all the inner torment she carried. "I don't want to think for a while. Take me flying, Jarrix."

Surely all the gods above and below would damn me if I refused her plea.

I left the bed just long enough to secure the door and return, leaving my pants on the floor on the way back.

She laughed when I leapt onto the bed with a flap of my wings, landing with my knees straddling her hips. Wide-eyed and chest heaving, she watched as I gripped the front of her jumpsuit in my claws.

"Yes?" I asked.

She held my gaze and licked her lips, making my cocks throb and my knot ache. "Yes."

The nearly orgasmic sound she made when I ripped her collar made spurts of precum land on her clothes.

As methodically as if I were sharpening a blade or calibrating my newly acquired crossbow, I tore her jumpsuit down the front, baring her beautiful breasts with those perfect pink nipples that begged so sweetly to be sucked.

I paused in my destruction of her clothing to take one in my mouth and pinch and roll the other.

“Jarrix.” She pulled my hair until I reluctantly raised my head. Her eyes searched mine. “I want you to pierce my nipples.”

The thought of putting jewelry in these delicate pink nubs made my cocks leap again, this time hard enough for stars to streak across my vision. “When?” My voice was ragged.

Her lips turned up. “No argument? No ‘Are you sure’?”

“No argument.” I lowered my head to draw her other little nipple into my mouth. She groaned and held me close until I released her. “I know you don’t say anything you don’t mean,” I added. “So you will tell me when you are ready and I will do this for you.”

“Get rid of the rest of my clothes,” she ordered, sounding much more like herself. “I don’t want to feel anything on me but your skin.”

Gods, how deeply I felt the same.

I made quick work of the rest of the jumpsuit and the little shorts she wore under it. I tossed aside the shredded remains of the suit—I’d lost my patience for neat tears by the time I’d reached the legs—but the torn shorts I pressed to my nose so I could drink in her most personal scents. Ambrosia.

And then I put the scrap of fabric in my mouth, sucking on it while I ran my hands up and down her body. I cupped her breasts, teased those soon-to-be-pierced nipples, trailed my claws lightly across her abdomen to watch the muscles contract, and then spread her knees so I could admire the glistening folds of her perfect little cunt. Every gasp that escaped her mouth fed me better than the finest dish a Bacorian-trained chef could have dreamed of making.

I gave my cocks casual strokes as I rubbed my knuckle along her slit and up to her clit, drinking in her cries and gasps and the way she undulated her hips, seeking friction. She whimpered my name, pleading for more, pleading for my aphrodisiac lubrication. And of course I could refuse her nothing.

But I had my own wants too.

I took the scrap of fabric from my mouth and leaned over her. “Open.”

Eyes heavy-lidded, she obeyed.

Gently, I tucked the remains of her little shorts into her sweet mouth, leaving a torn bit of fabric hanging past her lips. She moaned into the cloth.

“On your hands and knees,” I told her.

With another shuddering moan, she rolled over and presented me with the most mouth-watering view.

“Down,” I said, and guided her with a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder until her face was sideways on the bed and she was looking at me, cloth dangling between her lips and eyes hazy with lust.

She wanted to fly, and I would take her as high and as far as I was able. Far enough that she could escape the things that hurt and haunted her and filled her eyes with darkness when she didn’t think I was looking.

I held her firmly, fingers spread wide so my hands almost spanned her hips. And then I nudged her legs apart until she was wide open for me.

“If I do anything you do not like, you will pinch me,” I said. “Otherwise, be still and obedient and let me take you to the stars.”

She shuddered hard, closed her eyes, and nodded.

Slowly, almost one muscle at a time, her body relaxed into my grip, abdicating the control she held onto so tightly. I loved her need for control, but right now she needed to let go and let me give her the peace of not needing to think.

I loved everything about my mate. Even the jagged, broken, angry parts.

I bent and lapped at her sweet clit. She cried out, the sound muffled, and writhed in my grip.

I pulled back. “No. *Stay*, my beautiful mate.”

She whimpered but stilled.

“Good girl.” I returned to her clit, swirling my tongue around the little nub and sucking. She was already soaking, her arousal gathering in drops that fell on my face and onto the bedding. I lamented the waste of those sweet drops.

She came fast and hard like this, her wail muted as her body jerked against my firm hold. Since I didn’t want to waste any more of her sweetness, I dragged my tongue from her clit along her folds, lapping up every bit of nectar my tongue could catch and then delving deeply into her opening to capture the rest. Her inner walls spasmed and squeezed around my tongue.

She made a noise that sounded like my name. I pricked her delicious ass with my claws and she moaned.

I left one hand on her hip and used the other to gather my lubrication and precum on my fingers. And then I began to paint her.

I started with her swollen clit. The moment I spread the slick blue liquid on her nub to make it even more sensitive, she wailed into her gag. I expected her to try to grind against my hand, but she didn’t. So I rewarded her by bringing her to another orgasm with my fingers on her clit and my tongue in her cunt. She gifted me with so much sweet nectar that it dripped down my chin.

And then I went back to coating every detail of her soft pink folds until she was so sensitive that she was quivering and whining and my slightest touch set off a cascade of shudders and moans.

Then I turned my attention to her ass.

The moment I gripped her cheeks and spread her open, her moan turned guttural. I knew just the reward for how well she was obeying my command to stay in this position and let me give her all the pleasure she needed and wanted.

I flicked my tongue against the delicate skin between her cunt and her asshole until she was trembling in my hands, and then I traveled up and twirled it around her little opening. She shrieked into her gag.

For the next several minutes, I licked and swirled and kept her teetering on the precipice of a release, building her pleasure until she was shaking and whimpering. Her nails were digging deeply into the bedding, and I wished they were doing that to my back. I wanted her to fly so high this time that she couldn’t even see the ground from such dizzying heights.

When we’d reached the zenith of what she could bear, I plunged my tongue into her ass as I circled her clit with my fingers and granted her release.

She burst apart so beautifully for me, her back arching, her nectar flowing, and her ass spasming around my tongue. A low, barely human sound came through the fabric in her mouth, and it made my knot ache to be buried inside her.

I dropped little kisses on every little red mark left by my claws, rose on my knees, and pulled her up so we were better aligned.

The moment the head of my lower cock nudged against her cunt, she groaned and rocked against me despite my order to keep still.

Slowly, deliberately, I filled her in one long sustained thrust, feeling her shake as she stretched to take me. Keela cried out and tried to push back to make me go faster, but I wanted to savor every moment of this bliss as much as I wanted to be sure I didn’t hurt her.

She was so tight, so perfect, so wet and welcoming. And watching my upper cock with its thick knot slide along the cleft of her ass, leaving a trail of precum and lubrication on her skin, was almost as good as the sensation of her inner muscles fluttering and spasming around my lower cock.

By the time I was sheathed to the hilt, I was shaking too with the strain of keeping still and the intense rapture of being squeezed along my entire length.

I pressed a kiss to her back and gently tugged the fabric from her mouth. “Good?” I asked.

“So good,” she rasped, her eyes almost feverish with desire that was all for me. “Oh, gods, Jarrix. So good.”

I drew back as slowly as I’d filled her, shuddering with pleasure and ignoring her whimpers and pleas for me to move faster.

When I withdrew completely and began teasing her by slipping my cock head in and out, she started swearing. Her repertoire of curses was astounding but not surprising, given her time serving on various kinds of ships.

“Fuck me,” she demanded finally, her flailing hand finding my thigh so she could give me a vicious pinch. “Jarrix, this is an *order* from your captain. I need you to be rough. I want to feel you with every step I take for a week.”

Apparently, her willingness to cede control had its limits. Ah well.

When I slammed all the way in without warning, her howl made my balls clench. I hadn’t nearly come so quickly in all my adult life.

I pounded into my mate as she wailed and writhed in my grip, until she came again with a scream of my name. Gods, there was no sweeter sound than that.

“Give me your other cock,” she gasped, reaching back to dig her nails into my thigh. My tail lashed the air at the delicious pain. “I need your knot. I need to be full of you now.”

I slipped my lower cock from her fluttering cunt and plunged my upper cock in.

Her yowl of pleasure made my wings flare wide with a snap—not that I was aware of much besides the way she gripped me. And when she reached down to stroke my lower cock hard in time to my thrusts, my vision tunneled until all I saw was her in front of me, taking me into her perfect body and begging me to fill her until she overflowed.

My balls drew up tight and pleasure built to a towering crescendo, threatening to take me over the cliff into oblivion. I spread her wide and slammed my knot into her beautiful cunt in two powerful thrusts.

Her scream when she came around me was silent at first, then became a strangled cry of "*Jarrix…my mate.*"

No, *that* was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard.

Jarrix…my mate. I took those three words with me into the mindless bliss when I came.

She was coming again—or still coming—strangling my knot to the point of pain as my body emptied itself into her perfect cunt and onto her abdomen and the bed beneath us in great wracking releases that made me collapse forward over her with one hand braced on the bed and my other arm across her middle, holding her back tightly against my chest. I couldn't bear for there to be anything between us—not even air.

I folded my wings around us while we trembled and gasped. She jerked and sagged in my grip, letting me take her full weight. Her inner walls fluttered and spasmed around my cock and knot, sending another cascade of stars across my vision.

"Good?" I managed to utter.

"Feel this." Panting, she took my hand and pressed it to her lower abdomen, where I felt a slight bulge. "This is you filling me up like I asked you to." Shakily, she slid my hand lower to her slick and dripping cunt. "I'm still coming, Jarrix." She shuddered hard and ground her ass against me, wrenching groans out of both of us. "I'm so *very* fucking good."

I turned us carefully and curled up behind my mate, draping my wing over us as a blanket so there was no chance she would get chilled—or be seen should someone enter the room unexpectedly despite the locked door.

She fit to me, and I to her, so perfectly that it was almost enough to believe in Byx's great pantheon of gods. Certainly the minutes I spent buried within her like this were the closest I had ever come to unveiling the great mysteries of the universe.

When she rested her head on my bicep and pulled my arm more snugly against her middle, the rumble in my chest grew until the bed vibrated. Her warm chuckle made me smile.

"We have to go to Saistea," she murmured.

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I know."

We fell into a comfortable, sated silence. I could all but hear her thoughts turning, but she remained relaxed in my arms so I let her think all she needed to without interruption.

“When I was four, my mother sold me to a procurer who supplied the arenas with fighters,” she said finally.

My gut contracted and rage swept through me so intensely that my vision tunneled. Her own *mother* had sold her?

It wasn’t unheard of for family members to sell children into servitude on impoverished worlds, but a mother selling a child…I couldn’t fathom it.

Keela laced her fingers through mine, as if she needed a stronger anchor to speak. “Procurers could be independent, or they might work for someone else, but the basic system was that the procurer evaluated a potential fighter, paid a lump sum to the seller if they thought the candidate had potential, and then either sold them outright to a keeper or opted for a lower initial payout plus a share of future winnings. Orqiel unha’Feste paid four thousand credits for me and sold me to a keeper for twice that, plus a share.”

Gods above. My body trembled with the need to rend this male limb from limb and take my time about it.

I knew about the horrors of Ganai before the arenas burned and the Alliance had stepped in to stabilize the economy and help alleviate the extreme poverty that plagued the planet, especially its human colonies. Conditions were much better now than a decade ago, but such monumental changes took time.

As bad as this story was, there was something Keela wasn’t saying—some additional horror that haunted the silences between her words. Something to do with her mother or father, perhaps? Some additional abuse she’d suffered at Orqiel’s hands?

I couldn’t ask, though—at least, not yet. My role was to listen with empathy and comfort as she recounted nightmarish memories.

“He was there when my keeper fastened my first collar around my neck,” she said, her voice calm and even. “I had a tracker too, but at least I knew I had it. I was awake when they put it in.” She reached up and indicated the area near her left shoulder blade. There was a scar there—one of many, but now I knew its significance. “Local anesthetic only, of course. And not enough of it. It was our first chance to show how well we could

withstand pain. I tried so hard not to cry, but I did. I had no idea at the time my life would become little more than pain from then on."

She toyed with my hand, stroking over my callouses and gliding her fingertips along my claws. "The gladiators whose procurers opted for shares got more…attention from the trainers. The procurers would pay them extra to ensure our weapons were a little better than what the others had. My training time started early and ended late. Every once in a while I got extra rations in secret. It created a caste system among the fighters. No one could have friends in the barracks because the pit lords liked to arrange fights between pairs of friends, but getting anything that was better than the person in the bunk beside yours made you enemies when otherwise you would have no reason to hate or resent that person."

Keela pressed her fingertips to the points of my claws, not quite drawing blood but almost, as if this immediate, sharp, physical pain would help distract from the pain of her memories.

"There wasn't much use for wishing for anything in those barracks," she said. "The misery sucked the ability to hope and wish right out of you really quickly. But sometimes I'd lie in my bunk at night and wish Orqiel hadn't opted for a share. It would have meant my nivilus wasn't as well made and I got less training time and worse rations, but back then I would have made the trade if it meant I didn't see hate in the eyes of so many girls in my barracks. It would also have meant Orqiel wouldn't have lurked around the arena watching me when he didn't have to be traveling to find new candidates." She swallowed, the sound audible in the stillness of the room. "He wouldn't have called me *his*. *His* fighter. *His* asset."

I was coming up with even more new and inventive ways of disposing of this vile male.

"He didn't touch me," she said, answering a question I hadn't asked but that had hung in the air. "I don't think his fixation was of that sort. I was a thing to him. I made him a great deal of money. My success was also proof he was a good judge of who might make a good fighter, or at least that was how he used my skills to his advantage. It wasn't always a wise choice to take a lower initial payout plus a share versus the other option, but with me, he earned far, far more than what the keeper offered him for an outright purchase."

Her shoulder lifted in a tiny half shrug. "And then I turned sixteen and left the planet, and never saw him again until today. I have no clue as to

why he would be seeking me now, or be seeking me *at all*, but that is the story of how I know Orqiel unha'Feste, Beastmaster of the Aiphelevia."

When she fell silent, I cooed softly, sensing she didn't want the full effect of my comforting song but wouldn't mind being gently soothed.

Hours ago, Gitto had called me *her* asset, and though I hadn't reacted visibly, my stomach had soured and I was infuriated. The way she'd said it made it clear she thought of me as something to be possessed and used as she saw fit. Our interactions had always been cool and professional, but there was nothing cool or professional about the way she'd looked at me as she hissed those words.

"Gitto is…or was…my GAIS handler," I said.

"I figured as much." I heard the smile in her voice. "She's going to be a problem."

"Probably." I nuzzled her hair. "I sent a transmission to her superior yesterday—not one that could be traced here. In it, I stated I had altered my mission to take advantage of an opportunity to gather intel on a crime syndicate, and following that, I would be tendering my resignation under the matehood clause in our contracts. Physician Kel'parigan will attest to my newly mated status."

"I see." Once again, I could hear the gears turning in her mind. "Her superior is the one you referred to as Bruska?"

"Yes."

"And did Bruska accept your change of plans and your resignation?"

"He did, reluctantly, but as a mated male himself, he acknowledged that the GAIS cannot separate us. He chose to remain because his mate works beside him and they share a home. But a planet-bound life and career in asset management at the GAIS is not for me."

She turned her head to look at me, eyebrows raised. "And when did you plan to tell me about your resignation?"

"First thing this morning, but we were somewhat distracted by an intruder in engineering. I then intended to tell you once we'd gotten news from Byx, and now…" I gestured at our surroundings. "It has turned into an eventful day."

"You are forgiven." She kissed my jaw and settled back onto my arm. "And your former crew?"

"Also a problem, but one that can be handled once our business on Saistea is settled." I rubbed my thumb across her knuckles. "You took many

punches today, Captain. I am here to listen whenever you want to talk."

This time, her silence had an uneasy edge. "You mean N'vera," she said eventually.

"Among other things."

"I bought information from them. And as you've probably figured out, that's the reason my credit account is so empty." She took a deep breath and let it out. "It might not be fair of me to ask this of you, but I need you to trust that I *will* explain once we've dealt with this bounty on my head and probably yours as well, and you are free of Gitto and the GAIS. It isn't that I don't trust you. There are…other considerations."

Ah. Now her refusal to speak on the matter made more sense. There was someone she was protecting who was in danger as long as she was still being hunted.

I rested my head against hers, careful not to bump her with my horns. "Of course I trust you, my mate. And I trust that if the matter becomes an immediate danger that you will tell me what I need to know to keep you safe and protect whatever other…*considerations* you hold close to your heart."

My wristcomm beeped. I checked the screen and found an incoming comm from Byx. I tapped the screen and made the comm audio only.

"Apologies for disturbing your *recovery*, my friend," the Wundi male said, his tone mocking but good-natured.

Keela compressed her lips to hold in a snicker.

"I have some news," he added, growing serious. "A source has told me the *Fleeting Fancy* is on its way here at top speed. Their ETA is six hours."

Keela turned her head to meet my gaze. Judging by her expression, we'd come to the same conclusion at the same moment.

"Gitto," I said, flexing my hands. Keela captured the one draped over her middle and kissed my knuckles.

"Very likely," Byx replied. "What better way to get her revenge than to inform your former crewmates of your location?" He made a rough grating sound. "Does she hope to flush you out from the sanctuary of the outpost? Or does she believe I would grant clearance for the *Fancy* to dock and let you take your chances with your former crewmates?"

"I suspect both would suit her needs," I muttered. Louder, I said, "Let me discuss this with Captain Shaw. We'll be returning to the docking bay presently."

“We will monitor the *Fancy* in the meantime.”

Once Byx signed off, I pulled Keela back tightly against my chest. “A few more minutes and my knot will have eased enough for us to separate without too much discomfort.”

She huffed. “I already disliked your former captain for shooting us both. Now I *hate* him.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her outrage at having to end our intimate encounter prematurely.

We’d both surely known these stolen minutes in medbay wouldn’t last, but I hadn’t anticipated the reason would be the imminent arrival of Sjer and his crew. How many would be my former shipmates, and how many would be new acquisitions hired to replace those I’d killed on Ghira? And would Jonor still be aboard?

It was likely Sjer had kept him on for the purpose of hunting me down. I had no idea how he’d survived his wounds and what kind of danger he now posed, but he would be bent on vengeance even more so than Sjer. And even more volatile and unpredictable than ever—a truly unsettling prospect.

He never could be reasoned with before, but now Sjer would have no control over him at all. That made him *excessively* dangerous. I wanted him far away from Keela. And preferably dead.

My knot eased just enough for a trickle of seed to escape between us. A growl slipped out before I could contain it.

Frowning, Keela craned her neck to look up at me. “Problem?”

“No.” I nipped at her ear gently with my fang. “When we have sorted out our business with Orqiel, Gitto, my former crew, and your personal matter, you and I will find an island on some forgotten world and enjoy many glorious days like this, uninterrupted.” The vision of how I would spend those days filling my mate again and again made my tail flick.

“I would be fine with doing that,” Keela said. “Once we complete a few jobs and get some credits in my account.”

I could have pointed out that I had enough credits to keep the *Nivilus* operational for years, but I had sworn to be the mate Keela needed, so I simply said, “Then that is our plan.”

She urged me to lower my head for a kiss. When we drew apart, she cupped my jaw. “Speaking of plans…how the hells are we going to get off this station without Gitto knowing, and without your former crew tailing us all the way to Saistea?”

“I have a thought about that.” I grimaced. “But I doubt you are going to like it.”

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CHAPTER 18

KEELA



JARRIX WAS RIGHT—I DIDN'T LIKE HIS IDEA. NOT ONE BIT.

To be fair, neither did he, but our choices were woefully limited.

Hands on hips, I stood on the deck of Docking Bay 1910, eyeing the sleek little star-runner on the platform as Jarrix walked around it for the third time and Byx extolled its virtues from his tank beside me.

"Brand-new engines, fully fueled," he said, gesturing at the vessel's aft section. "Full cloaking ability, shadow mode, slipstream jump capability, and a Mok-Tur artificial intelligence system. The waiting list for one of these is ten years long."

"Which is one of the things I'm concerned about." I watched Jarrix examine the ship, trying to get a read on his feelings about the star-runner. "We'll be noticed anywhere we dock. Where we're going, we need to blend in."

"You only need to blend in if you can be seen." Byx was watching Jarrix too—with several of his many eyes, at least. "In this ship, you won't need to dock. You can go in cloaked, put down in a derelict building near your target, and leave the same way when you've finished your business. And best of all—" he puffed out his thick, round body "—this vessel travels regularly from this outpost, so there will be no reason for anyone keeping watch to believe anyone is on it besides its usual pilot and co-pilot, thanks to the ship's *other* modifications."

“False bioscanner readings?” Jarrix guessed, looking over from the vessel’s open hatch.

Byx pointed a tentacle at him. “Exactly. I’ll have my people put your tracker aboard the *Bandit’s Blade* and go through pre-launch routines while you depart from this bay on the opposite side of the outpost, blending in with the rest of today’s scheduled traffic. Anyone who scans the ship will see two Dakarans making their weekly run to Mborsi. Once you’ve cleared the sector and ensured you haven’t been followed, you’ll drop into shadow mode and reroute to Saistea.”

It was a good plan, other than it meant leaving the *Nivilus* here and trusting my life—and Jarrix’s—to an unfamiliar vessel and AI.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have a better plan, and time was not on our side. The launch window for the star-runner was coming up fast, and every passing minute brought the *Fleeting Fancy* closer.

Jarrix and I had already looked at the ship’s interior and decided it was adequate for our needs—*more* than adequate, really—but I was far less concerned about the luxurious shipboard amenities than surviving this trip to Saistea and back.

“What do you think, Captain?” Jarrix said, abandoning his examination of the ship and coming to my side.

What I *thought* was that I missed the days of simply smuggling goods while dodging the Trade Barons, Alliance patrols, raiders, and drunken space station bar patrons with too many wandering tentacles.

What I *said* was, “I want to take Zwee. If anything gets aboard this ship but us, I want them to live just long enough to regret it.”

“Agreed.” Byx leaned over the side of his tank until his head was closer to Jarrix’s height rather than towering over both of us. “My people will help transfer your necessary gear to the star-runner. In the meantime, the regular pilot and co-pilot will begin launch procedures on their normal schedule. You’ll be leaving this dock at 1500 hours station time, giving you more than four hours to get clear before the *Fancy* reaches scanning distance.”

He handed me a datapad. “This is everything I could get on the Aiphelevia, Orqiel unha’Feste, and his ties to the Liktarr syndicate. If anyone else but you two touches that datapad, it will be instantly and permanently wiped.”

“Understood.” I tucked it under my arm. “Thank you, Byx. For everything.”

“You and your mate can thank me by returning in the same condition you’re leaving in,” he said with surprising heaviness.

“I’m sure you’d like your ship back the same way,” Jarrix said, placing his hand on the side of the beautiful star-runner.

“Did I mention the ship?” Byx swirled his tentacles in his tank. “Ships can be replaced. Friends cannot.”

And there was nothing I could say to that except, “We’ll do our very best.”

With little encouragement needed from me, Zwee boarded the star-runner *Vespira* as if she owned it, commandeered the nicer of the two crew cabins for her nest, and hissed at anyone who came near the ship’s open hatch or cargo door.

Byx had introduced us to the ship’s AI, Lumos, as Captain Beatrice Farai and First Mate Staevix Nadal.

The *Vespira* launched at precisely 1500 hours, just after a Haboori freighter and followed almost immediately by a scientific research vessel bound for the Nalin Nebula.

Our route for the first part of our journey, before we’d slip into shadow mode and redirect to Saistea, took us closer to the nebula. With navigation in Lumos’s hands, Jarrix and I sat in the cockpit, our eyes glued to the wrap-around front window and the breathtaking sight beyond.

Like Jarrix, I couldn’t picture myself putting down roots and staying in any one place, but if I *had* to, living somewhere with a view like this wouldn’t be too much of a hardship.

“Captain Farai, we are being scanned,” Lumos said not long after we’d joined the shipping lane headed for Mborsi. The AI’s voice was male and surprisingly melodic, with a slight accent I couldn’t quite place but that might have been Halutan. “Two standard passive scans from nearby ships and one very intrusive scan from a trailing merchant vessel matching the description of the ship that docked at Trakhan earlier today. It appears to be scanning all vessels in the vicinity.”

“Gitto,” Jarrix murmured. “This is when we find out if the *Vespira’s* false bioscanner readings are as good as Byx claimed.”

“I assure you that to all scans, this ship contains two Dakarans and a gorga,” Lumos said with a mildly offended tone that made me bite the inside of my cheek to hold in a chuckle. “There was no need to mask your guardian’s biosignature. In fact, I believe it adds verisimilitude to your cover, as you would seem unlikely to have gained a gorga during your short visit to the outpost.”

“Thank you, Lumos,” Jarrix said, his tone very serious though his lips twitched. He held out his hand to me. “That chair doesn’t look very comfortable. May I be your captain’s seat?”

I huffed in exasperation but rose and allowed him to settle me on his lap. “There’s *nothing wrong* with that chair.”

He tucked me against his rumbling chest, wrapped his tail around my right calf, and rested his chin lightly on top of my head. “But it is not as comfortable as this one, correct?”

“About the same,” I lied.

He chuckled and kissed my hair.

“The merchant vessel that scanned us appears to be returning to Trakhan Outpost,” Lumos said with an unmistakable hint of smugness. “It would appear our deception has succeeded.”

“Well done, Lumos,” I said, trailing my nails up and down Jarrix’s trouser-covered thigh. His rumble doubled in both volume and intensity. “Remain on high alert, though. We have more than one enemy looking for us.”

“Of course, Captain Farai.”

The ship couldn’t go into hyperspace until we were farther from Trakhan, so we had a while yet to enjoy the view of the nebula and the variety of vessels traveling nearby.

“When I was young and living in the dirt, I couldn’t imagine a life among the stars,” I mused. “Now I can’t imagine living any other way.”

“It is addictive,” Jarrix agreed. “I have always had itchy wings. Some feel unfettered in space, but I look at that—” he indicated the cockpit’s window “—and I see freedom. And endless wonders.”

“I do as well.” I entwined our fingers. “Maybe your physiology got it right after all.”

He squeezed my hand. “Maybe.” But there was no *maybe* about the way he said it. “I must tell you something.”

Despite his mild tone, I tensed. “Yes?”

“Our mate bond has begun to form. I don’t know how it will manifest for you, but for me, that means I can sense and share some of your emotions.” His thumb stroked my hand. “When you saw the information about Orqiel, I felt your shock and anger. And fear.”

Stunned, I moved so I could see his face. His expression was tender, his eyes soft and understanding. “I will learn to control the flow of emotions so your feelings remain private,” he promised, “but it will take some time to master it.”

I expected to feel angry and threatened. And maybe there was a little of that, but surprisingly I didn’t react at all like I would have in the early days of knowing Jarrix and put my dagger to his throat. Maybe it was the compassion in his gaze and how important my privacy was to him that soothed me. Even in this, he continued to prioritize my feelings.

Jarrix exhaled. “You’re all right.” It was a statement, not a question. He’d sensed my reaction and was relieved that I wasn’t angry or feeling betrayed. That he could know these things without me having to explain was…surprisingly nice.

“I’m all right,” I confirmed.

I closed my eyes and attempted to sense something from Jarrix, but try as I might, I felt nothing but what my normal senses could tell me. Maybe sharing emotions only went one direction. After all, I had none of his genetic advantages. Nary a drop of bat or eel or any other kind of DNA in my body but plain old human.

To hide my disappointment, I gave his thigh a little tweak and settled in against his chest with the datapad full of intel Byx had given us.

Before I started reading, though, I recalled something I’d meant to ask. “What’s Catugo Prime? Byx threw that at Gitto, but I’ve never heard of it.”

“You wouldn’t have.” He rested his chin on top of my head again. “I know few details myself, but it’s supposedly the location of a GAIS black site designed to house very high-value and very dangerous prisoners. Gitto used to work there as an interrogator, but not anymore. Whatever conclusions you draw from that are probably accurate.”

I grimaced. “That is…somewhat alarming. When did you find out?”

“I thought it was a rumor until Byx mentioned it today.” The tip of his tail was slowly stroking my leg and it might be my new favorite thing. “What new intel do we have on Orqiel?” he asked, his lips pressed to my

hair as he peered down at the datapad in my hands. “It looks like our friend has managed to collect quite a lot of information.”

“It is a lot.” I was already skimming the first file. My gaze landed on a familiar word almost immediately and I jerked in recognition. “According to this, Orqiel was heavily involved in the Rendex project that failed on Forval IX. He was to have managed one of the arenas, and was advising on its design.” I swallowed hard. “Is that the connection to the rendezvous your captain mentioned?”

“Could be.” His chest rumbled in the gentle way that relaxed me. “If he lives and works on Saistea and has for many years, I don’t understand why he would want to meet Sjer for a hand-off on Forval IX. Why not just have you brought to him directly?”

“I don’t know.” Irritated at yet another mystery, I tucked loose hair behind my ear. “We’re still missing something. Maybe he doesn’t *want* me on Saistea. Or maybe he doesn’t want anyone to know that’s where I’m going to end up. As far as Sjer or whoever handed me over would know, my trail would go cold on Forval IX. Anyone looking for me would have no idea where I went from there.”

Jarrix’s low rumble became a growl. He clearly didn’t like even the thought of me disappearing without a trace. I didn’t care much for the prospect either.

We spent the next few hours reviewing Byx’s files on Orqiel, the Aiphelevia, and the Liktarr syndicate. I read everything about Orqiel, most of the information about the Aiphelevia where he lived and worked, and a little about the Liktarrs—enough to ascertain that despite his title, Orqiel didn’t have much in the way of authority or power within the syndicate. Good. That meant when he turned up dead or vanished without a trace they weren’t likely to invest very many resources looking into it.

According to Byx’s intel, as High Beastmaster, Orqiel managed everything to do with “non-sentient combatants”—in other words, animals from across the galaxy brought in to fight and die for the arena audience’s entertainment. The practice was illegal on all Alliance worlds, but Saistea didn’t belong to the Alliance. None of its laws applied there.

The only laws on Saistea were those enforced by the Liktarr syndicate. Credits, cunning, and brute force ruled.

By the time we’d finished reading, Lumos was certain enough that we weren’t being tailed to put the *Vespira* into shadow mode, engage the

cloaking system, and leave the Mborsi-bound shipping lane in favor of a route that would take us out of Alliance space and directly to Saistea.

In sixteen hours, we'd arrive at one of the most dangerous syndicate-run worlds. It would be a colossal tactical error not to consider how many threats would surround us from the moment we got within scanning distance of the planet's orbital defense systems, but I had difficulty thinking about anything except Orqiel himself.

What would I say to him once I had my dagger at his throat?

There would be little point describing how much I'd endured in the arena—he already knew. If suffering mattered to him at all, he wouldn't have been such an enthusiastic participant in what transpired on Ganai, much less attempted to build new, worse arenas on Forval IX or become High Beastmaster at the Aiphelevia.

No, I wouldn't waste my breath telling him about my pain. If anything, Orqiel might actually enjoy hearing about it. Everyone I'd ever met associated with the arenas was sadistic. The procurer who'd bought Calla and me from our mother was no different.

All I wanted from Orqiel was an explanation for the bounty and for him to cancel it.

And then what? Kill him quickly? Take my time and make him suffer? I had a feeling I knew which option would get Jarrix's vote.

I supposed the way Orqiel would meet his gods might depend on the reason he was seeking me in the first place. One thing I was sure about was that it wasn't to make amends—as if that would be possible. Beings like Orqiel didn't seek absolution.

"I hear you thinking," Jarrix murmured into my hair. "Talk to me."

"I know there's no peace at the end of this," I said instead of recounting my internal debate over what I'd say once we found our target. "It didn't bring me any relief when the arenas burned, even when I imagined Orqiel and my keepers and everyone else who'd hurt us dying in the flames or the riots. If tomorrow I shoot him through the heart or take off his head and then mount his horns on my wall, I don't think it will change how I feel or make the memories any less terrible. I won't sleep any better." I drank the last of my coffee and set the mug aside. "All I can hope for is to find out why he posted the bounty and get it taken down. I don't think I'll even care if I kill him. In my head, he was already dead."

“Then your peace will come from somewhere else.” He reached for the coffee carafe sitting in the cockpit’s galley nook. This ship was by far the most luxurious I’d ever traveled in. “More?”

I held out my mug. “Please.”

As he filled it, he added, “Killing Orqiel once you’ve gotten what you need from him may bring you some unexpected satisfaction. But even if it doesn’t, it will be long-deserved justice for what he did to you and to many others.”

“Maybe so.” I raised one shoulder in a little half-shrug as I blew on my coffee, which was clearly imported directly from Bacora and very excellent. “But if he hadn’t bought me, someone else would have. That someone would have sold me for a profit, probably opted for a share of my winnings and made me a pariah among the other gladiators. Orqiel’s a symptom of a disease, not the disease itself. And the disease can never be eradicated as long as beings thirst to watch violence and credits can be made. I think…” I chewed my lip. “I think it doesn’t matter if I kill him or not. It won’t change anything. My life and all the others he affected will still have unfolded the same way. And they’ll choose another High Beastmaster within a day. The Aiphelevia will grind on.”

“But it will grind on without him.” He cradled my head to his chest with one warm, strong hand. “He will no longer have any power over anyone. He will no longer use up breathable air or further the goals of the syndicate. He will no longer piss me off with every single breath he takes.” The last sentence came out almost as a snarl. His chest vibrated against my cheek. “And with every one of his kind we remove from the equation, the machine wobbles a little more. Just because it hasn’t toppled yet doesn’t mean it won’t. On the day you left Ganai, did you believe the arenas there would burn only a few years later?”

“No.” My voice was soft. “I would have bet every credit I had to my name that they never would.”

“Then it is good that you held onto those precious credits.” He kissed the top of my head. “We’ll resolve the bounty, Captain, and dispose of a blight on the galaxy. Then we’ll return to Trakhan, settle matters with the GAIS and my former crew, and resume your illustrious smuggling career with the new additions of a highly capable first mate and an adorably lethal ship guardian.”

Despite everything, that drew a laugh out of me. “Zwee *is* adorably lethal.”

His lips moved to my ear. “Would you stab me if I said I find you adorably lethal as well?”

“No.” I tipped my head back and drew him down for a kiss. When our lips parted, I murmured, “But I *would* shoot you.”

He grinned, displaying those gorgeous fangs.

“Captain, it is unadvisable to discharge a plasma weapon aboard a vessel,” Lumos said. “Should you miss your target—”

“She doesn’t miss,” Jarrix said, his gaze never leaving mine. “But your concern is duly noted.”

The deliberate silence that followed was the AI equivalent of a huff.

Jarrix took the datapad from me. “Thanks to Byx, we have fairly detailed information about the Aiphelevia and the area around it, including Orqiel’s quarters. Let’s locate the best locations to set the ship down and then plan our entry and exit strategies. After that…” His tail slid up my leg to squeeze my thigh. “I have plans for us, my mate.”

“Making use of that very large bed in the crew cabin?” I guessed.

“Close.” He dropped a kiss on my lips. “Sparring in the cargo hold. I had Byx’s people put down a mat, but it’s a lot smaller than the one aboard the *Nivilus*. There’s not much room to move around. We’re sure to end up practically on top of each other.”

“I don’t think there will be much ‘practically’ about it—at least not if I can help it.” I wrapped my hand around his tail and stroked, making him growl, then grabbed the datapad from his hands and started flipping back through the files. “Now, where’s that map of the Aiphelevia?”

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CHAPTER 19

JARRIX



SAISTEA WASN'T AS BAD AS I'D ENVISIONED. IT WAS MUCH, MUCH WORSE.

In fact, I would have walked down any alley on pirate-run Yavamir and felt less uneasy than I did standing at the *Vespira's* hatch beside my mate, making last-minute adjustments to our disguises and weapons before leaving the relative safety of our cloaked ship and stepping out onto this gods-blasted planet.

Like many worlds with immense income inequality, Saistea was sharply divided between its few wealthy citizens and the rest of the inhabitants. Most of the planet was urbanized—so much so that rather than individual cities, it was one enormous city with sectors further divided into districts and zones.

The elite traveled between the ports, luxury hotels, casinos, brothels, arenas, and other destinations in private flyers and never set foot, tentacle, or any other part of their bodies on its soil or pavement. Residents of moderate means avoided the ground as much as possible, hiring flyers from one of the many agencies that seemed as common in the cities as food stalls. Only the poorest lived, worked, and walked at street level, taking their chances with not only the gangs who controlled entire sectors but syndicate-run patrols who were as likely to rob and kill an unwise pedestrian as assist them.

If I were alone, I would have turned to shadow, slipped through the streets to Orqiel's quarters within the Aiphelevia, obtained the necessary

information, canceled the bounty, and disposed of the male's corpse without being seen and leaving no trace. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd completed a mission in such a way, but it would have been my most satisfying.

I'd made the offer to Keela, knowing it was a futile endeavor before I spoke. She'd smiled, given me a few pats on the cheek, and holstered another blade without a word, which was the response I'd expected. Our mate bond let me know that far from being angered or insulted by my suggestion, she'd merely been amused. She knew I didn't expect her to agree.

That didn't mean I wanted her walking these streets any more than she wanted me to do so. And that was perhaps the biggest surprise offered by our bond thus far: that the strongest emotion in Keela at this moment was a fierce possessive protectiveness.

The warmth of it filling my chest blazed stronger when she grabbed a handful of my cloak and yanked me down to her height so she could give me the most ferocious kiss we'd ever shared, followed by a bite to my lower lip hard enough to make me growl with desire and my cocks leap inside my trousers.

"If it comes down to getting our answers or us both leaving this planet alive, we choose to live," she said, gripping my cloak tightly so she could stare straight into my eyes. "I am not going to die in this shithole and neither are you. That is an order." Her lips curled up. "In fact, make that ground rule number nine: We don't die on *any* shithole planet or space station. I'll have Siber add it to the list when we get back to the *Nivilus*."

"Understood, Captain." I cupped her face with my gloved hand and brushed her nose with mine. "My star. I follow your lead wherever you go."

"Then let's do this." She gave me one last little kiss and let go of my cloak.

We'd taken Byx's advice and set the *Vespira* down in the burned-out shell of a building in one of the city's derelict warehouse districts near the Aiphelevia. The structure must have once housed some sort of manufacturing plant before the planet's industrial output collapsed and the syndicate's interests became the only businesses that mattered.

Scans indicated few beings ever ventured into this building except for small feral animals. Lumos astounded us by smugly revealing the vessel was capable of emitting a low-level, virtually undetectable energy field that

had the effect of dissuading living things from coming near. The AI set the radius to encompass the building and the streets along its perimeter. Keela and I each got an update to our wristcomms so they emitted a modulated signal ensuring we wouldn't be affected by the repulser field.

"Shame we have to return this ship to Byx," I said. "It's got all the best toys."

Keela slid me a look. "I'm going to tell Siber you said that. Prepare for ice-cold cleanser cycles and bugs in your food."

"I've dealt with worse." I grinned. "Plus, as you so frequently point out, I am a bat. I *like* bugs."

"Not the ones she'd put in there." She poked my chest. "Don't insult my ship, you scut. Or I'll be forced to find a new first mate-slash-medic-slash-weapons master to replace you."

Beneath my cloak, my tail lashed. "The hells you will," I rumbled.

With a laugh, she pressed her hand to the scanner next to the hatch to unlock it. When it opened, a blast of warm, fetid city air blew in, tinged with a hundred odors, none of them pleasant. The arboretum on Trakhan had never felt so far away. I tried to focus on the scent of my mate over the stench of industrial waste and urban decay.

Keela put on her gloves and activated her biomask. I checked my own gloves, tapped my earpiece, and did the same before we stepped out of the ship. The moment the hatch closed behind us, the ship's sounds became dampened by the cloaking tech. Even standing next to it, my sharp ears detected only a quiet hum. Absolutely astounding.

I glanced down at my mate and smiled at her little bounce of anticipation. "You're lovely, little dragon," I murmured, my voice much deeper and more gravelly than normal.

She grinned. Her biomask displayed a mouthful of sharp teeth.

After much discussion, we'd chosen to disguise ourselves as a Haboori male and a Fortusian female. Keela's face still appeared human and she'd retained her red hair, but thanks to the biomask her eyes were red with vertically slit pupils, her nose wider and flatter, and her flesh was orange and red with a distinct scale pattern that emulated a Fortusian equatorial dragon.

My skin was now cobalt blue and my hair silver. My size, my prosthetic fangs, and false forward-curled horns also made me instantly recognizable

as Haboori—as long as my cloak stayed on to cover my other horns and my tail.

We were posing as a heavily armed arena guard and his mate who worked as a bathing attendant in the Aiphelevia. The *Vespira's* state-of-the-art clothing synth had no trouble creating duplicates of the uniforms worn by the arena's employees. Our false identity chips—provided by Byx, programmed by Lumos based on the latest intel, and implanted by me—*should* get us through one of the many employee entrances without raising suspicion.

Side by side, Keela and I made our way from the ship to a hole in building's sagging wall. With every step, our boots squelched and crunched through sodden debris and detritus. With the benefit of enhanced vision through our biomasks, we avoided the most unpleasant puddles, but Keela's right boot ended up partly coated in a corrosive dark green goo that had to be cleaned off immediately.

"Lovely place," Keela muttered when we finally reached the street. "I think I would have rather gone to Forval IX and taken my chances with carnivorous plants, sandstorms, and toxic air. Can't be worse than this."

"We can visit later if you want," I offered, half seriously. "Just to see what the fuss is about."

She hummed thoughtfully. "Possibly. I admit I'm curious."

We turned right and made our way at a brisk pace down the deserted street toward the arena. As large as an entire city sector, it towered above everything else in the area and had become visible to the naked eye during our descent from orbit before any other structure.

We'd set the ship down as close as we dared to the part of the arena's residential complex that housed most of its officials, including Orqiel. The arena's schematics showed the current Beastmaster resided in a wing with tunnel access to the facility that housed the non-sentient combatants he controlled.

If all went well, it would be a short walk to the entrance to that residential wing and the first test of both our disguises and our identity chips.

At first, we saw no one walking on the street—just a few shadowy animals darting in and out of buildings. Far overhead, the planet's elite filled the sky in brightly lit flyers in seemingly endless rivers of traffic on their way to late-night meals or entertainment or bouts at the arena, while

only a few dingy civilian hover vehicles passed on the street. We ducked into buildings or dark passages to keep out of sight whenever one hummed by.

But once we reached the streets leading to the arena's residential complex, foot traffic, civilian vehicles, surveillance drones, and armed Sentry patrols replaced the silent desolation of the area where we'd left the ship.

Our proximity to the Aiphelevia must have dredged up all kinds of terrible memories for my mate. And yet I sensed no anger, grief, or fear from Keela as we approached the arena—only determination, focus, and heightened awareness of our surroundings.

Since our clothing identified us as employees, we attracted very little scrutiny, but Keela's lovely dragoness features drew appreciative stares. In keeping with my disguise as a mated Haboori male, I bared my teeth and oversized fangs and rested my gloved hand on the back of Keela's slim neck as a clear declaration of ownership.

Rather than appear submissive or cowed, she kept her chin raised and exchanged nods with others passing by who eyed our casual intimacy with undisguised avarice. A proudly mated pair was enviable on pretty much every planet, even cesspools like Saistea.

But Keela didn't just feign her pride in our matehood—I sensed she felt it deeply as well. Satisfaction made my chest rumble and my real fangs drip and my cocks as hard as a meteorite. I had never been more grateful to be wearing a cloak capable of hiding my arousal.

I allowed myself a moment to bask in the knowledge that her admirers saw only her Fortusian disguise. Of all the beings on this busy street, I alone had seen her true beauty. Let them gaze at this dragon-eyed female. Her fierce green gaze was for me alone.

Without warning, a pair of cyborg Sentries stepped out from an alcove to block our way. I let out a low warning growl and stepped in front of my mate.

"Identification," the Sentries said in unison. Each raised a metal palm with an embedded scanner. "State your names and purpose."

I raised my wrist and scanned the chip while Keela did the same with the other bot. "I am Hurd K'low," I said in Alliance Standard, my voice modulated to sound like a Haboori. "I am a guard. This is my mate. We are on our way to work."

“I am Meline K’low,” Keela said, without wilting under the cyborgs’ piercing stares. “I am a bathing attendant.”

Her biomask had done little to change her natural voice, since her disguise was humanoid, but like mine it still needed to be altered to match our false identities’ voice prints.

To my dismay, the Sentries’ scanners lit up red instead of orange. Both cyborgs raised their plasma weapons and aimed them at our chests. “Do not move,” the Sentries said, again in unison.

Keela and I froze.

Pedestrians walked around our little group, looking curiously at us while giving the Sentries a wide berth.

I kept my expression neutral while inwardly cursing Lumos and his entire AI ancestry. He had *sworn* these identities would pass all but the most intense scrutiny. If we had to engage these Sentries in full view of the entire gods-damned street—

Blessedly, both scanners turned orange. The cyborgs automatically lowered their weapons, their movements perfectly and eerily synced.

“Identification confirmed,” they said. Each bot stepped to the opposite side of the walkway as if forming a doorway. “You may proceed.”

“Thank you,” Keela chirped in that too-sweet voice. Without hesitation, she started forward, giving me no choice but to immediately follow.

With my hand once again resting on her neck, we passed between the Sentries. Their heads swiveled to keep us in sight. And though they didn’t follow or raise their weapons again, I was extremely aware of my back as we continued down the walkway.

Despite the close call, Keela didn’t tremble and her breathing didn’t change. Through our bond, I sensed some strain, but her focus and determination remained unshaken.

As for whether I owed Lumos an apology for cursing him, it would largely depend on how the next few minutes went.

The rest of the walk to the gate was uneventful. Keela and I got in line to scan our identities with other employees arriving for their late-night shifts. This time our scans didn’t go red first before the orange appeared.

Side by side, we passed through the security gate and entered the arena complex.

The Aiphelevia was very much a city unto itself, with the main arena at its heart. Surrounding it on three sides were training facilities, barracks for

fighters and staff who lived on-site, the bestiary, and a dozen other buildings. One of those contained the luxurious apartments given to the arena's senior officials, including the Beastmaster.

Once on the arena grounds, employees fanned out to nearby structures depending on their assigned duties. We joined the group headed to Orqiel's building and gained entry by once again successfully scanning our identity chips.

Perhaps Lumos's smug superiority had some justification after all.

Still, despite the advanced tech and amenities aboard the *Vespira*, I much preferred Siber and the *Nivilus*. In fact, I missed them both—even my too-small bunk in my minuscule crew cabin. It was very strange to miss a place. As far as I could recall, I hadn't missed any ship, station, or planet since I'd left Fortusia at the age of eighteen standard years to begin my GAIS training.

Keela was my home and would be until my hearts ceased to beat, but I had begun to think of the *Nivilus* as home as well. For a male who'd been without a place to belong for many, many years, it was a most welcome feeling.

One I would protect with my life.

With a little laugh for the benefit of surveillance, Keela drew me into an alcove in a deserted corridor. She put her back to the wall, tugged my face close to hers, and wrapped her leg around mine. To anyone watching or passing by, we appeared to be nothing more than mates enjoying a romantic interlude.

The building was spotlessly clean, as I would have expected for the residence of most of the Aiphelevia's highest ranked officials. Once past the entrance, even the air was purified to keep out the stink of the streets and the smells of the arena complex. I knew from studying the schematics that we were a mere hundred meters from the entrance to a tunnel that led directly to the bestiary, but not even my sensitive nose could detect a trace of its inhabitants. Another tunnel farther away led to the training areas and fighter barracks.

Once they entered this building, those who lived here did not have to smell or see the suffering elsewhere in the complex. Had it been the same at the arena on Ganai where Keela had grown up? Probably so. The name of the planet could change and the color of the sand might be different, but everything else remained the same.

I lowered my forehead to Keela's and breathed in her luscious scent to replace the too-clean air in my lungs. She smelled of me now, and I of her, thanks to our matings and how we'd slept in each other's arms these past few days. Her scent did more to focus me than all my training and field work combined.

More than my star, she was my universe—and by all the gods above and below I would spend the rest of my days proving it.

"Scan?" I murmured.

With her arm hidden between us, she showed me the screen of her slim wristcomm—a new model provided by Byx because it was already integrated with the *Vespira's* AI. The green light confirmed the presence of a Ganaian male on the third floor of this building, right where we'd expected to find him.

"He's there," she murmured. "Alone. No other biosignatures detected."

"Good." I touched her gloved hand, wishing I could caress her bare skin instead. "Lead on, Captain."

She gave me a tight nod and stepped back into the corridor.

Unlike the fighters' barracks and the staff residences, which were lively at all hours, the halls of this wing were almost entirely deserted. The night's bouts had already concluded. Our intel had indicated Orqiel's work schedule began early in the morning and ended after the beast fights, which took place after the sparring demonstrations but before the premier bouts. Data from his door scanner had indicated he was almost always in his quarters by this time. Tonight was apparently not an exception.

From a supply room, Keela obtained an antigrav cart stocked with bathing supplies such as enormous lush towels, oils, cleansers, and fur conditioners. I followed her and the cart up a grand spiraling walkway to the third level, trading nods and greetings with the employees we passed. With the employees focused on their own tasks and the few residents in the halls in various states of post-fight inebriation, we attracted very little notice. All but one of the residents looked right through us. The only one who paid attention was a Thurroth who leered at Keela but reconsidered his behavior and scuttled in the opposite direction when I growled.

According to our schematics, our target lived in the largest set of rooms on this level, a corner apartment with a view of an outdoor training yard. Without hesitation, Keela strode directly to the door of Orqiel's quarters.

Through our bond, I sensed almost perfect calm from my mate. If she feared this male or the horrors he represented, she was very adept at crushing those feelings under disciplined focus as sharp as any blade in her weapons cache.

With her body blocking the view of the surveillance drone in the corridor, I raised my gloved hand over the scanner beside the door. The mechanism was familiar. A simple manipulation of circuits and the door slid aside soundlessly.

With the cart in tow, we slipped into the darkened room beyond. The door closed behind us.

A luxurious living and entertaining area took up nearly half Orqiel's residence. It included a large sitting area, a magnificent and spotless kitchen that showed no signs of having been used, and a dining room.

A dimly lit corridor to our right led to additional rooms. From one of them came a low, rumbling noise. A snore.

As Keela checked her scan again to confirm our target was alone and asleep, I reached out with all my senses, including my ability to feel energy fields and circuits, seeking any indication of sensors or alarms that would be tripped by movement. I sensed nothing.

Keela touched my hand. "Shadow," she murmured.

I gripped her fingers for a moment in a silent promise to have her back, and then I quickly removed all my weapons and set them aside before kneeling.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and let go of my physical form.

Unlike in the bar on Ghira Station when necessity forced an abrupt and disorienting transition, I slipped into my shadow form as easily as exhaling. Bodily awareness gave way to totally different and yet familiar sensations. My senses changed—some becoming sharper, others more muted. And through it all my mate's presence was steadfast beside me, the anchor I'd never known how much I wanted or needed until this mission.

Quickly and silently, Keela gathered my clothing and put it with my weapons on one of the sofas. Unable to resist touching her, I approached and caressed her face through the biomask. She leaned into my shadowy hand, her eyes closing briefly despite our precarious situation.

What did I feel like? Was I warm on her skin? Or cold? Could she still smell my scent as I could hers? I would ask her later, when we were safe and away from this place.

The snoring continued unabated from the rear of the apartment.

After once last glance at her wristcomm screen, Keela followed the sound, her steps soundless on the Vorcian marble floor. I moved ahead of her to visually confirm we were alone and there were no traps along the way.

We passed an opulent room with a bathing pool and several empty guest rooms before arriving at wide double doors at the end of the hall. These led to the main suite containing Orqiel's sleeping chamber, his private bathing room, and a balcony overlooking the training grounds.

I was about to slip under the doors to check on the inhabitant of the room when they suddenly slid aside.

Behind me, Keela didn't react audibly, but I sensed her sudden tension. It blazed through me like power sparking from a frayed conduit.

In the open doorway stood a tall, gray-furred Ganaian male with a metal-tipped horn and a pulse rifle in his hands. The false sound of snoring cut off abruptly.

Every instinct demanded I return to my physical form and sink my fangs into his neck to inject him with enough venom to drop him where he stood, or at the very least swiftly disarm him so he couldn't harm Keela.

But I'd sworn to follow my mate and our plan for this meeting, and revealing my presence by paralyzing Orqiel or taking his weapon was not part of the plan. Not yet, anyway.

Instead, I forced myself to remain unseen, silent, and in the shadows while Keela and Orqiel studied each other.

"I do not recall summoning a bathing attendant," he said finally, his voice cold and broad face expressionless. "So I must assume you are here on other business."

"I am." Keela's tone was calm, and still soft and sweet because of the modulation.

Despite her nighttime intrusion into his quarters and her dragoness features, her relative size and lack of visible weapons apparently didn't alarm Orqiel enough that he aimed his rifle at her, but I was all too aware of how quickly that barrel could move and emit deadly bolts of plasma in the hands of someone with training.

"Speak, then," Orqiel snapped. "Speak, and then get out. I am an old male, and I have an early meeting with my training staff."

Slowly, her gaze locked on his, Keela reached up and flipped back her hood. She'd worn her hair long but braided on the top and sides to keep it back from her face. The braids also disguised her biomask band.

Very deliberately, she deactivated the mask and the voice modulator. Her scaly red skin and red eyes faded, revealing her bare human face and icy green stare.

Orqiel unha'Feste, Beastmaster of the Aiphelevia, grunted and rocked on his feet as if she'd shot him. His hand tightened on his rifle until its grip creaked.

"Hello, Orqiel." Keela smiled. "I heard you were looking for me."

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CHAPTER 20

KEELA



ORQIEL UNHA'FESTE HAD INDEED BECOME AN OLD MALE.

And the thought that surfaced as I noticed the white fur on his face that caught the gleam of the dim lights in the hall was that largely thanks to him, a great many human and Ganaian children didn't live long enough to become old—or even adults.

It was a thought that made my chest feel tight and cold.

In a glance, I assessed Orqiel as I would any adversary. His grip on the rifle was steady and his gaze was keen, but he no longer had the lean strength of his earlier years. He was also favoring his left side as if his hip troubled him. His fur didn't look quite right in that area. Had he perhaps been injured and the wound not completely healed? Strange that with the Liktarr resources at his disposal he had a lingering impairment.

Of course he was larger and heavier than me, which had its advantages in hand-to-hand combat, but I would be faster and more agile. Thanks to all my sparring with Jarrix, I'd adapted to compensate for my still-healing shoulder. Judging by his physique, I doubted Orqiel had kept up his training.

I didn't need to look away to check on Jarrix's position. I sensed him ahead and to my left, taking advantage of a shadowy area between the dim hallway lights. My mate had to be beside himself with the need to eliminate the threat, but he was holding back—at least for the moment.

“You wear your hair long now,” Orqiel said, his voice still that cold monotone. “Lovely, but tactically unsound.”

As if he had the right to have an opinion about it.

Rage and disgust made my stomach clench, but I kept my expression neutral. If he wanted to test me, to see if he could get me to react emotionally instead of with discipline, I would show him I was far too experienced of a fighter to fall into that kind of trap.

Even if for a moment I felt the echo of a careless jab of the blade used by our barracks attendants to shear our hair so it was too short for an opponent to grab, I didn’t let him see any hint of pain in my eyes.

“I’m quite sure you didn’t want me brought here to discuss my hair.” I tilted my head. “But since we’re on the topic of appearances, you’re looking quite aged. The horn cap is a good addition, though. I always suspected the broken tip hurt.”

“It did. It *does*.” He shifted the rifle just enough to send adrenaline through my veins and make my fingers twitch, but he didn’t point it at me.

His infinitesimal nod was an acknowledgement of my decision to leave my weapons sheathed.

Orqiel’s lips drew back into an expression that was more grimace than grin. “I watched recordings of your departures from Daventi and Ghira Station. You had narrow escapes—much too narrow for someone with your skills. Still, you did well against the Altasians. Their deaths were mercifully quick. Their employer would have made them suffer for their failure to capture you.” His mouth twisted. “Pity you eliminated Vinian Ykottaran, though. He owed several of my acquaintances a great deal of credits.”

“Pity he stabbed me in the back and tried to steal my ship.” Out of habit, I flexed my hands to keep them loose. “Why am I here, Orqiel?”

Why did you send half the gods-damned galaxy after me? Why did your people kill N’vera?

Why didn’t you die in the arena fires like you should have?

He studied me for a long time—so long that my fingers twitched again and I wondered if I was going to get an answer.

“Two reasons,” he said finally. “Maybe three.”

Maybe three? How could he not know why he’d done this?

“There is a holo message for you,” he said before I could demand an explanation. “It is stored on a datacube hidden in my bathing chamber. If

you will permit me to get it…" He gestured to his left, at an open door within his bedroom that led to an enormous pool.

I frowned. "Why is it hidden in your bathing chamber?"

His mouth twitched into the closest thing to a smile I'd ever seen him make. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"My quarters are subject to unannounced searches," he said. "In all my years, I have never known anyone to examine a bathing pool looking for hidden caches of valuables or secrets. Have you?"

I had to admit I had not. I'd have to remember that the next time I needed to hide something well.

Who the hells would have recorded a holo message for me and given it to Orqiel unha'Feste, of all beings?

I'd come to Saistea looking for answers, and instead all I'd gotten so far was corrosive goo on my favorite boots and more questions.

With a flick of my wrist, I dropped my plasma gun into my right hand from the holster on my forearm. I aimed it squarely at his chest. "One wrong move," I said. "Just one. There are no more warnings after this one."

"Understood." To my surprise, Orqiel set the rifle down against the wall, its barrel pointed toward the ceiling. "This way."

My eyes almost went to Jarrix, but instead I kept my gaze locked on Orqiel and followed him as he made his way slowly toward his bathing chamber.

A warm touch on my shoulder signaled my mate was with us. In my peripheral vision, I watched him slip along the wall, keeping to the shadows, a deadly ally just feet away from his unsuspecting target. It was… surprisingly arousing.

What was even more surprising was that having backup didn't make me feel less capable or strong. Jarrix's presence made me feel *more* dangerous. Like I could take on the whole damn building if I had to, not just Orqiel and the other assholes on this level.

With a quiet grunt, Orqiel went to one knee next to the ostentatiously large bathing pool, which smelled fresh and clean and not at all like what I imagined the water available to ninety-nine percent of the planet's inhabitants smelled like. Movement in the water indicated it was flowing constantly, not just when he was using the pool.

I thought of how the dirt and sand of the arena had caked my body, how it had always worked its way under my nails and into every crease of skin,

and how ineffective our all-too-infrequent weak and tepid showers had been at getting us anything close to clean. The shower water had reeked too, as if it had barely been touched by the wastewater reclamation system before dripping onto our weary heads and scarred backs.

The first time I'd ever been truly clean in my life was after my first turn in the cleansing unit aboard the Wundi ship that had taken me off Ganai. My muffled sobs inside the unit were the first time I had cried in many years.

My fingers itched to kill Orqiel and shoot a dozen holes in the bottom of this bathing pool for making me remember that.

Orqiel moved aside a tile on the inside lip of the pool and withdrew a datacube from a small hollow before replacing the tile. Still on one knee, he extended his hand toward me, the cube on his palm.

Rather than come within his reach to take the cube, I gestured for him to rise by tipping up the barrel of my plasma gun.

His gaze flicked to his rifle and then back to me. With a sigh, he heaved himself to his feet. Had he wanted to use the rifle to steady himself as he stood?

"Play it," I said.

Rather than obey, Orqiel regarded the datacube on his palm as if contemplating its reasons for existence. "This was not supposed to happen here," he said, his quiet voice echoing in the chamber.

I couldn't tell if he was talking to me or thinking out loud. Maybe both.

"Was it supposed to happen on Forval IX?" I asked.

His head jerked up, surprise and suspicion in his silver eyes. I was *definitely* not supposed to know about the planned meet-up. If he was wondering how the hells I'd found out he was behind the bounty and tracked him down, he was doubly taken aback that I possessed that bit of intel.

"It seems a lot of things were supposed to happen on Forval IX," I said blandly. "But here we are instead. *Play it*."

With an annoyed grunt, he pressed his thumb to the datacube, set it on the marble floor, and stepped back.

A holographic man appeared. A human man, with graying red hair, dull eyes, and sallow skin, sitting in a chair very similar to the ones I'd seen in Orqiel's front room. Since there was no background in the hologram, I couldn't be sure if the message had been recorded in this apartment or not,

but it seemed likely it was at least in this complex. The chair's design was distinctive.

"Hello, Keela," the man said. His voice was rough. He coughed. "You don't know me, but I know you. I've watched you and your sister for a long, long time."

No.

My insides turned to ice, and I recoiled. All the gods above and below damn me to the deepest, darkest hells, I took a *full step back* from a gods-damned *hologram*.

"Turn it off," I said, hoping my voice didn't sound as desperate as I feared it did.

The recording paused automatically at the interruption. The hologram froze with the man's mouth open.

Orqiel's expression hardened. "No."

I retracted my gun up my right sleeve and dropped the weapon sheathed on my left forearm into my gloved hand. In a single fluid movement, I spun it as it extended on both ends—one with a hook and the other with blades—and then swung the bladed tip out and up to brush against his throat.

When he swallowed, his flesh moved against the metal enough that it probably left a scratch under his fur.

"Turn. It. Off." As far as I could recall, my voice had never sounded flatter or colder.

I sensed Jarrix at my back, his warmth and proximity offering support and reassurance that I wished could thaw the glacier my body had become, but even his presence offered no comfort.

Jarrix would have no idea who this man was, but he would soon if that recording continued. He'd already heard the reference to my sister. I felt as if every ounce of control I'd gained over my life was being ripped out of my hands and ground to dust.

I would rather Orqiel had wanted me for some role in the arena or to kill me for a long-ago slight than for *this*.

"No," Orqiel said again, his silver gaze locked on my face rather than the relic of both our pasts that was a centimeter away from ending his life. "I gave my word you would hear it and you *will*."

"The hells I will," I spat.

Unfazed, he raised his enormous hands palm up. "If you want the bounty taken down, you will listen. There is no other way to resolve this."

I jabbed him just enough with the blade of my nivilus to make blood drip down his neck to his chest. He didn't flinch. Tough old bastard.

"You have no right to demand this of me," I snapped. "And neither does he. How the *hells*—"

I cut myself off. I didn't want to know how this recording ended up in Orqiel's hands. I didn't want *any* of this.

I wanted to get out of this room, out of this arena, and back to the *Vespira* so Jarrix and I could leave this hellhole of a planet and the man in the hologram far, far behind. Even if it meant spending the rest of my life evading bounty hunters.

But what kind of life would that be? Not just for me, but for Jarrix. For any children we might someday have—if we even chose to have them with a bounty hanging over our heads. A life of endless danger and running. A life where I'd never be able to look for Calla because I'd bring more trouble to her than she deserved.

I squeezed the nivilus so hard that my fingers ached.

I'd told Jarrix that if it came down to a choice between leaving this planet alive and getting answers, we'd choose to live. I'd said nothing about choosing escape over being emotionally gutted.

"I owed him my life," Orqiel said, almost startling me. Maybe he'd figured out what I'd started to demand before I thought better of it. "He called in the marker. He made the request and I vowed to see it done. Even for the most repugnant of Ganaians, a life debt must be paid."

Orqiel referring to himself as *repugnant* didn't catch my attention nearly as much as what he'd said before that.

Owed. He'd *owed* this man his life. Past tense. What did that mean?

I'd survived all those years in the arena. Surely I could survive an emotional evisceration if that was what it took to free us. At least I'd have Jarrix to care for me after.

"Take down the bounty first," I said. My voice didn't sound like my own. "I give you my word I will listen to the recording in its entirety, but the bounty comes down first. Otherwise, you will die here and now and I will walk out and take my chances."

Orqiel studied my expression, my body language, my stance, even my grip on the nivilus.

Once upon a time, on a blazingly hot day on Ganai, that calculating gaze had assessed my sister and I and led to a business transaction that

brought an end to the first chapter of my life and began the next.

And once again, he took my measure and apparently decided to do business.

“Agreed.” He crouched and pressed his thumb to the datacube, activating its holographic menu. It was apparently a highly secure transmission device as well as data storage.

With a few taps and swipes of his fingers, he accessed the bounty posting. From this angle, the surveillance image of me with dark hair and eyes captured on Ghira was superimposed over the human man’s sallow face. My stomach tried to revolt. I swallowed hard.

A few more taps and a code later, the bounty’s status switched from *Active* to *Retracted*. An alert arrived on my wristcomm screen moments later confirming that the bounty had been canceled by the agent who’d posted it.

It was done.

My fingers tightened on the nivilus.

I’d left it untouched for a long time, but once I knew who we were going after, the choice of what weapon to bring had been surprisingly easy.

After painstaking cleaning and restoration, it was now in perfect condition. The blades and the tip of the hook had never been sharper. At my expert touch, the internal mechanism had expanded soundlessly and smoothly without the slightest scrape. The textured surface of the central staff was spotless and unmarred by even a fingerprint.

I could put the blades through Orqiel’s throat right now. In a single motion, I’d sever his spinal cord. He’d be dead in moments, possibly before he realized what had happened. It would be far more mercy than he deserved.

But I’d given him my word, and that had to mean something, even on Saistea.

I moved the blades away from his neck. “Play it,” I said.

He gave me a nod. With a swipe of his fingers, he closed the screen. My bounty listing vanished.

And the man in the chair began again.

“Hello, Keela. You don’t know me, but I know you. I’ve watched you and your sister for a long, long time.” He cleared his throat and flinched as he did so. “My name is Leomer Casso-Wren.”

Like his face, his full name meant nothing to me. And yet its final syllable hit my stomach like a sucker punch.

Casso-*Wren*.

The contents of the meal I'd shared with Jarrix aboard the *Vespira* before we'd disembarked threatened to surge into my mouth.

Leomer managed a thin smile that lacked any hint of humor. "You won't care about my life story, I know, but I suppose you deserve to know who I am. It will sound familiar to you, at least some of it. Born on Ganai, sold to the arenas, survived to sixteen and got my collar removed. But unlike you, I stayed on Ganai. I found work in the arenas. I became a trainer—"

He coughed again—a deep, wet, painful-sounding cough that doubled him over in his chair for almost a full minute.

When he straightened, he wiped a smear of red from his lips. "Became a trainer," he repeated hoarsely. "I was sixteen and hungry and had nowhere else to go, so I sold myself to the same people who'd hurt me. Hated myself for it, but I told myself now I had good food to eat and a soft bed. Credits to spend. And I had knowledge and skill I could pass on to others, help them survive. Maybe you understand."

I well remembered the feeling of when my own collar had come off and they dug the tracker out of my shoulder with minimal care or anesthetic. I'd been hungry too, and desperate, but I'd never given a moment's consideration to picking up a whip and becoming one of the monsters who'd ruled our lives. I'd rather have starved to death on the street. So no, I *didn't* understand. Not at all.

Orqiel was watching me instead of the hologram. I supposed he'd seen it before, maybe even helped Leomer create the recording, but he seemed far more interested in my reactions than anything else. So I did all I could to keep my face blank and not care about whatever bullshit this man—this complete and utter stranger—spewed.

After another bout of coughing, Leomer continued. "When I was twenty standard years of age, I met a woman named Marcila. She worked in the bar where I drank most nights. We were both angry and alone." His lips turned up, but again there was no humor in it. "I will spare you the details, but I'm sure you know the result. First there was you, named after my mother who passed away before I was sold. And then Calla came the following year, named for my grandmother. Both good women who died much too young."

The taste of bile made keeping my expression neural increasingly difficult. Mother had never told us anything about the man who'd sired us —not even his name, though I'd guessed our surname belonged to him since hers was different. She'd certainly never revealed the origins of our given names.

She'd rarely held us and never shown affection as far as I could recall. We were a burden to her, small creatures she sometimes fed and bathed because her neighbors seemed to expect it of her, but Calla and I had little for us at home but a roof and a sleeping pallet we shared.

In fact, I could and probably *should* simply think of her as *Marcila* on the rare occasions when I thought of her at all. The title *Mother* had meaning that Marcila never bothered to earn.

Leomer picked up a cup from beyond the recorder's view, took a long drink, and rested the cup on his knee. "Only a few months after Calla's birth, Marcila was finished with me. Really, we were finished with each other. The more distance between us, the better our lives would be, or so she told me. I found work in another city, in a different arena, and offered to take you both with me since she never…" He rubbed his jaw. "I thought she'd jump at the chance. Instead, she refused, and the local magistrate took her side. I was to give her a portion of my earnings each month for your care and she was to allow me to visit when I could and speak to you via comms. Of course, she never allowed me to see or speak to either of you. Eventually, I couldn't fight her anymore. I made her promise never to sell you as I'd been sold, and then I just had to let go."

I'd never wasted much thought on the man who'd sired me, not even enough to hate him. I had no memories of him, and Mother—*Marcila*—hadn't kept any images. She'd spoken about him only a few times, only ever in answer to my questions and only in a few words followed by a demand that I stop asking. She'd certainly never mentioned he was giving her credits each month to supposedly help keep us fed, clothed, and housed.

I hated him now, though. Hated him for becoming the thing that the child gladiators of Ganai feared and despised. Hated him for *letting go*. Hated him for extracting a promise from Marcila that she'd broken after barely waiting long enough for Calla to turn three.

Hated him for apparently saving Orqiel's life, recording this fucking message, and forcing him to hunt me down to deliver it.

Keeping that hate locked inside while Orqiel watched me was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do.

"I found out she'd sold you after it was done." For the first time, I saw actual emotion on Leomer's colorless face. His dull eyes blazed with fury. "I got a comm from an old friend at the arena. I couldn't do a damn thing by then." His fists clenched despite the flinch and shudder of pain that rolled through him. "All I could do was contact the procurer who'd made the deal and bribe him to conceal the fact you and Calla were sisters. I knew what would happen if I didn't."

My knees nearly gave out. The surge of warmth behind me was Jarrix trying to hold me. Not just hold me, but hold me *up*.

I'd always thought the fact our keepers didn't know Calla and I were sisters was due to chance. In no universe could I have imagined our sire and *Orqiel* were the real reason we'd escaped being pitted against each other in a fight to the death in a highly profitable headline match.

My hatred for them collided with shock and a bitter kind of gratitude with a force that felt like starships ramming into each other at full speed in my chest.

Leomer was still talking, though through the ringing in my ears his voice sounded as if it were coming from down a long tunnel. "I did what I could. I paid bribes to prevent you from facing each other in the arena. Your procurer made sure you got extra training and better weapons and more rations." He flung his cup beyond the eye of the recorder and pounded his fist on his leg. His breathing became labored. "I know it wasn't enough. I *know* it wasn't. But doing more would have made people suspicious. And you'd both be dead."

My ability to not show Orqiel emotion was failing. My *body* was failing. Jarrix was keeping me on my feet, his shadowy arms under mine and chest braced to my back. He didn't have much physical strength in this form, but it was enough. Without him, I would have been on my knees on the marble floor.

Leomer was coughing again, his thin body wracked and hunched over. I couldn't dredge up sympathy at the moment. I could barely breathe myself.

"The day you turned sixteen, I sent people to find you and bring you to me," he managed to say between coughs and wheezes. "I wanted to make sure none of the vultures lying in wait got you. Instead, you left them all

wounded and nearly dying in an alley and disappeared. It was almost a year before I found out you'd gotten off the planet on your own."

I stared at my nivilus as if seeing it for the first time. I'd carried it aboard the Wundi ship at the spaceport dripping the blood of the gang of hired thugs who'd followed me from my keeper's office and tried to abduct me. They'd been working for the man who'd sired me?

"By the time Calla turned sixteen, I'd given up on any kind of reunion," Leomer rasped. "I hired a crew to make sure she made it safely away from the arena. The males I sent to protect her stayed out of sight. She never knew who killed those who tried to trap her before she eventually escaped Ganai. And then you were both gone."

Someone gave him more water. I recognized the large, furry hand that handed him the cup.

Eventually, Leomer spoke again. "When the riots began, your procurer had just been employed by the arena where I lived and worked. He and I barely made it out as the gladiators turned on their keepers and trainers and the whole place burned. I paid the bribe to get us aboard a freighter and off-planet. What we did after that isn't important. But eventually we ended up on a planet called Forval IX, planning the grandest arenas the galaxy has ever seen. They would have been magnificent."

Was that a flash of pride in his reddened eyes?

Gods above, he'd gone to work for the Liktarr and been involved in the Rendex project just like Orqiel. I hadn't seen any images of him or mention of his name in the files compiled by Siber and Byx, but he'd been there in the margins of those reports, a specter from my past lurking in the shadows between the lines.

"We had big plans for that planet." Leomer's mouth twisted. "But the project was doomed from the start. *I* was doomed." He rubbed his bony chest. "There's a vine on that planet we called rettenroot. It's poisonous and it grows quickly. And it likes blood—especially human blood. I was out on a surveying mission when it got me. And there's no cure, only treatments that give you extra years."

He forced another humorless smile that faded quickly. "I've wrung all the years I can out of this body. The treatments aren't working anymore. So I went looking for the only decent things I've ever been associated with: you and Calla. But I looked too late. You may already know this, but she's gone. Joined the Alliance Defense, became a pilot. Died in action a year ago

in some hot zone on the edge of Alliance space." He swallowed visibly. "I'm sorry if I'm the one to tell you the news."

From somewhere deep within, I found the will to steel my features. I would betray *nothing* about Calla. If it came down to it, I'd die to protect her secret, though I certainly hoped it wouldn't come to that. Once this matter was settled, I was heading directly back to Trakhan and my ship, bound for that little stormy purple moon.

Leomer heaved a deep, rough breath. "I knew no other way to bring you here than to call in a favor from an old friend. I don't know how he went about it, but I suspect you're angry. And maybe beaten up a little. I doubt he asked nicely, but we don't associate with nice people. Seems like you don't either."

I let out a huff of breath that was the closest thing to a snort I could manage at the moment.

"I wish I could have been here when you came, but I waited too late. They say I have maybe a few weeks left. I think it's more like days." He coughed and wiped away another splatter of blood from his mouth. "Just as well. You'd have had to kill me. I can spare us both that, at least."

He stared at the cup as it rested on his knee. "When it's over, I'm going to leave what's left of me with Orqiel unha'Feste. I'm sure you'll remember him. I have no right to ask anything of you, Keela. But even if you hate me, maybe you'll do one thing for the worthless man who sired you and Calla. If you happen to pass by the sector where your sister died, I'd like to be left there. I don't want to be on Saistea, and I don't want to be on Ganai. I thought at one point I'd end up scattered across the rocks on Forval IX, but that didn't turn out either. Hells, maybe you'll dump me there instead. I wouldn't mind it. Some of the worst things in the galaxy are there. I'd fit right in."

While Leomer was talking, Orqiel had returned to the hidden compartment in the pool. He brought over a small, silver orb about twenty centimeters in diameter with a flat base and a datachip in a clear protective case and wordlessly set them down next to the cube.

I stared at the orb.

What was I supposed to feel right now? Because everything inside me had gone totally and completely numb. The only sensation that registered at all was Jarrix's steadfast warmth against my back.

“That’s all I need to say, then.” Leomer sank back into his chair, suddenly seeming even smaller and more frail than before. The cup nearly toppled off his thigh before he caught it with a hand that trembled so much that it was apparent even in the hologram. “It’s more than you wanted to hear, I’m sure. And I know an apology wouldn’t change anything or make you hate me less, but I *am* sorry. I’ve been sorry your entire life. I’ll die sorry.” He stared straight at the recording device, straight at me. “Thank you for listening, even if it wasn’t by choice. Sorry about that too.”

The hologram vanished.

For a long moment, the only noise in the chamber was the soft rush of flowing water. It was eerily similar to the hollow feeling in my chest and the sound of my heartbeat in my ears.

Orqiel gestured at the orb and the encased datachip on the floor between us. “Those belong to you.”

Since I could easily guess what was in the orb, I ignored it for now. “What’s on the chip?”

“I don’t know,” Orqiel said. At my narrowed gaze, he added, “He insisted it be untraceable and secure and only accessible by someone who shared his genetic signature. You can use the datacube to check it if you don’t want to risk accessing it on your ship.”

Part of me didn’t care what that datachip contained. I hadn’t wanted to hear the recording, and I hadn’t wanted to come to Saistea in the first place. But now that I was here and I’d heard and *seen* what Leomer Casso-Wren had to say for himself, kicking the thing into the pool or telling Orqiel to keep it seemed pointless.

The problem was, I didn’t want to access the chip aboard the *Vespira* or the *Nivilus*, and I didn’t trust that datacube either. But back on Trakhan, Byx was sure to have a secure way to see what was on it without endangering anyone. As long as my scans confirmed the chip was nothing more than what it appeared to be, I could take it back with me.

As for the orb…

Leomer was right: he had no right to ask anything of me, even—or perhaps most of all—to dispose of his remains. I’d never in my life cared about the fate of the man who’d sired Calla and me or where his corpse ended up. At most I might have assumed he would die or had died on Ganai and not given it another thought.

But now I'd seen the man and learned his name, knew what he looked like, what he'd sounded like, and what he'd done, and what should have been an easy decision somehow wasn't.

Maybe because so many gladiators had died on the sand and been disposed of with little ceremony or notice in a communal grave, and before Leomer was anything else he'd been one of us. Maybe for a few minutes I'd thought Calla had ended up as atoms scattered in the void between stars, which wasn't all that different. She didn't even have a grave—just a final report and a commendation apparently filed by her commanding officer.

"Back up," I said to Orqiel.

He retreated a dozen steps from the items on the floor. I let Jarrix keep an eye on him while I crouched and scanned the datachip and the orb with my wristcomm. There were no surprises. The orb contained organic matter genetically identifiable as "processed" human remains. I didn't let myself think too much about that. The encased datachip was indeed just a datachip with a genetic lock. No explosives, no trackers.

I pocketed the chip, held my nivilus in my right hand, and picked up the orb with my left. It weighed about a kilo, maybe slightly more.

My gaze slid from the orb to Orqiel. He'd stayed right where he was after I'd told him to give me space, and as far I could tell he hadn't moved a muscle. Jarrix was beside me again and a little behind, and probably looked like nothing more than a shadow to the Ganaian male, especially in the low light of the bathing chamber.

Orqiel cleared his throat and gestured at the orb. "What will you do?"

Whatever they'd been to each other—friends or colleagues or just two monsters thrown together by fate, who knew—he seemed to care what my answer was. Too bad I didn't have one yet.

"I don't know," I said.

He didn't react with anger or impatience, or bother making an argument about following Leomer's final wishes. He had to know it wouldn't do any good. He just gave me a slight nod of acknowledgement.

"All right." His gaze dropped to the nivilus. "Do it, then, and let's be done."

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CHAPTER 21

JARRIX



My mate was *hurting*, and I couldn't do a damned thing about it.

Her horror and fury at being forced to listen to her sire attempt to excuse his vile behavior and abandonment seared me to the core. To feel my magnificent mate, who faced every enemy without faltering or fear, sagging in my arms ripped my hearts out of my chest—or would have if I'd been in physical form. It was all I could do to remain a shadow when every fiber of my being screamed at me to hold her and comfort her.

The news of her sister's apparent death hadn't surprised her, so she must have known, but the way she'd locked down her emotions told me there was far more to that part of the story and she didn't want Orqiel to see any kind of reaction.

Keela's pain had settled so deeply into my being that despite being only a shadow, I could have believed multiple blades had pierced my body—not unlike the one I'd envisioned skewering Orqiel's neck or chest from the moment he'd confronted us at his bedroom door. No, before that. From the moment Keela had reacted to his image in Byx's docking bay.

But when Orqiel invited her to kill him and "be done," she didn't rush him with the nivilus or pull a different weapon.

Instead, Keela tilted her head and studied him like he was a mystery she needed to unravel.

It wasn't my place to kill him outright, but I still wanted a chance to send this despicable male to his gods for judgement. It would be my great

honor to dispose of him for her.

So why was Keela not moving? Why were her emotions suddenly so eerily calm?

“When you saw my sister and me that day, kneeling in the dirt,” she said, her voice quiet, “what did you see?”

I almost fluttered in surprise. Why would she ask him this? What did it matter?

“Two hungry children whose mother did not want them,” Orqiel said, his tone flat. “Two potentially good fighters supposedly sired by a gladiator, who’d be sold that day whether it was to me or to someone else. And I would rather it be to me.”

Keela’s expression didn’t change. All I sensed from her was a grim resignation. “Why?” she asked.

“Because some procurers took more care long-term with their purchases than others, and I was one of them. Or because I believed I could earn enough credits off your hard work and suffering to get myself away from Ganai.” He raised his palms. “Choose which explanation you believe is more true.”

She didn’t move, though her gloved fingers tightened on her nivilus. “But you didn’t leave Ganai until you had to, and then you continued to work in arenas. You still do.”

“That is true.” He shrugged and dropped his hands to his sides. “So that should answer your questions about who I am and what your next move should be.”

Did this male truly want to die by Keela’s blade? Why goad her and offer himself up in such a way, without any weapons to defend himself? If he simply wanted to end his life, he could have done so by his own hand and done it painlessly. Even if he hoped Keela would give him a quick end as he’d requested, he had to know she could just as easily make him suffer. That would have been *my* choice if it were up to me.

Maybe Keela was suspicious too. She was as expressionless as a cliff face, but a trickle of uneasiness came through our bond.

“I didn’t think much about you once I left Ganai,” she said, sliding the orb into an interior pocket of her robe with a casualness that didn’t match the tension in her body. “But I always assumed you’d died in the fires. Imagine my surprise when I found out who was behind the bounty.” Her sudden smile would have made my wings quiver with unease if I wasn’t a

shadow. “Orqiel unha’Feste, purchaser of hungry, unwanted children, is now Beastmaster of the Aiphelevia and an old, damaged male with no owner’s box in a grand arena on Forval IX.”

Orqiel’s eyes narrowed just a little.

“Maybe he’s paying back a life debt to an old friend who saved his skin back on Ganai,” she continued. “A noble act and a good way to honor a dying man’s wishes.” Her fingers flexed on the staff of her nivilus. “Or maybe it gave him an idea. Maybe now he’s looking for something novel, something the Aiphelevia hasn’t ever had on its famous black sands. Or should I say some*one?*” Her voice dropped to almost a purr. “Maybe a former Ganaian child gladiator? And then once the crowd sees one of us in action…perhaps he would hunt down more?”

Three of his thick fingers twitched. A tell.

Gods above, my brilliant mate had sniffed him out. He wasn’t just delivering a message; he was trying to capture her.

This bastard was *dead*.

A sound from the hallway—a brush of metal against the wall, just loud enough that Keela heard it too.

Orqiel backpedaled and dove to his right, moving toward a shower area with a low wall. Going for cover, or for a weapon?

In a blink, Keela transferred her nivilus to her left hand, pulled my sword from her back sheath, and held the weapon out toward me by its hilt. “Go.”

It was my fastest transition from shadow to physical form in recent memory.

Between one heartsbeat and the next, I was on my feet, wings tight to my back and my right hand on the sword’s grip.

“I love you,” I said. “Don’t be long.”

Her smile was all the answer I needed.

I took the sword and ran for the hallway as Keela charged toward Orqiel’s shower refuge with her nivilus at the ready. Both my mate and her weapon looked hungry for his blood.

Two Hardanians, an Atolani, and a J’noran formed a wall of malice in the doorway between the hallway and Orqiel’s bedroom. All armed with swords or staves and carrying shields. All fighters from the arena, wearing collars inscribed with their ranks.

And none of them were prepared for me to suddenly appear, wings flared and totally nude, and it gave me a half-second of advantage. Nakedness was almost strategic at this point.

The J’noran stared at my bare body, dumbfounded, and I took my chance to plunge my plasma-edged sword between the plates of his armor and through his neck. I relieved him of his stunner staff as he fell. It was smaller and lighter than the Havelian one I used for sparring, but it felt good in my hand.

The Hardanians were unmistakably a fighting pair. Brothers, by the look of them, with metal-studded skin and traditional kilts made of pelts. They attacked in perfect sync, their movements more elegant than any Hardanian I’d ever faced. Usually they resorted to skill mixed with brute force. These males each wielded a plasma-edged sword and stun shield as naturally as if they’d been born with them.

If they’d been five or ten years older or more streetwise, I might have had a real problem. But this polished pair lacked experience with brawling.

I, on the other hand, *excelled* at chaotic fighting. My years aboard corsair vessels ensured it. So I knocked the older brother back with my staff and targeted the younger brother with a flurry of strikes that created an opening for me to slash him across the inner thigh. Blood sprayed across the wall from a severed artery.

As he went down, his older brother roared in fury and attacked in a frenzy that was all rage and little discipline. He slashed my left shoulder and left forearm deeply enough to render that arm significantly less mobile.

No one was using guns or rifles. The building likely had scanners that would alert if someone fired a weapon. No doubt Orqiel hoped to take Keela prisoner without alerting anyone to our presence until he was ready to unveil his acquisition.

With my right fist wrapped tight around my staff, I punched the older Hardanian in the jaw hard enough to feel his bones crack. As he stumbled back, I swung up the staff and jammed its stunner end into his gut. He went down hard, the back of his head hitting the marble floor with a wet *crack*.

A metallic clang rang out from the bathing chamber, followed by a bellow of pain and the distinct sound of a heavy body hitting the marble. I grinned. It sounded like my mate was dispatching her adversary.

The Atolani had stayed back while the others fought. I’d been keenly aware of his black eyes taking in my every move, assessing and waiting for

the Hardanians to wear me down. He was older than the brothers, and had the look of a male who'd made fighting not just his career but his passion. His twin blades were long and curved, larger and heavier than the J'noran intanas Keela favored, but similarly shaped.

Rather than wait for him to come to me, I leapt over the bodies at my feet and charged, closing the distance with a flap of my wings. That usually bought me an advantage, but the Atolani met my sword with both of his own. In a quick maneuver, he locked my sword between his blades and attempted to wrench my primary weapon from my grasp.

With a hiss, I swung the stunner end of my staff at his leg, forcing him to jump aside to avoid a powerful shock. His move loosened his blades' lock on my sword and allowed me to free it to attack again, parrying and jabbing with my staff while slashing with the sword.

We traded slashes, parries, and blows as I drove him back toward the front rooms of Orqiel's quarters, where our movements would be less restricted. And maybe he figured that out too, because he abruptly stopped retreating.

Instead, he went on a frenzy of attack in the corridor.

We were more evenly matched than I preferred given my mate and I needed to finish our mission and depart as soon as possible. But as we fought, my blood sang and my horns tingled in a way that made me feel exhilarated and utterly *alive*.

Just a few meters away, in that obscenely opulent bathing chamber, my mate was taking her revenge on Orqiel, and the matching ferocity and satisfaction flooding me through our bond made this night all the sweeter.

We could not have been a better mated pair if we had formed each other from our best and most satisfying dreams.

But the longer we remained in Orqiel's quarters, the more we risked discovery. Energized by the feedback loop of battle adrenaline in our bond, I jabbed rapidly at the Atolani with my staff, putting him on his heels. His moves turned desperate.

One mistake was all I needed.

I grazed his side with the stunner, knocked his blades aside, and plunged my sword through his heart. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Breathing hard and dripping blood from a half-dozen wounds, I returned to the bedroom doorway. I gave the dying Hardanian with the severed artery

a hard hit to the forehead with the stunner end of my staff. Once he was unconscious, I delivered a single stroke of my sword, severing his head.

As I disposed of his brother in the same way, Keela dashed into Orqiel's bedroom from the bathing chamber, her bloody nivilus in one hand and a dagger in the other. She was breathless and splattered with blood, but very little of it seemed to be hers. I saw only minor cuts and a darkening bruise on her cheek that made me growl.

Her gaze swept across the males on the floor of the hallway and landed on me, where she catalogued my injuries in a glance.

"Good?" she asked, her chest heaving.

For a moment, I was in two places at once: in bed with my mate beneath me, trembling in my arms and breathing hard as she asked how I felt, and here, where we stood with our enemies dead at our feet.

"Good," I said, my voice far deeper and more gravelly than it probably should be given how much blood I was standing in. "And you, Captain?"

"I'm good." She jerked her chin at the front room where I'd left my clothing and weapons. "We need to go."

"Orqiel?" I asked.

"Dead." Her smile made all my aches vanish. "It was quicker than you would have wanted, but not as quick as he would have preferred."

"Dead was all I wanted." I wanted to kiss and hold her and hear the full story of how she'd vanquished him, but we had no time.

We returned to the front room, where I dressed quickly and returned my weapons to their sheaths beneath my cloak. My wounds ached and some still bled, but none were particularly debilitating except the cut in my left forearm. I set the pain aside as unimportant.

"Same route out?" I asked.

Keela was studying her wristcomm screen. She glanced up at me. "No. My scanner reports six beings gathered in the corridor outside. Probably awaiting Orqiel's signal."

"Then we'll take the secondary route." I held my hand over the door control panel and used my electrical field to melt all the components.

With the door secured behind us, we returned to the bedroom. Through the open doorway to the bathing chamber, I spotted Orqiel sprawled on his back next to the pool in a sizable pool of blood. His arms and legs had deep incised wounds, as did his chest and abdomen. Keela's killing blow had severed his head, which had rolled away to the edge of the pool.

He might have deserved worse, but he'd certainly deserved no better.

I drew up my hood and activated my biomask. "Ready?" I asked.

"Ready." My mate dropped her plasma gun into her hand and activated her own biomask.

"You make a lovely dragoness," I murmured, kissing her blood-splattered hair before drawing her hood up over her head.

"And you're a very handsome Haboori." With a wink, she led me to the bedroom's exterior doors and out onto the balcony overlooking the deserted training grounds. In just a few hours they would be filled with fighters enduring predawn training, but for the moment, silence reigned in the arena complex.

Keela ran her hands up my shirt, curled her fingers against my chest, and leaned close to murmur, "Back to our ship, Weapons Master. We have celebrating to do."

Instantly, my cocks stiffened. "Of course, Captain."

I wrapped my arms around her and lifted her until she could lock her legs around my waist. My left arm throbbed, but I still had more than enough strength to hold her, especially with the help of my tail, which I wrapped around her as well. "Do not let go," I said roughly.

She stared into my eyes with her red dragon gaze. "I don't plan on it."

I ran a few steps, planted my foot on a low table, and with a powerful flap of my wings leapt over the railing and into the night.

Keela's gasp was pure exhilaration.

In my dreams, I had flown with my mate in my arms into the skies of my homeworld, soaring over beautiful pink lakes and waterfalls and brilliantly colored trees. Every such dream had been a promise of the life we would have together once our bounties were dealt with and we resolved whatever matter had brought Keela to Ghira Station to meet with N'vera.

I would never have chosen the noxious urban air of Saistea for our first flight. But as we put distance between ourselves and the dangers of the Aiphelevia, I would not have traded this journey for anything—not even a flight on beautiful Fortusia. With my own arms and wings, I was carrying my mate to safety after she'd slain her enemy. What greater or better purpose could they serve than this?

I couldn't indulge myself and extend our flight time, as much as I might have enjoyed soaring with my mate through the towering, brightly lit city skyline. We needed to get to our ship and away from this place as quickly as

possible. I heard no shouts or alarms, and quick glances down showed no one was giving us any notice since our dark cloaks blended so well with the night sky, but every moment we were in the air, I was keenly aware of our vulnerability.

My wristcomm showed the fastest aerial route to our ship, but I didn't need it. All my instincts drew me toward our safe haven like a magnet. I swooped between buildings, over roofs, and along narrow alleys with my mate held so tight to my chest that I felt every beat of her racing heart. Her little gasps and squeaks made me feel like a god of the skies—one with dripping fangs and a pair of fully engorged cocks yearning to be buried deeply inside my perfect mate.

When the warehouse came into sight between two buildings, I gave Keela a reassuring squeeze and adjusted my trajectory to aim for the open roof.

She deactivated her biomask and smiled up at me. Her eyes had a bruised look that along with the pangs in my chest reminded me of everything she had suffered tonight. I felt the shape of the orb hidden inside her cloak too, and hoped we would soon be rid of it so my mate could begin to heal.

Still, for all the pain that haunted her lovely green gaze, it was a more beautiful sight than anything on any world, even my lush home planet.

"Well done, my bat," Keela murmured. Her expression softened. "You know, I—"

A plasma shot punched through my right wing. Agony whited out my vision. Two more shots clipped and then punctured my left wing.

We dropped from the sky like a stone.

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CHAPTER 22

JARRIX



KEELA DIDN'T SCREAM.

Instead, she held onto my waist loosely with one arm, twisted her upper body, and fired back at the source of the shots while I fought through the pain to force my damaged wings to extend and control our tumble out of the sky.

My mate was shooting at something on the street, but all I could see was the mountain of broken glaz and twisted metal in front of us.

Time slowed.

My damaged wings couldn't get us around or up and over the enormous rubble pile. But without her weight, I could *just* clear its peak.

Gods above, I had to drop her now onto one of the smaller piles of debris and trash, or we'd both be impaled on those deadly spikes of metal and glaz ahead of us and she'd die in my arms.

It was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do in my life, and it hurt so badly that in that moment I wished for my own death, but I unwrapped my tail and forced my arms to let go.

With a startled gasp, she fell.

Hearts thundering in my ears and ice in my veins, I watched her plummet three or four meters toward a pile of debris and partly burned garbage. And I prayed to Byx's gods and Felina's goddess as I had never prayed before.

The horrible sound of my mate hitting the trash pile made bile surge into my mouth. And the silence and stillness that followed…

With a few flaps of my wings that were more like agonized spasms, I cleared the pile of jagged metal with less than a meter to spare. I half glided, half fell the rest of the way to the dirty floor of the warehouse, landing somehow on my feet before staggering and nearly collapsing.

Pain in my chest made me look down. In my torment over letting go of Keela, I'd clawed through my clothing and into my own flesh above my hearts without even realizing it. Blood dripped down my fingers.

"*Mate*," I rasped.

The little lump of clothing on the trash pile didn't move.

Jonor stepped into the warehouse through a hole in the wall, aiming a pulse rifle at my chest. The ruined building itself had no lights, but the weak glow of the decaying city around us offered more than enough illumination to see a cybernetic upper right arm where a thickly muscled flesh-and-blood one used to be. He wore armor on his torso and tactical pants with armor plates.

I didn't have time to wonder why the *Vespira's* repulser field didn't seem to affect him. As he fired, I pulled my own gun and dove for cover behind a heavy, thick slab of collapsed ceiling. His bolt of plasma punched a hole in the floor where I'd been standing a moment before.

Fear for Keela and the agony in my wings made it difficult to focus, but I shoved everything aside and returned fire. My volley of shots hit his personal shield, driving him back against the crumbling warehouse wall but leaving him uninjured.

"I've come to collect on your bounty, Tal Noku," he called out mockingly, drawing out the syllables of my name. "And it looks like I'll be taking back something else with me as well."

He fired again—not at me this time, but toward Keela. The shot hit the pile of debris less than a meter from her still form, creating a smoking hole and a small fire. My mate remained motionless.

I clutched at the bond between us, needing to feel her, to know she was alive. And she *was* alive—I sensed that much—but I felt nothing from her but a strange kind of coldness. Was this how she would feel to me when she was unconscious?

With a snarl, I shot Jonor again and again, but the shield he was using was better than any I'd seen. Where most shields would have overloaded by

the third or fourth direct hit, my plasma bolts only rocked him on his feet and made him stumble.

My frustration must have shown, because he grinned. His broken fang was now missing entirely.

“It’s good tech, right?” Even in the low light, his eyes gleamed, wild with a mixture of glee and madness. “I stole it. Stole a stealth ship too. Captain Sjer flushed you out from Trakhan and I followed you here. Your ship is good, but mine is *better*.”

I glanced at Keela, but she still hadn’t moved. My hearts hurt so fiercely that I could barely breathe.

“Sjer wants me to comm him and report where you are so the whole crew can come get a piece of you, but you’re *mine*.” Jonor spat on the ground. “I told you I would be the one to skin you alive. So I’m taking your hide back to the *Fancy*, along with your dying mate. I’ll put her in the medpod on my ship. She’ll be worth something to someone, even when we’re all done with her.”

He was trying to bait me into attacking and giving him a clean shot—I knew it as well as I knew I was going to cut him into the smallest pieces for causing Keela to be injured and threatening her.

Jonor’s gaze slid to the rear of the warehouse where the *Vespira* remained cloaked. “On the other hand, I like that ship you borrowed from Trakhan. Tell you what: you give it to me and I’ll leave your mate here after I kill you. Maybe she’ll live if someone finds her in time.”

There was no chance he was going to let Keela live, and we both knew it.

“Fuck you, Jonor,” I rasped. “You’re not putting one finger on my ship *or* my mate.”

All humor vanished from his expression, and his face hardened as he wagged the barrel of his rifle. “Time to make your choice, *Tal*. Keep fighting, or hand over the ship. Either way you’re dead, but if you make the right decision at least the human might get a chance to fuck someone else someday.”

I’d take a little extra time killing him for that last remark.

Keela groaned. The pathetic and pained sound made my hearts claw at the inside of my ribs. But it sounded exaggerated to my ears, and it clashed sharply with the smug satisfaction and reassurance that suddenly filled our bond with welcome warmth.

When she moved and groaned again, Jonor snarled and swung his rifle in her direction. Why wasn't she staying still and quiet? Was she trying to distract him and give me an opportunity to attack?

A dark blur shot out of the shadows.

With a hiss that sent a chill up my spine, a rotund creature with opalescent black skin and a wide-open maw full of long, serrated teeth launched itself off a crumbled section of wall and landed on Jonor's upper chest, making him stagger.

Gods above, it was *Zwee*.

She sank every one of those vicious teeth into Jonor's face. He screamed.

Reflexively, his hand tightened on his rifle, loosing a dozen wild shots of deadly plasma. Half of them sizzled against the *Vespira's* shields, two narrowly missed Keela as she crawled for cover, and another went straight through the slab of ceiling in front of me and left a burning hole in my cloak.

Still screaming, Jonor dropped the rifle and used all four of his hands to try and dislodge the irate gorga from his face and torso while she set about devouring him one mouthful at a time.

Finally he fell onto his back, his screams turning to gurgles. I staggered to my feet, made it to where the rifle had fallen, and threw it as far and as hard as I could into the ruins of the warehouse.

Then I left Zwee to her feast and headed for my mate.

Keela lay on her side near the debris pile where she'd fallen, gun in one hand and the other pressed to her belly under her cloak. The smell of her blood overwhelmed the odors of the warehouse and this rotten city.

I deactivated my biomask, threw back my hood, and fell to my knees beside her. Her eyes were full of pain, her lips pale and bloodless, but she managed to reach up to cup my face with her bloody hand.

"I told you gorgas are handy to have," she gasped.

"You were right, Captain." My voice was rough. "As always."

Swallowing hard, I lifted her cloak. A shard of glaz larger than my hand protruded from the left side of her abdomen. Her attendant's uniform was soaked with blood.

My own gut clenched and I nearly doubled over, as if it were my flesh that had been wounded and not hers. Gods above, I wished it were mine.

I started to rip my sleeve to bare my arm so I could share my blood, but she patted my cheek.

“No need for that, little bat,” she said. “My nanobots are slowing the bleeding. I’m not going to die.”

At some point, Jonor had stopped making noises. The only sounds from that direction were crunching and slurping, and I tried to ignore it.

“I’m so sorry.” I lowered my forehead to hers and breathed her in. “I didn’t want to let go of you.”

She stroked my lip with her thumb and smiled just a little. “I know, but you had to. Ground rule number nine, remember? We don’t die on shithole planets.”

I smoothed hair back from her lovely face. “I remember.”

I did not deserve this magnificent female, but I’d happily spend my life trying every day to earn the honor.

Despite her pain, her eyes twinkled. “If it makes you feel any better, *I* would have dropped *you* if the situation were reversed.”

Knowing she didn’t blame me didn’t ease my guilt or the pain in my hearts. Nothing would, until she was healed and healthy once more and in my arms.

“We both need to get to medbay.” Keela grimaced. “And get the hells off this planet.”

Taking extreme care to jostle her as little as possible, I scooped up my mate and headed for our ship. “What about Zwee?”

We glanced in that direction and shared a wince. Despite Jonor’s armor, the gorga was making quick work of his body.

“Never get between a gorga and her meal,” Keela said with a fleeting smile. “Poor thing…he’ll probably give her indigestion.”

I kissed her forehead. “How did she get out?”

She raised her arm to indicate her wristcomm. “I opened the hatch on the other side of the ship and provided a little distraction to give her a chance to get close without getting shot. She did the rest.”

“Simply magnificent,” I murmured.

Her pale lips quirked. “Me, or Zwee?”

“Both.”

Keela closed her eyes and rested her head against my chest. “I’m probably going to pass out soon,” she murmured. “Get us on our way back to Trakhan.”

My hearts twinged. “I will,” I promised.

Cradling my precious mate, I circled our cloaked vessel to the open hatch hidden on its far side. Climbing aboard the *Vespira* felt nothing like boarding the *Nivilus*, but I breathed much easier within the safety of the ship.

Once inside, I rushed straight to medbay and placed Keela gently into the emergency medpod. Despite her earlier claim that she was in no danger of dying, every indicator light blazed red the moment the scanners detected the severity of her injuries.

I stroked my mate’s soft, pale cheek. “Rest, Captain. You’re safe.”

Keela murmured something unintelligible. Her lashes fluttered, and then her head rolled to the side. She’d held onto to consciousness just long enough to know I’d carried her to safety.

With a medic’s practiced efficiency, I removed and set aside all her weapons, including her bloodied nivilus. I also took off her biomask and her wrist bracer, leaving her ruined clothes for the pod to disintegrate.

I secured the mysterious datachip until we could access it safely. The orb containing Leomer’s remains I put in a medbay compartment and closed the door to hide it from my view so I was less tempted to leave it on a garbage heap outside.

“Treatment commencing,” the medpod’s AI said once I finished divesting my mate of everything important. “Please stand clear of the pod.”

Wings battered, tail drooping, and hearts heavy as stone, I backed away, bracing myself against the counter behind me.

“Welcome back, First Mate Nadal,” Lumos said as the medpod’s lid slid closed. “As the captain is indisposed, you are in command. Shall I prepare for immediate departure?”

“Not yet.” I scrubbed my face with my hands before remembering they were covered in warehouse goop and the blood of four gladiators, myself, and my mate. Gods, I needed a long cycle in the cleanser. “I need you to scan and find a stealth ship that’s somewhere nearby. The male who’s being eaten outside has access to it, so there may be a traceable signal.”

“Scanning.”

The agony in my wings and the adrenaline crash had left me feeling fuzzier than I would like. I opened compartments until I found what I was looking for: painkillers and a mild stimulant to clear my head. I jammed the

transdermal injectors to my neck one after the other. The sudden absence of pain was a welcome rush.

“I have located the ship two hundred meters from our position,” Lumos said. “As you suggested, its pilot maintained a live signal with the vessel’s artificial intelligence system. The ship is a Fortune-class stealth runner. Very impressive tech.”

“Apparently so.” I was far too angry about Keela’s injuries and that gods-damned recording she’d been forced to watch to try to keep the accusatory tone out of my voice. “Despite all our precautions, it managed to follow us here from Trakhan.”

There was a beat of silence that felt like surprise or shock before Lumos replied. “My sincere apologies, First Mate Nadal.” The AI actually sounded contrite. “I accept full responsibility for my failure to detect the vessel and for endangering you and Captain Farai. I have logged this incident in my permanent record.”

“You can make it up to me by getting me on that ship and accessing its comms,” I said. “I don’t care how impressive the tech is. I need to get aboard and send a message.”

“I will ensure you can,” Lumos said in a vicious tone that almost made me feel sorry for the other ship’s AI. “Please see to your own wounds in the meantime. All necessary equipment to treat your injuries is stowed in medbay compartments one and three.”

“Thanks.”

Before I followed Lumos’s recommendations, I forced myself to leave Keela’s side long enough to step outside and call for Zwee.

The gorga hurled herself through the hatch moments later, blood-smeared and warbling in contentment.

I crouched and rested my hand on her back as my mate often did. The gorga’s warbling increased in both volume and intensity. “Well done, Zwee,” I said warmly. “I’ll make sure you get a grand feast when we get back to Trakhan.” I curled my lip in disgust. “Something that tastes much better than a Barmian.”

With a pleased trill, she scurried off in the direction of the crew cabin where she’d made her temporary nest.

I returned to medbay, stripped quickly, and shoved my torn and bloody clothing into the ship’s waste reclamation unit. After using some medical

cleansing wipes to clean off the worst of the blood, I pulled on some pants and focused on repairing my damaged wings first.

The holes in my wings throbbed despite the painkillers I'd injected. This was not the first time I'd been shot with plasma bolts in my wings, but these injuries seemed a hundred times worse because they'd almost cost me Keela.

Every time I looked at the ragged holes, I relived the sensation of plummeting from the sky with Keela in my arms. My stomach churned with the gut-wrenching memory of dropping her onto a trash pile where a hidden shard of glaz had nearly killed her. The fact that falling onto the mountain of jagged metal and broken glaz would certainly have killed both of us didn't do much to ease the guilt that gnawed at my insides.

Within the medpod, my wings could have been fully healed within a few hours. Instead, I healed the burns with a dermal regenerator and patched the holes with a finely webbed membrane that would expedite my enhanced healing process and allow almost normal function, including flight.

As I was stretching my wings and testing the pliability of the membranes, Lumos spoke. "First Mate Nadal, I have successfully used the deceased pilot's damaged but still operational wristcomm to gain access to the stealth runner's systems. After a fashion, I was able to…*subdue* its artificial intelligence system. You may board the ship to send a communication, or utilize their comm systems through me."

"Good work, Lumos." I fluttered my wings to loosen the residual stiffness and then folded them behind my back. "I'll send the message from our cockpit, then. It is *essential* that it appears genuinely sent from that ship and has no trace of our unauthorized access to their comms."

"I assure you no trace will be present," the AI stated.

In the *Vespira's* cockpit, I dropped into the co-pilot's seat just as the comm screen activated. It mirrored the panel aboard the stealth runner—including the previous comms between Jonor and Sjer.

As Jonor had claimed, Sjer had allowed him to steal the stealth runner and follow us alone, with the agreement that as soon as our destination was reached, he'd send a simple coded transmission with the rendezvous coordinates. The *Fleeting Fancy* would wait in orbit around Trakhan until then, pretending to believe we were still on the outpost.

Their subsequent discussion of what Sjer and the rest of the *Fancy's* crew planned to do to me as payback for my actions on Ghira Station was both illuminating and highly creative.

Their comms had ended as soon as Keela and I had departed aboard the *Vespira*, probably to help ensure we didn't detect the stealth runner's presence on our tail. As angry as I was that their ploy had worked and nearly resulted in Keela's death, at least I could use it to my advantage now.

Posing as Jonor, I sent the encrypted coordinates for the stealth runner's location. Minutes later, Sjer sent a reply: a coded phrase that confirmed the *Fancy* was on its way to Saistea at top speed.

I slumped back in my seat and let out a breath. "Lumos, send a secure message to Deckmaster Byx and request confirmation that the *Fancy* has departed the outpost."

"Affirmative. Sending now."

While the AI contacted our Wundi friend, I hauled myself to my feet. I didn't *need* to check on Keela, but every moment I spent away from her side left me feeling incomplete, as if I were missing a limb.

On my way to medbay, I stopped by the galley to make a mug of tea. Like the coffee aboard the *Vespira*, it was sourced directly from Bacora and exquisite. Perhaps I could persuade Byx to part with a case.

Tea in hand, I peeked in on our heroic Zwee. She was back to her natural pink color, clean of Jonor's blood, and curled up in the exact center of her bedding nest with her eyes closed and her antennae drooping. When I paused in the cabin doorway, she opened one eye briefly and let out a sleepy little warble. Adorably lethal indeed.

Yes, our guardian would have nothing but the best meals from now on. I'd see to it personally.

In medbay, I gathered the rest of the equipment and supplies I needed to heal my remaining wounds and settled into the medic's seat next to the pod.

"First Mate Nadal, I have received confirmation from Deckmaster Byx that the *Fleeting Fancy* has left Trakhan Outpost at a high rate of speed," Lumos reported. "He believes you are clear to return via the Mborsi shipping lane. Shall I disconnect from the stealth runner and prepare our vessel for departure?"

I considered. "Can you set a self-destruct sequence on the runner that would be triggered when someone attempts to access its controls from inside the cockpit?"

“It would be my pleasure to do so,” Lumos said, sounding positively smug. “Automatic hatch lock on trigger, followed by a three-second countdown?”

“Perfect.”

“Perhaps you would like to record a personal message that would appear on the cockpit screens prior to detonation?”

I grinned, though no one but the AI was present to see it. “You are cold-blooded, Lumos.”

“I will take that as a compliment, First Mate Nadal.”

“It was intended as one.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “No recording. I’ll be satisfied knowing they’re dealt with.”

“Very well, sir.” The AI was clearly disappointed by my decision. “It will take me only a few minutes to set up the auto-destruct and prepare for departure.”

“Good. Set course for Trakhan and maintain cloaking and shadow mode for the duration of the journey.”

“Affirmative.”

With my wings already attended to, I used a dermal regenerator on the deep cut on my left arm. Thanks to my genetically enhanced ability to heal, the wound had already stopped bleeding and begun to close. Ordinarily I might have simply used the same membrane I’d applied to my wings, but the instinct to ensure I was ready and able to defend my mate drove me to expedite the process.

“Self-destruct sequence set and the *Vespira* is ready to depart,” Lumos said as I finished healing the cut and took a long drink of my tea before moving on to the next wound. “Permission to launch?”

“Granted,” I said, setting my mug aside. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

I barely felt the lurch when the vessel lifted off. I couldn’t recall experiencing a smoother launch on any ship I’d ever traveled on.

For all this ship’s tech and comforts, though, I craved the familiar colors, tiny rooms, basic food synth, and stiff co-pilot’s seat of the *Nivilus*. Keela’s pride and joy. Our home.

And just a few minutes later, we were slicing unseen through Saistea’s upper atmosphere on our way back to where we belonged.

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CHAPTER 23

KEELA



NORMALLY, EVERY TIME I WOKE FROM TREATMENT IN A MEDPOD, I USED the cleanser, dressed, and went straight to the cockpit. Sometimes I made myself coffee and a meal, sometimes just the coffee. But I never allowed myself to lie down and go to sleep because while I seldom dreamed while undergoing treatment, my post-medpod dreams were always nightmares.

This time, as the pod shut off, I let Jarrix scoop me up half-awake, carry me to our quarters aboard the *Vespira*, and hold me snugly against his chest while he cooed me to sleep.

I slept very deeply for a very long time, and I dreamed very good dreams.

In one dream, Jarrix cradled me in a warm pool in the arboretum on Trakhan, humming a sweet melody as the lovely bioluminescent plants surrounding the pool gently poured clean, glowing, fragrant water from their blossoms and leaves onto our heads and shoulders. All the blood and filth on our bodies left by our adventure on Saistea washed away, leaving us clean.

Somehow, my skin had changed color to match Jarrix's dark gray flesh. Rather than be alarmed, I was perfectly at peace with the change. And even more wondrous, our skin was covered in sparkling stars and colorful cosmic dust that swirled as if we'd been formed out of space itself.

In the dream, Jarrix caressed my body lovingly. His touch made the stars in my skin twinkle even more brightly.

“Look at us, mate,” he murmured in my ear. “We are a star nursery.”

I marveled at our bodies as our skin glowed and glimmered like the nebula beyond the arboretum. When I touched the scar on my stomach where the shard of glaz had impaled me, it flared brilliantly white. All my other scars glowed too. They were somehow beautiful now instead of grim reminders of a hard and dangerous life. I’d been transformed—or perhaps I was seeing myself as I really was beneath all the layers of scars and armor I’d worn for so long.

A wondrous, comforting warmth that had nothing to do with the heated pool and everything to do with the male at my side filled me.

The comfort remained when I finally opened my eyes. I found myself in bed, wrapped tightly in a cocoon made of Jarrix’s arms and wings. His tail was coiled around my calf as if he needed every part of me to be surrounded as much by every part of himself as possible.

Only the faintest amber light from the ship’s interior made it past his beautiful black wings, but it was enough for me to see Jarrix’s face.

My last memory before I’d passed out in the medpod was of him bent over me, his grave face streaked with blood and his eyes deeply shadowed with worry and guilt. His terribly damaged wings had nearly dragged on the deck behind him.

Now he breathed deeply and evenly, his forehead nearly touching mine and his expression blessedly serene as his chest rumbled quietly. I couldn’t tell if he’d been able to fully heal his wings and the rest of his injuries, but I hoped so.

We both smelled clean and not of blood or warehouse filth. In fact, I smelled like lightly fragranced soap and not just as if I’d been sanitized by the medpod or cleaned in the cleanser. Jarrix had *bathed* me while I’d slept, and he’d been so tender and gentle with me that I hadn’t even woken up.

I had to sit with that realization for a few moments.

While Jarrix enjoyed watching over me while I slept, I was rarely awake while *he* was asleep. His instincts kept him from falling asleep until I did, and since he required less rest, he was always up and about before me, or at least already awake when I opened my eyes. This was the first time I’d really gotten to study him while he was sleeping.

Gods, he was beautiful.

His cheekbones were sharp, his lashes were long and thick and black, and up close his eyelids had a soft lavender tint that I somehow hadn’t

noticed before. Maybe I could be forgiven for missing that detail when there were so many other striking features to take in, from those horns—so perfect for hanging onto for dear life—to the tips of the claws on his feet.

He was a feast for all my senses, in fact. Skin like the finest suede that I couldn't imagine I'd ever tire of caressing. The taste of rare black-market spices with hints of smoke. The delicious and chilling ferocity of his snarls sounded as good to me as the comfort of his rumbles and coos.

I inhaled, pulling his warm smoke-and-spice scent into my lungs. I'd once imagined how good his smell would be on my pillow, and it was in fact perfect. But now his scent had settled deeply into me, into my skin, my bones, my muscles, and my blood. Into my heart and soul.

I watched my mate sleep peacefully and let my mind drift.

I have found you in all the vastness of the universe, Jarrix had said to me in the maintenance shaft on Ghira Station. In that moment, I'd thought it was an utterly ridiculous statement, especially when he'd said it while on his knees, his expression open and unguarded and his throat deliberately pressed to the tip of my blade.

It was anything but ridiculous now. Now, I looked at him and felt the same way.

Despite all my wanderings across the galaxy, I'd never felt lost. But for the first time in my life, I felt *found*.

My vision shimmered. When I blinked, a few tears escaped, trickling down toward my hairline and along the side of my nose until a drop formed on the tip before falling to the pillow.

Jarrix's nostrils flared. His eyes snapped open and swept over my face.

The moment his gaze landed on those little drops, he pulled me against his rumbling chest, tucked my head under his chin, and began to coo softly in the way I preferred over the louder, more forceful version he'd employed the first time he'd comforted me as we were leaving Ghira Station. I hadn't needed to verbalize my preference—he'd just instinctively known what I wanted and needed.

For a long, long time, I let my tears fall. I didn't sob or tremble or wail. Well before Marcila had sold Calla and me, I'd learned not to let anyone hear me cry. Life in the arena barracks had brutally reinforced that lesson. Tears only ever led to more suffering, never comfort, so they had to be kept silent and hidden.

My tears were safe with Jarrix, but some habits were likely never to go away. Besides, this wasn't a violent cry—it was a release, like an exhalation or a sigh.

He cooed and stroked my back with slow, even caresses up and down my spine. I curled my fingers into his bare chest, scratching him lightly whenever a memory or unpleasant remembered word twinged in my chest. His rumbles never grew louder or softer and the rhythm of his hearts remained even. He was steady. Constant. A promise made flesh and bone.

Eventually, the last of my tears made the slow trek down my face to drip onto either his chest or his wing below us. If both of us lying on his wing had become uncomfortable, he didn't let on.

I took a deep, unsteady breath and pressed a kiss to his sternum, feeling his double heartbeat against my lips as his coo faded. "Thank you," I murmured into his hot skin.

"No thanks are needed," he said quietly into my hair. "I have no greater honor than to comfort, protect, and heal you. And to love you."

He'd said it so easily in Orqiel's bathing chamber, and now he'd said it again in the safety and warmth of his wing cocoon. And though our mate bond didn't allow me to sense his emotions, I didn't need it to know and feel how he loved me. His love was in everything he said and did.

It was far more difficult to know my own heart than his.

I'd experienced very little love in my life, other than my love for my sister and my ship. And perhaps even with a plasma gun to my head I couldn't have described what I felt for Jarrix and whether it qualified as *love*.

But if it came down to it, I'd melt down a reactor and destroy an orbital station for him without a second thought. For him, I'd put on a shimmery gown and high-heeled shoes that had no sheaths for hidden daggers. I'd even let him cook my meals and remodel my cabin aboard the *Nivilus* because his instincts demanded he provide me with food and a nest.

I let him feel all that through our bond, and this time his rumble grew until the entire bed vibrated.

Jarrix peppered gentle kisses all over my face, with special attention to the wet trails left by my tears. I closed my eyes and reveled in his little affectionate touches and the security I felt at his side.

When he tucked some loose hair behind my ear and cradled my cheek with one enormous hand, I opened my eyes and found him gazing back at

me.

“Can you tell me what happened with Orqiel?” he asked.

I’d intended to tell him the moment we got back to the ship and departed Saistea, but Jonor’s ambush had derailed that plan. And I had some questions of my own about what had happened after I’d passed out.

“I’m sure you could tell he was trying to goad me into attacking him,” I said with a wry shake of my head. “That didn’t make sense to me, so I immediately suspected an ulterior motive for wanting me to get within striking distance. He had an obvious one, and it turned out to be the right guess.”

“Capturing you for the arena,” Jarrix grated out, his hands flexing in anger. “What did he have in that shower area he kept backing toward?”

“A stun field and a human-sized restraint collar.” I barked a humorless laugh, remembering Orqiel’s fury and frustration when I didn’t chase him into his trap. “He had a few weapons back there too, but he clearly hadn’t trained consistently. He obviously counted on the stun field and the gladiators you disposed of to either knock me out or beat me into submission so he could snap that collar on.”

Rather than touch my throat to confirm it remained bare and collar-less, I ran my hands up Jarrix’s chest. I dragged my thumbs lightly over his nipple piercings to banish his scowl and make him rumble in a more pleasant way.

“He got close enough to the edge of the stun field for me to use the hook on my nivilus,” I added, recalling his bellow when my hook speared deep into his thick, furry hide and the flesh beneath. “After that, he didn’t last long. I wanted to get to you.”

At Jarrix’s frown, I flicked his chin with my fingertip. He blinked at me, startled. “I have no regrets,” I stated. “He didn’t matter. I told you what mattered before we stepped out of this ship: leaving that planet alive. I haven’t changed my mind. As for the recording…” I took a deep breath. He stroked my cheek with his thumb. “Watching it hurt,” I said quietly. “You know it did. I haven’t even begun to process what I saw and heard. I’ll need time before I can talk about it, but I *will* talk about it.”

He kissed me gently. “Whenever you are ready to talk, I will be here to listen.”

I didn’t need to ask what he’d done with the orb or the datachip; I knew he would have put them somewhere secure. But I *did* need to know how

things stood now that we'd left Saistea.

"What happened after I went into the pod?" I asked.

I listened in amazement while he described how Lumos had found Jonor's ship and accessed its comms so Jarrix could send the vessel's coordinates to Sjer. My smile grew when he revealed the *Fancy* had been lured away from Trakhan and the stealth runner had become a deadly trap for his former crew when they arrived on Saistea.

"You're brilliant, you know," I said, cupping his face in both my hands. "In fact, I think I'll keep you."

"I could ask for nothing more." Eyes glowing softly, he turned his head to kiss my palm. "But I have many skills beyond setting traps and luring privateer crews to their well-earned doom."

He captured my hand and kissed his way from my wrist to my inner elbow, then ran his nose along the inside of my bicep to my shoulder. I shivered, suddenly very aware that I was nude and he wore only a loose pair of pants.

"Just what are these additional skills you claim to possess?" I asked, grasping his horn to draw him above me as I rolled to my back. "Would you care to provide a demonstration?"

He brushed his lips to mine and murmured, "I am, as always, a servant to my captain's pleasure."

My "*Oh*" came out as a ragged gasp.

Gently, he raised me with one arm, freed his wings, and settled me on my back so he could go to his hands and knees above me.

When he spread his wings fully, I finally saw the webbed membranes on the areas that had been hit by plasma bolts. The burns had already healed, and inside the protective membranes the holes were closing.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the memory, but the terrible sight of his beautiful wings punctured and burned played out in my mind anyway.

Damn it, I should have been on the lookout for danger as we approached the warehouse. I never should have let my guard down and allowed Jonor get the drop on us like that.

No doubt awash in my self-recrimination through our bond, Jarrix bent and kissed my brow before touching his forehead to mine.

"Love, I understand," he said. "Every time I close my eyes I see you falling from my arms. I can't look at you without seeing what that shard of glaz did to you." He rested his hand on the faint scar on my stomach. "I will

have nightmares for all my years. For a while, I'll need to touch you and keep you close so I can be sure I didn't lose you." His expression grew fierce. "But we are here, and we are *alive,* and I love you with all my hearts and soul."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Then show me," I commanded.

With a growl, he lowered his head and poured all of himself into a ferocious kiss that made my head spin and my toes curl into the bedding. His tongue demanded entry to my mouth and I gave it, allowing him to plunder me as I'd ravaged him during our first kiss in my cargo bay.

He stole my breath when he drew my bottom lip into his mouth to suck gently. When he pricked it with his fangs just enough to inject a trace of his mating fluid, a wave of warmth rolled through my body, lighting up every nerve in its wake.

My back arched and I moaned, my knees falling open to welcome his hips between my thighs. I was already dripping for him, and had been from the moment he'd declared himself a servant to my pleasure.

He groaned and released my lip. "Gods, your scent drives me mad." He gazed into my eyes. "My mate, will you accept my bite?"

I didn't need to think about it. I shoved my fingers into his hair and dragged his mouth to my throat. "Yes. *Please* bite me."

He chuckled against my sleep-warmed skin. "Not just yet, Captain. I have a very particular vision about how and *where* I'd like to give you my mating bite."

I pulled his hair to make him raise his head. "You and your visions, Jarrix To'vok." I scowled. "If you're going to force me to wait, you'd better make it worth my time."

He nipped my earlobe with his fang. Another drop of mating fluid made me moan and writhe. "I assure you I will *more* than make the wait worth it."

He captured my wrists and pinned them to the bed above my head with one hand as he kissed his way down my throat to drag his tongue along my collarbone. Gods, I'd survived Orqiel's plotting and Jonor's plasma bolts, but the way Jarrix's every touch sparked and tingled like electricity on my skin might be the death of me. Goosebumps prickled over my entire body.

His other hand slid down my belly toward my dripping pussy. The moment he slid his fingertip gently over my clit, I cried out and bucked my hips. His grip on my wrists tightened just a little.

“You’re so sensitive today,” he murmured, his lips traveling to my breast so he could flick my nipple with his tongue at the same time he brushed his fingertips back and forth over my clit. Every little touch sparked like static. “I like it.”

I whimpered and ground against his hand. “Jarrix…gods…”

He raised his hand and showed me his glistening fingers. “Look at this,” he said, and brought them to his mouth to suck them clean. He growled. “Delicious. You’re soaking the bed already, lovely Keela. But I don’t want to waste a drop.”

In one smooth movement, he rolled to his back, picking me up and settling me astride his hard stomach with his hands on my hips. His hard cocks pressed against my ass through the thin fabric of his pants.

“Cover me in your sweetness,” he said, urging me to move. “I need every inch of my skin to smell like my fearless mate.”

I let my head fall back as he glided me up and down his chest and abdomen, coating himself in my arousal. The ridges of his muscles and the rumbling in his chest provided perfect friction against my swollen clit and sensitive folds.

I wanted him to make me come—I *needed* him to make me come. But the memory of his devastated expression when he saw the glaz shard in my belly and how gorgeous and desperate he looked beneath me as he murmured pleas for me to give him more of my scent made me let him take what he needed.

When his hands finally tightened on my waist, sending a sizzle of electricity through me, I opened my eyes to meet his hungry gaze.

“Sit on my face, my love,” he grated out. “I want to drown in you.”

I managed to nod. In a flash, he picked me up and settled me above his mouth with my thighs on either side of his face.

I ran my fingers through his hair and tried my best to commit everything about this moment to memory, from the way his eyes glowed more brightly than I’d ever seen them to the glint of his fangs and how he gripped my hips as if he was afraid even now that he might lose me.

“Grab my horns,” he demanded. “And don’t you dare let go.”

And then he pulled my dripping pussy down to his mouth and suckled my clit with lips that buzzed with power.

With a scream, I clutched reflexively at his horns, wrapping my fingers around them and holding tight. Tingles rolled over my skin, fanning out

from his hands on my hips and his lips and tongue on my clit.

And when he pricked my hips ever so carefully with the tips of his claws, I hurtled toward a precipice of pleasure, clinging to his horns as if my life depended on having that one single anchor.

A heartbeat away from my climax, he released my clit and swiped his tongue along the full length of my folds. My tortured scream of frustration at being denied stuck in my throat when he turned his head and sank his fangs into my upper thigh.

Everything went white and silent, and then…detonation.

Heat, blazing and all-consuming, rolled through my body like a shockwave. My climax was a star going supernova, a universe being born, a jump into hyperspace with no vessel to carry me. I might be screaming and thrashing wildly somewhere beyond the veil of blinding colors that filled my vision, but there was nothing here but pleasure.

The bond opened between us like a flower blooming beneath the sun, and Jarrix was with me.

Not just with me; he was everywhere, pouring into my mind and body in a flood of familiar warmth. His unyielding protectiveness and love heated and illuminated me from the inside, while his hunger and desire stole what little breath I still had in my lungs.

Somewhere far away from where I was drifting in a haze, he was caressing me, moving his hands over my face, along my shoulders, down my arms, up my back and over my hair to cradle my face again. He was calling my name, or maybe whispering it over and over again in an endless refrain.

Keela. My mate. My love.

When I opened my eyes, I was panting and still straddling his face, but I'd fallen forward with one hand braced on the bed above his head. My other hand was pressed to my chest as if trying to hold my heart inside my ribcage.

Jarrix cupped my face gently between his enormous palms. His eyes glowed very brightly, but he was calm, almost serene. "Keela? Are you with me?"

I rubbed my chest where his warmth now lived. "Yes," I gasped. My voice was hoarse. How long had I been screaming? "I feel you here." I rubbed my chest. "I feel you *everywhere*."

His expression was so tender that my heart ached. “I feel you too, in every cell of my body and soul,” he said roughly. “There can’t be anything better in the universe than this.”

He gathered me in his arms and rolled us over so he was above me. His mouth, cheeks, and chin glistened in the amber lights in our cabin.

“So *that* was how you envisioned giving me my bite.” I ran my thumb over his lips. “Looks like I drowned you just like you wanted.”

“You did.” He turned his head to kiss my palm. “You drenched me, mate,” he growled. “It felt like standing outside in the rain, only much, much sweeter.”

He moved slowly above me, gliding his dripping upper cock back and forth over my throbbing clit while the lower one slid against my ass. I almost felt too sensitive now, as if every nerve ending was exposed.

“I need you,” I said, grabbing a handful of his hair. “I need you to fill me up and give me your knot. I need to feel everything.”

“And you will.” He nuzzled my temple. “I’ll give you everything you ever need or want, Keela Wren. I’m your weapon and your shield. I’m your partner and your co-pilot. I’m *yours* to command.”

Jarrix notched his thick, weeping upper cock at my slick entrance. I sucked in a breath and dug my nails into his back.

In one, long, slow thrust that ripped a cry of pure ecstasy from me, he buried himself inside me all the way to the beginning of his knot…and then further until I took that too. My inner muscles spasmed around his ridges and that absolutely perfect piercing, making him rumble.

Desire…pleasure…*hunger* poured into me through our bond, blending with my own until I was a quivering puddle of need. My back arched and I cried out.

He pressed his lips to my ear, swirled his thumb around my clit, and growled, “I am your *mate*.”

His touch, his words, and the gravel in his voice sent me flying. I threw my head back and screamed, my heels digging into the bed. He withdrew and slammed back in, giving me everything of himself all the way to his knot again and again. I clawed at him like a feral thing, almost drunk on the way the little flares of pain zinged through our bond and lit sparks on my own skin.

When he slowed and hooked my leg over his arm to go deeper with first one cock and then the other, I was almost sobbing with shared pleasure.

“Look at you,” he rumbled, gazing down at me with half-lidded eyes as he circled his hips to make me writhe and shake. “Taking my cocks so beautifully, so perfectly. Coming for me like the goddess you are.” He tilted my hips and rocked into me even harder. “Take me deep, love. Take all of me.”

At this angle, on the next thrust he hit something new, something so deep inside that nothing and no one had found it before. My mouth fell open in a silent scream as I came hard enough that my vision tunneled and my hands fell from his shoulders onto the bed.

Shuddering and rumbling, he gathered me in his arms and sat back on his heels, pulling me to his chest so he was buried inside me with his lower cock resting against my ass.

He kissed the curve of my neck at my shoulder, and I felt him breathing hard against my damp skin. “I love you,” he rasped.

Panting, I reached behind me and stroked his lower cock. His groan resonated in his chest like it came from his very soul.

“Fill me, mate,” I said, and raised myself enough to position its dripping head against my ass. “Fill me and knot me and never let me go.”

He guided my arms around his neck and held himself steady while I dropped slowly onto both his cocks. The stretch was so good and so familiar and he was such a perfect fit that it had begun to feel like coming home.

By the time I was fully seated—at least to the top of his knot—I was gasping for air with my nails digging into the back of his neck and his shoulder blades.

He held me still and let out a guttural groan. “Keela.”

So much love and pleasure poured into me through our bond that I felt dizzy with the sheer depth and volume of how much he wanted me.

“I love you,” I said against his chest, knowing even though my voice was muffled he’d hear me just fine. “Gods, you feel…you feel so good.”

He put my hand on his breastbone over his hearts and drew back so he could look into my eyes. “These beat for you,” he said, covering my hand with his much larger one and pressing it until his rapid double heartbeat thudded against my palm. “If you didn’t believe that before, now you can. There is *nothing* I wouldn’t do for you. Nothing I wouldn’t give.”

The fierceness of that promise blazed through our bond like plasma.

“I don’t need much from you,” I said, cupping his face with my other hand. “Just forever.”

He pressed his forehead to mine. “You have it.”

He let me set the pace, guiding me, supporting my weight with his hands on my hips, and keeping me spread open so making love with both his cocks was as easy as breathing. Every rise was a symphony of pleasure as his ridges rubbed against every sensitive place inside me, and every fall was an entirely different chorus of sensations. Our cries blended, accompanied by the slick sounds of our bodies moving together.

My climax built slowly, delicious tension coiling low in my belly with every drag against my inner walls of a thick ridge or perfectly placed piercing.

And when I finally wanted to go faster and take him harder, he helped me do that too, until he was growling and I was screaming his name and grinding my hips on every drop.

Suddenly I was on my back and he was above me once more, his wings spread wide until they blocked out the entire room from my view.

He was beautiful and dangerous and steady as stone, and he was *mine*.

Maybe he caught that last word somehow through our bond because he went a little wild, caging me with his arms before driving himself deep, *deeper*, and deeper still until I was taking his knot all the way to the base of him.

Knot grinding against my inner walls, he rocked inside me once, twice…

“Jarrix,” I sobbed, and came wrapped in the safety and promise of his powerful embrace.

A moment later, he shuddered hard, growled into my ear, and climaxed in almost a dozen hot releases that filled my overstuffed pussy and my clenching ass until I felt full to bursting. His twitching cocks set off another soft orgasm that made my eyes flutter closed.

Our shared pleasure and satisfaction blended until I truly had no sense of where each of us ended and the other began. With Jarrix’s arms around me and his knot securing us together, I let myself drift in bliss.

Some hazy time later, he rolled us carefully so I was lying on his rumbling chest. He hummed something soft and gentle as he caressed my back in long, languid strokes. My mind was quiet for once, and his

contentment was a constant soft warmth in my chest that helped it stay that way.

"I love feeling you so at peace," he murmured, toying with my hair. "I love you in every mood, but this…this is *especially* good."

"You love my *every* mood?" I summoned enough energy to rest my chin on his chest and regard him skeptically through half-open eyes. "You know some of those moods are very…stabby."

"I'll tell you a secret, Captain." He drew a lock of my hair to his nose and inhaled before letting it slip through his fingers. "Those stabby moods are the ones I love most of all."

"Glad to hear it." I settled back in and closed my eyes. "Because stabby is my default setting and I don't think that's likely to change anytime soon."

"Good," he said softly—so softly I almost didn't hear it.

With a smile on my lips, I succumbed to the steady thrumming of the *Vespira's* engines and Jarrix's quiet rumble and drifted off to sleep.

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CHAPTER 24

KEELA



With only three hours remaining in our journey back to Trakhan, Jarrix and I finally emerged from our quarters to eat a quick meal and settle into the cockpit.

I didn't bother with the captain's chair and simply curled up in Jarrix's lap with my cup of coffee. Jarrix had opted for a mug of tea that smelled very pleasant—though not nearly as good as my coffee.

A few hours earlier, as Jarrix and I were once again knotted together in bed, the ship had dropped out of hyperspace and slipped back into the shipping lane between Mborsi and Trakhan. We'd opened the small viewport in the crew cabin to reveal a sliver of the now-familiar sight of the Nalin Nebula.

From the cockpit, though, the view was truly breathtaking. We'd have to come back to visit Trakhan regularly, both to see Byx and Felina and for the view.

As electrifying as his desire and need for me had felt blazing through our bond, Jarrix's quiet contentment was a warm, steady sensation in the middle of my chest. I could tell it was his feeling, not mine, but it still settled and anchored me in a way I liked far more than I'd anticipated. I hoped my own contentment warmed him too.

He dropped a kiss on the top of my head and drew me a little closer as we watched the colors of the nebula.

“Captain,” Lumos said, jolting me out of my reverie. “We have received an encrypted transmission from Deckmaster Byx. He states that First Mate Nadal’s mother has taken ill and been transported to a first-rate medical facility to undergo treatment. Should he wish to reach her, he can make contact through his father.”

Through the bond, I expected to sense worry, alarm, or perhaps panic from Jarrix. Instead, I felt surprise, followed by a distinct satisfaction.

Frowning, I moved so I could see his face. He was grinning.

“You want to explain this, First Mate?” I said, giving his chest a poke with my index finger. “I take it your mother isn’t ill?”

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around me again. “I had no singular *mother*, Captain. Like many Fortusians, I was raised in a crèche by a host of doting caregivers.” He rested his chin on top of my head. “That was a message Byx is relaying from Bruska at the GAIS. Gitto’s been dealt with.”

“Ah.” Now the coded message made more sense. “So that ‘first-rate medical facility’ is…?”

“Likely a GAIS black site.” Jarrix let go of me with one arm to grab his mug and finish the last of his tea. “I’ll get more details later, but I’m sure the fact she tipped off Sjer’s crew where to find us didn’t sit very well with Bruska *or* his superiors. And combined with her unsanctioned incursion onto Trakhan, where she attempted to take me by force…” He nuzzled my hair. “I doubt she’ll be a concern for a while.”

I exhaled and settled against his chest, my coffee cup cradled between my hands. “So with the bounty on my head gone, the *Fancy* headed for Saistea, and Gitto warming a cell somewhere…”

He stroked my hair, which I planned to braid before we reached Trakhan but had left loose for now. “We’re free,” he said.

Free.

Shared elation surged through our bond, warm and almost effervescent. I let out a breath.

“Once we’re back aboard the Nivilus, we can go wherever we please,” Jarrix continued. “We can return to smuggling, or transition to a lucrative career as bonded couriers. We could visit a remote paradise planet where I can keep you full of my knot day and night.”

The prospect of both those suggestions gave me a delicious shiver.

He squeezed me gently. “Or we can go wherever else you might need to visit.”

I thought about those coordinates still sitting deep in Siber's files. Coordinates bought not just with nearly every credit in my account, but with blood—mine and N'vera's.

I thought about what I might or might not find at the end of a journey to Iosa, and what I'd learned on Saistea and the orb Jarrix had hidden away in one of the cabinets in the medbay. If Calla was on Iosa and she allowed me to speak to her, I'd need to choose whether to share the information about Leomer.

And I thought about the bio-locked datachip that we hadn't dared try to access until we could do so safely and securely. What the hells was on that chip?

"There *is* a place I need to go before we get back to work or run away to a paradise planet," I said quietly, since he'd already figured that much out. "But we'll wait to talk about until we're aboard the *Nivilus*."

"Of course." He dimmed the cockpit lights and leaned back in his seat, settling me in against his chest. "Comfortable, Captain?"

I rested my head against his shoulder. "Very comfortable, First Mate."

I gazed out the front window at the beauty of the nebula. And for the first time in a very long time, I let myself hope.

Byx and Felina were waiting for us when the *Vespira* landed smoothly in docking bay 1910. I was wholly unprepared for how happy I was to see them, and how much it warmed my insides to have friends who wanted to celebrate our return.

Lumos was monitoring transmissions on Saistea for sightings of the *Fancy* or any news of explosions near the Aiphelevia. He'd also extracted a promise that we'd stop by for a visit the next time we were on Trakhan. I'd never known an AI to get attached, but apparently we'd made a favorable impression. I'd actually grown fond of him myself, and I'd overheard Jarrix having a chat about optimal medbay organization before we docked.

As Jarrix and I came down the cargo ramp followed by an antigrav sled carrying our things, Byx and Felina met us on the deck.

"Friends!" the Wundi grandmale boomed, his many eyes scouring us as Felina swept me up in a fierce four-armed hug that I returned just as

enthusiastically.

Byx's gaze focused on Jarrix's mended wings. He scowled, which was a truly terrifying sight on his enormous face. "You had trouble, I see."

"Only a reasonable amount," Jarrix replied with a grin that showed his fangs. "The other guy looks much, much worse. In fact…" He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial volume. "Zwee ate him."

Byx's laugh rolled through the bay like thunder. "Excellent! I have always said every ship needs a gorga."

"We're very fond of ours." I patted Felina's silky, furry back and finally extricated myself from her embrace. "Per your request, we've returned more or less in the same condition we were in when we left, and your ship didn't get so much as a scratch."

"Good to hear, good to hear." He rubbed two of his upper tentacles together in glee. "I'm pleased to see the journey was a success and your troubles have been resolved."

"Most of them," I agreed. I didn't glance at the bag containing the orb, but I did hold up the datachip. "Speaking of which, I've come into possession of this little item. My scans show it's clean of trackers or explosives, but we need a secure place to access whatever's on it."

"I have just the facility to assist you." Byx gestured grandly with his largest tentacle at the doorway leading from the bay. "If you'll come with us, I'll have all your possessions and Zwee transported directly to your vessel. Unless you plan to stay with us a while?"

"We have an urgent matter to attend to now that the bounty matter is settled," Jarrix said, falling into step next to me as we followed Byx and Felina down a long corridor and away from the noise of the docking bay. "But we plan to return to the outpost as soon as we can."

"I am so glad," Felina said, smiling at me. She and Byx were walking side by side with one of her clawed hands cradled in the curled tip of his smallest tentacle. "I would welcome comms from you at any time, my sweet friend."

"I feel the same," I said around an unexpected lump in my throat. Jarrix squeezed my hand.

Byx led our group to a secure control center deep inside the station. Felina stayed in an outer room while the three of us ventured into the inner chamber.

“A bio-lock,” Byx mused, studying the datachip in my palm. “Coded to your DNA, I expect?”

“Correct.” I looked around the room. “Where should I place it once it’s unlocked?”

He indicated a slot in the control panel. “Here. It will be held until we exit the room and then accessed. These computers are isolated and do not connect to any other systems inside or outside of the station. The room is heavily blast-proof and will be sealed. Whatever is on the datachip will *not* be stored in any way on this equipment. It will only appear either on the screens in the outer room or on a datapad that you can dispose of or take with you—whichever you prefer.”

Since I truly had no inkling what might be on the datachip, it was probably safest not to let anyone else see it before I did—not even Byx or Felina. “A datapad would be best,” I said.

What was I about to find? Another message from Leomer? Some other unwanted bit of information about my past? Something about Marcila, a woman I hadn’t thought about in more than a decade until Vinian’s use of the word *scrap* dredged up memories of the day Calla and I had been sold? Truly, it could be anything, or nothing. Really what I cared about most at the moment was accessing it without endangering anyone, especially our friends.

Jarrix rested his hand on my lower back. Through our bond, I sensed his calm reassurance.

I removed the datachip from its case, pricked the tip of my index finger on the point of my dagger, and touched my blood to the tiny scanner on the chip. The scanner immediately lit up orange as the datachip unlocked.

That orange glow was a final confirmation of who and what Leomer had claimed to be. Despite my distrustful nature, my gut had told me who he was even before he’d given his name in the recording. That the bio-lock had opened by matching our shared DNA left no room for argument.

I slipped the datachip into the slot Byx had pointed out and we filed back out of the secured area.

As the doors locked and sealed behind us, Byx handed me a datapad before joining Felina on the far of the outer room to give us privacy.

Jarrix bent and pressed a kiss to my temple. “Would you like me to step away?” he murmured. “It is purely your choice. I will not be offended.”

Back on Saistea, if the circumstances hadn't required Jarrix to remain close as my backup and I'd known Orqiel planned to subject me to a recording of Leomer introducing himself and confessing his sins, I would have asked Jarrix to let me view the hologram alone. But with the benefit of hindsight, I was grateful I *hadn't* known, and that Jarrix had been there for me when I'd needed him.

Having him at my side had done more than make the intolerable tolerable. The way he'd slipped his arms under mine, so steady and unyielding, and braced me against the onslaught of Leomer's appearance and tale, meant more than I could have put into words. He couldn't take those hits in my stead, but he made sure I didn't go down when they landed.

"Stay," I said. "Please."

He stood behind me once again, wrapped his arms around my middle, and folded his wings close on either side of us to form what felt like a kind of upright nest.

I took a few deep breaths to let his heat and scent and reassurance settle my stomach, and then I tapped the necessary sequence of commands on the datapad screen to access the datachip's contents. Behind the sealed doors and out of sight, the chip lowered into the input slot.

*Scanning…*the datapad read.

We waited for more than two minutes for the scans to finish. When no dangers were detected, the word *Accessing* appeared. Finally, rows and columns of numbers and text filled the screen.

It took me several seconds to understand what I was seeing. Utter shock left me numb. Jarrix was stunned as well, but my mate found his voice sooner than I did.

"Your equipment has confirmed there are no threats hidden on the chip," he reported to Byx, who had his enormous back turned to give us privacy but was obviously waiting for an indication of what we'd found and confirmation of the danger level.

"It's just…information," Jarrix added.

I almost snorted. *Just information* indeed.

While Byx and Felina murmured to each other, Jarrix and I stared silently at the datapad, going over what it showed again and again.

Accounts. *Dozens* of accounts. All scattered throughout the Alliance and beyond its borders. All accessible only through this bio-locked datachip and bulging with untraceable credits.

It was a fortune almost beyond reckoning, and Leomer had given it to me.

My knees felt a bit wobbly. I really could have used someplace to sit.

Jarrix tightened his embrace. He wasn't going to let me drop where I stood, which for a moment seemed like a distinct possibility. Things had gotten a bit hazy, in fact.

"Breathe, love," he murmured into my ear. Thanks to our bond, his calm reassurance steadied me from the inside. "We don't have to do anything about this right now. Just breathe."

I sucked in an unsteady breath. "Thank you."

With a shaking hand, I tapped the commands to shut down the access to the datachip. The screen blanked again, then showed a confirmation that the chip had been ejected and was waiting inside the inner room for us to reclaim it.

"We're done," Jarrix said to Byx.

Byx opened the doors. Moving almost on autopilot, I handed the datapad to Jarrix to dispose of, picked up the datachip, reset the bio-lock, and returned it to the little case before sliding it into one of the little hidden pockets inside the waistband of my pants.

Jarrix tucked my hand in the crook of his elbow as we rejoined Byx and Felina by the door leading to the corridor.

"Thank you very much for assisting us with this," I told Byx, craning my neck to look up at him. "And for everything else you've done. We're in your debt. If ever you need a favor…"

"There are never any debts between us," Byx stated. He was a little more reserved than usual, maybe because my reaction to the contents of the chip had been so visceral. But if he was curious about what we'd found, he didn't let on. "In the meantime, your ship has been prepared and cleared for departure," he added. "I had my crew do one last sweep over her today looking for trackers, for my peace of mind and yours."

"Thank you, friend," Jarrix said, giving Byx a deep bow. I did the same.

The walk to docking bay 2406 was a long one, even taking the hidden interior corridors accessible only to Byx and his people. Jarrix walked with Byx, discussing engine calibrations and changes to the medbay he wanted to do on the *Nivilus* the next time we visited Trakhan.

Normally I would have been in the thick of that conversation, but I let Jarrix handle it and walked companionably with Felina instead.

“I have something for you,” Felina confided as we approached our destination. She withdrew a wrapped box from the bag she wore across her upper torso and handed it to me. “Open it later on your ship.”

“I don’t have a gift for you,” I protested.

“Meeting you was the gift,” she said, patting my hand. “And seeing your love for your mate has warmed my hearts. I am quite glad now he did not take to any of my sisters. He was clearly meant to be yours.”

My eyebrows shot up. “One of your *sisters?*”

In front of me, Jarrix’s wings vibrated, and though I couldn’t see his expression, I sensed the effervescence of barely suppressed laughter through our bond.

“Oh, yes!” Felina crowed. “I introduced him to *all* my sisters. Once I escaped our home planet, they all fled too, you see. And they are all still searching for their true loves.” She beamed at Byx, who beamed right back. “I alone have been blessed by the Goddess so far,” she said, clasping her hands. “But She will weave my sisters’ threads with those of their mates when the time is right, just as she brought you and Jarrix together.”

Who was I to argue with that?

“Of course She will,” I said, patting her arm reassuringly.

When the massive doors to docking bay 2406 groaned open, my gaze went immediately to my ship. I let out a breath.

The *Nivilus* was an island of calm in the midst of the ocean of chaos that was Byx’s main bay, and a very welcome sight. The past few days were the longest I’d ever been separated from my ship in the seven years I’d owned her.

As promised, the cargo ramp was open and Byx’s crew were loading our things aboard. There seemed to be quite a few extra antigrav sleds humming up the ramp too, loaded with crates marked with logos I didn’t recognize.

Jarrix slid his arm around my waist. “Ready to get on board, Captain?”

“Definitely.” I waved at the crowded ramp. “But what’s in all those crates?”

He kissed the top of my head. “I needed a few more clothing items.”

My jaw dropped. “*What?*”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry—it’s not clothes. I had Byx’s people upgrade the galley while we were gone so I can cook proper meals for you

and Zwee from now on. And I have a nest to build for us, remember? Plus, didn't you want some of that coffee you liked on the *Vespira*?"

I glared up at him in mock outrage while my tummy fluttered at all the work he was putting into the ship. "You take too many liberties, *First Mate*."

"My sincerest apologies, Captain." He pressed his lips to my ear to murmur, "I await your firm censure once we've left the dock."

A hundred ideas of how I might discipline him came to mind, but every single one of them sounded like something he'd actually enjoy.

I squeezed my thighs together and scowled while he struggled not to laugh.

Saying goodbye to Byx and Felina proved more painful than I'd expected, despite our promises to stay in frequent contact and return for a visit as soon as possible.

At the bottom of the cargo ramp, I gave Felina one last hug, thanked her again for her mysterious gift, and boarded the ship with Jarrix at my side.

I made my rounds of the cargo bay, looking at what Byx's people had brought on board. Just how much tea and coffee had Jarrix bought?

"Welcome back, Captain," Siber said as I frowned at a stack of crates marked with the logo of a Bacoran coffee supplier. "I am heartened to see that other artificial intelligence system did not cause your untimely end."

I bit my cheek to keep from chuckling at Siber's possessiveness. "We're very glad to be back, Siber." I slid a pointed glance at Jarrix. "We'll be leaving the outpost as soon as *all this cargo* is secured."

"Acknowledged, Captain," the AI said.

"I'll take care of the cargo," Jarrix promised, giving me a quick kiss. "As the ship's new, official Cargo Inventory Officer, it is both my duty and my pleasure."

"You'll think differently the first time we pick up a haul from a Ymarian shipping agent," I warned. "But very well. I expect a full inventory on my screen before we leave the dock."

He straightened his spine and grabbed the cargo inventory scanner off the wall with a flourish. "You'll have it."

Shaking my head in amusement, I took Felina's gift to my—*our*—quarters. The cabin was half the size of the one on the *Vespira* and lacked nearly all of its amenities, but I wouldn't have traded this space for

anything. Especially since soon it would be gutted and remodeled into whatever style of nesting space Jarrix designed.

Before I changed into my flight suit, I sat on the bed to open Felina's gift. Once the outer layer was unwrapped, I recognized the logo of the Ivarian clothing shop where I'd purchased my evening gown and shoes for my arboretum dinner with Jarrix. A little thrill ran up my spine.

And when I opened the box…*oh my*. No wonder she'd told me to open it once I was on the ship. This present was definitely for Jarrix's eyes only.

I tucked the box away for now in my clothing cabinet behind my stack of sparring clothes and sent a quick message of thanks to Felina.

Her response came back almost instantly and made me laugh.

Your mate will experience entirely new levels of true and utter devastation. -Felina

I envisioned Jarrix's expression when I appeared wearing the contents of the box and smiled as I replied, *You know, he just might*.

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CHAPTER 25

JARRIX



THE *NIVILUS* WAS SIX HOURS OUT OF TRAKHAN AND TRAVELING THROUGH hyperspace in shadow mode when Keela settled in my lap in the cockpit with a fresh cup of coffee and a datapad. On its screen was a rotating image of a moon with a turbulent purple atmosphere, a set of coordinates in the Alpha sector, and a name: *Iosa*.

"Our destination?" I asked, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Yes." She switched the screen to hologram mode. We watched the purple moon rotate slowly in the air above the datapad. "It's a moon of the resort planet Jakora, but I'd never heard of it until recently. It has a long rainy season with lots of hurricanes, the marshes and swamps are full of deadly animals, and it's mostly ocean. Not many people live there."

She spun the hologram with her finger and pointed to a little glowing dot on the coast of one of Iosa's small continents. When the view zoomed in and details appeared, I noted the site appeared to be at least fifty or sixty kilometers from the nearest settlement and extremely isolated, as well as surrounded by marsh and swamp.

She'd shuttered her expression, but through our bond a torrent of pain, sadness, grief, and guilt crashed against me like waves breaking on a rocky beach. I sensed tentative hope too, but underlying everything was a deep, penetrating fear that gnawed at me like the teeth of a hungry gorga. I squeezed her gently and tried to offer her what warmth and comfort I could.

"It would be a good place to live if you didn't want to be found," I said.

“Yes.” The word was barely audible. “It would.”

I had a guess about why we were traveling to this unlikely location, but I stayed quiet and let her tell me in her own time. Of all her secrets, I suspected this one might be her most personal, most dangerous, and most painful.

“My sister Calla was a year younger than me,” she said, her voice strained with both remembered and current pain. “I was just four and she was three when Marcila sold us to Orqiel.”

So this *was* about Calla. Sometimes being right brought no pleasure. This was one of those times.

My coo rose in my chest. I let it out very softly, just enough to soothe her.

She’d never said so, but it wasn’t difficult to figure out why she didn’t want me to mute her emotions, even the worst ones. She’d had to hide her feelings deep inside for so long while a gladiator—and probably before too, when she’d lived with her monster of a mother. Now simply *feeling* and expressing those feelings were an integral part of her sense of her freedom and autonomy. And as her mate, it was my duty to ensure she never had to compromise either of those things again, especially due to my own actions.

“Between then and when I turned sixteen and fled Ganai, I only saw Calla twice backstage at the arena,” Keela continued. “I don’t know if she ever saw me. Of course, as Leomer mentioned, I couldn’t speak to her or try to get a message to her. I couldn’t let anyone figure out we were sisters.” Her mouth twisted. “Now I know how we escaped notice.”

She sipped her coffee and stared at Iosa’s slowly rotating image. “When I turned sixteen and left Ganai, I had to leave so quickly that I didn’t have a chance to contact her. I tried afterward, but either she never got my messages or she couldn’t find a way to respond. And then she left the planet too and I had no way to find her—especially no way that was safe.”

I laced our fingers together and tugged her closer until her back rested against my vibrating chest. She let out a breath and squeezed my hand.

“For years, I’ve been trying to track her down with requests for information I’ve posted at comm relays and various stations,” she said. “I used an alias, of course, and an untraceable comm code, claiming to be a friend from the arenas looking to reunite and offering a reward for information. I had some leads, but they were never legitimate. Every time I met up with someone and it turned out to be a false lead or a pack of lies or

a dead end, it broke me a little more. I almost gave up and took all the postings down so many times, but I had to keep trying."

Her hand tightened on mine until she was nearly crushing my fingers. The pain searing me through our bond hurt far more than her grip. "I couldn't protect Calla from our moth—from *Marcila*," she said hoarsely. She looked up at me, her lovely green eyes shimmering with unshed tears that ripped at my insides. "I couldn't keep her from going hungry, though I tried. I couldn't protect her from being sold, or from all the suffering I know she endured. So I had to keep looking, no matter what it cost me in credits or heartache."

She took a long drink from her coffee and stared at the cup as if she wished it held something much stronger. "And then seventeen days ago I got a message from a Kurutan named N'vera who claimed they knew where I could find Calla. I was all but certain it would be another dead end, but we agreed to meet on Ghira Station."

I listened grimly as Keela revealed how N'vera had—in my opinion—cruelly and carelessly informed her of Calla's apparent death in combat and then extracted an extortionate amount of credits for the coordinates of Calla's supposed location.

Keela clearly felt torn about N'vera, and not just because the Kurutan had died rather than give up Calla's supposed whereabouts. The galaxy was a cold and unkind place, and N'vera had information Keela needed and was willing to pay for. The fact N'vera had decreased their asking price when Keela admitted she couldn't pay the original amount didn't do much to raise them in my estimation, but their refusal to betray the secret even under torture left me conflicted too.

"I don't know if Calla is on Iosa," Keela said, stroking my hand with her thumb as she watched the holographic moon slowly rotate. "I don't know if what N'vera claimed about her having a mate is true, or if the intel is outdated and they *were* on Iosa a year ago but have since moved on. What I *can* say for sure is that Iosa isn't very far off the route Calla would have traveled from the location where the Alliance Defense believes she was killed in combat to her base orbiting Solan." She took a deep breath and let it out. "So now that we're not being chased by every bounty hunter in four sectors and your old crew has flown off in the other direction, hopefully to meet their demise, we're going to Iosa to find out the truth."

Keela raised my hand to her lips and kissed my knuckles. “Thank you for letting me tell you this when I was ready.”

“Of course.” I used the opportunity to rub my nose along our entwined fingers. Our combined scents were the finest fragrance I’d ever known, other than Keela’s most personal ones, which still lingered on my skin from our idyllic day of lovemaking on the way from Saistea to Trakhan. “I understand why you didn’t feel comfortable sharing this information before now.”

“This isn’t just my secret,” she said, her shoulders hunching under the weight of it all. “If Calla *is* alive, the Alliance Defense would consider her a deserter. That’s a crime punishable by up to life in one of their worst prisons. I’d rather never see her again than put her in that kind of danger. There is *nothing* I wouldn’t do to keep her location a secret.” Her gaze became fierce. “Tell me you understand.”

“I do understand.” I cupped her face and gazed into her eyes so she could see *and* feel how solemnly I made this oath. “I swear to you on my life I will do the same. If we find her—and I hope with all my hearts we do—you need never wonder if I will protect her as I protect you. Though if she has a mate half as devoted as I am to you, she is already well-guarded.”

“I don’t think I could live with myself if I brought danger to her door.” She rested her head on my chest. I began to coo quietly again and she melted against me. “We’re just two days’ journey to Iosa,” she murmured. “After waiting so long and suffering so much, how can two days seem like an eternity?”

“We will stay busy,” I decided. “We will spar, and I will cook our meals, and we will replace that small bunk in our quarters with the finest nest I can provide.” I slid my hand up her jumpsuit-clad thigh and brushed my fingertips over the place where I’d given her my mating bite. Her little shiver and moan made my cocks twitch and throb. “And I will make love to you in every room,” I murmured, my lips pressed to her hair, and she let out a breathy gasp. “Everywhere you go aboard this ship from this journey on, I want you to remember how we claimed each other there.”

Keela tilted her chin up to look at me, her eyes twinkling. Her mirth felt like bubbles in our bond. “Even the galley? That’s going to be quite a challenge. In fact…” She raised her eyebrows in an obvious provocation. “I’m almost positive it’s impossible.”

I took the datapad from her hand, tossed it onto the captain's seat, and rose so quickly that she let out an undignified squawk.

And when I put her over my shoulder and headed for the cockpit door, her squawk turned into a yowl of outrage that directly contradicted the tidal wave of desire that surged into me through our bond. "Put me down *this instant,* First Mate To'vok!"

"My skills *and* my honor have been challenged, Captain," I countered, stepping into the corridor to study the tiny galley like a military commander surveying a battlefield despite the highly distracting sight of her perfectly bitable ass mere inches from my eyes. "Therefore," I intoned, "I have no choice but to confront this test of stamina and determination head-on, lest my commanding officer find me lacking and leave me at the next available station."

With a truly adorable human growl, she shifted forward, slid her arm down my back inside my greatcoat, and grabbed the base of my tail right at its most sensitive spot.

I wasn't proud of the guttural sound I made, the spurts of hot liquid that escaped my engorged cocks, *or* the way my knees tried to wobble, but I *was* pleased to note there was an obvious solution to the problem of how small and densely packed with equipment the galley was, with very little available countertop or wall space.

I grasped the waist of her jumpsuit and let her feel the prick of my claws on her lower back through the fabric. She hissed in a breath, and a truly decadent scent swirled around us from between her lovely thighs.

"How fond are you of this jumpsuit?" I grated out.

"It's…fine," she said, clearly striving for a casual tone and failing miserably.

I ripped it open from its waistline to her thighs, careful not to so much as scratch her with my claws. Her moan and the sweetness of her arousal made my cocks do their best to punch their way out of my trousers.

"And these?" I plucked at her little silky undershorts.

"I have others," she whimpered, pressing her thighs together in a desperate bid to either hold onto her dignity or hide just how aroused she was from me.

With a single claw, I slit her silky shorts along the cleft of her ass, over her dripping cunt, and all the way up to her little clit without touching her a

single time. She was already slick and dripping, her arousal glistening on her folds and inner thighs.

"Gods, Jarrix," she moaned, squirming on my shoulder with her hand still holding my tail in an iron grip. "You…*menace*."

"I think you need me, Captain," I said, running my hand up her thigh and over her ass. "I think you need me very badly." Slowly, deliberately, I trailed my fingertips toward the opening in her shorts and grinned at her whimpers. "Shall we check?"

I retracted my claws and tightened my grip on her legs. My first light touch on her clit made her shriek. She let go of my tail to brace herself with both hands on my back. "*Jarrix*." It was a gasp.

I trailed my fingertip along her slit, delving between her folds so lightly that she moaned. "Please…"

"You're dripping, Captain," I said, gliding my fingertip back and forth over her delicate pink skin as she writhed. "Positively soaking. Does that mean you'd like to ride my cocks in this little galley?"

"We can't," she gasped. "There's no room."

With my free hand, I reached for the fastening of my trousers. As I undid them and opened the seam at the front, I turned my head to graze my fang along the curve of her ass. She cried out again.

"Undo the fastening over my tail," I said, pushing down my undershorts to free my dripping cocks.

She nearly dove down my back to comply, her fingers fumbling in her haste to open the seam.

The moment my trousers dropped down my thighs, I slid her around to my front so her legs wrapped around my waist. Her face was flushed, her eyes wild with desire, and her fingers dug into my shoulders to steady herself. When she grasped my upper cock and stroked me, a starburst blazed across my vision.

"There's no place to lean against in here," she panted, releasing me to lick my precum and lubrication from her fingers. Gods above, this female was perfect. "You can barely turn around. There's not enough counter—"

"We don't need a wall or a countertop." I glanced deliberately down at my leaking cocks. "You're going to sit right there, Captain."

She grabbed me around the neck and pulled herself up to kiss me hard —hard enough that one of my fangs nicked her lip. I tasted the coppery tang

of her blood. She moaned into my mouth and licked my fang carefully, swiping a drop of mating fluid right off the tip.

“Take your seat, mate,” I murmured against her lips. I squeezed her ass with both my hands. “I’ve got you.”

“You really do,” she whispered, her fingers in my hair. She nuzzled my face like I liked to do with her hair and the back of her neck, and my hearts lost their rhythm. She wanted my scent. “I love that you’ve got me,” she said, her eyes going half-lidded with desire that seared me through our bond.

Slowly, she lowered herself toward my cocks, steadying her movement with one hand on my shoulder while the other found my upper cock. But rather than position it at her dripping opening, she rubbed her clit up and down its length, from the piercing at the top down all the ridges until she reached my rapidly swelling knot. Her gasps and moans sounded like the sweetest music to my ears.

“Yes,” I breathed, watching every detail of her expression as she took her pleasure from me. “Make yourself come, my love. I want to see you fall apart.”

And she did, just moments later, with little cries and shudders that made me ache to be inside her, to feel her squeezing and rippling around my cocks in the way I’d become addicted to.

And when she finally seated herself on both my cocks and rested her head against my chest to catch her breath, I didn’t care anymore that I’d begun this by playfully trying to win a kind of bet, or even that we were in the galaxy’s smallest galley. Nothing mattered except this female in my arms, who’d never trusted a soul but had put her trust in me.

I was a genetically engineered agent trained by the GAIS, and with one look of those green eyes, one whiff of her scent, or one touch from her, I was on my knees.

“Tired yet?” she asked softly, her eyes sparkling up at me.

“Tired of holding *you?*” I scoffed. I smiled down at my perfect mate and flexed my arm muscles as I hefted her easily. “Never.”

Hands gripping my shoulders for leverage and guided by my hands under her ass, she glided up and down, taking my cocks slowly at first and then a little faster when she realized I hadn’t exaggerated when I showed her how easily I could hold her up.

And when she changed her angle and the piercing and ridges of my upper cock stroked back and forth in just the right place, her eyes rolled up and she let out a long, ragged groan. “Oh, gods…” she breathed. “*There*. Right there.”

I was pumping up into her now as she slammed down, each of us chasing the pleasure coming up fast on the horizon. With my gaze locked on hers and all my senses fixed on her pleasure and the release building at the base of my spine, I lost track of walls and distances and everything else but my mate and filling her with my knot so we could come together.

“*Jarrix*,” she screamed, her head falling back. “Oh, gods, yes. Deeper. Give me your knot.”

With one arm under her ass and the other wrapped around her so my arm took the impact instead of her back, I slammed her against the wall, thrusting hard and fast as I obeyed her commands to go harder and deeper.

And when my knot pushed all the way inside her tight channel and she screamed her orgasm, mine followed right behind.

Groaning, I ground my cocks into her, my releases filling her so violently that my back bowed and I staggered. She was too lost in pleasure to notice, her nails digging into my shoulder and the back of my neck and her eyes closed as she wailed my name.

To hells with my pride.

I sank to my knees and sat back on my heels, bringing her down with me until her ass rested on my thighs. I wrapped my arms and tail around her and held her tightly as we panted and trembled.

“Gods,” Keela gasped against my chest. “Jarrix, I came so hard my ears are ringing.”

I stroked her hair, looked up, and grimaced. “It’s not your ears that are ringing.”

“What?” Carefully, she half-turned in my lap to follow my gaze. Her mouth fell open. “What in the name of all the gods above and below did you do?”

I eyed the overturned bowls and plates and unidentifiable foodstuffs spilling out of the food synth, which was insistently chiming with a dozen frantic alerts. “I appear to have made…dinner?”

“If you think I’m going to eat any of that mess—” she scowled and jerked a thumb over her shoulder “—you are highly, *highly* mistaken, First

Mate.” She dropped her head back against my chest. “Worth it, though,” she sighed. “So incredibly worth it.”

I kissed my way along her hairline until my lips reached her ear. “I told you there was room in the galley,” I murmured.

Her laugh might have been audible all the way back to Trakhan.

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CHAPTER 26

KEELA



NAVIGATING THROUGH IOSA'S HURRICANES AND FINDING A PLACE TO LAND near the target coordinates proved a challenge even for Siber.

But the bumpy ride through the swirling purple clouds and heavy rain wasn't the reason I had a white-knuckled grip on the armrests of my captain's chair.

After a decade of searching and nearly a lifetime of being separated, I might be mere hours from seeing my sister again.

Jarrix sat quietly beside me in the co-pilot's seat. I hadn't had to ask him not to coo or to give me space; he could sense what I needed through our bond. I did let him coil his tail loosely around my ankle, though, because I'd become accustomed to its gentle comfort, and because not cooing was causing him some discomfort that he was doing his best not to show. His steady reassurance felt like the only reason I could breathe.

Once we made it through the atmosphere, Siber's scans had detected a small clearing and a single modest capsule home at the coordinates N'vera had provided.

The dwelling's privacy shield prevented the AI from detecting any life forms within it without using more intrusive scans. If Calla and her mate were still living there, they probably had a *very* good security system that would alert them. N'vera said Calla's mate was a former assassin, and Calla had served in the Alliance Defense. They'd both be highly motivated to

keep their location secret. The last thing I wanted to do was make them think they were under attack.

So I told Siber not to do any further scans and focus on getting us down safely.

Due to the swamp and thick trees surrounding the capsule home, the closest place to land was a few kilometers away at what appeared to be an abandoned raider base. The base was located in a large clearing right by the churning lavender ocean, meaning we could arrive on an inbound flight path over water instead of needing to set down vertically in the high winds, or risk crashing into the trees. No doubt that was why the raiders had established their base here in the first place.

After what felt like an eternity of being buffeted by powerful winds and driving rain, Siber set the *Nivilus* down on an empty landing pad in the middle of the ruined base, its nose facing the sea. I let out a breath and forced my fingers to let go of my chair's armrests.

Through the ship's front window, I studied the vast, storm-tossed ocean before us. Despite the choppy waves and overcast sky, the view was breathtaking.

"Captain, the weather will make flight extremely difficult and dangerous for you and the first mate," Siber said, interrupting my thoughts. "I have mapped what I believe is the safest and most direct walking path through the swamp and marsh to the target coordinates. My scans have detected a number of large reptilian and serpentine predators. The former are called kaory, and their bites and their barbed tails are venomous. The serpents are also highly venomous and aggressive. I advise extreme caution during your journey."

"How strange that so few people visit this moon," Jarrix quipped. "With such lovely weather and charming wildlife."

Despite my nerves, I snorted.

"I also advise you both to arm yourselves with suitable weapons," Siber continued, undeterred by Jarrix's attempt to lighten the mood. "First Mate To'vok, I suggest taking a well-stocked medical kit that includes the appropriate antivenoms. I have taken the liberty of synthesizing them and they are waiting for you in the medbay."

"Thank you, Siber." I rose and stretched, working the stiffness and tension out of my muscles. Jarrix stood too, and massaged my shoulders as I leaned back against him.

“With your permission, I’ll prep our weapons and the medkit,” he said, his fingertips digging into my tight muscles until I moaned. “While you synth us the gear we’ll need. Unless you’d prefer to trade?”

“No, that sounds good.” I tipped my head back against his chest so I could look up at his face.

Jarrix’s gentle smile contrasted with the seriousness in his gaze. No doubt he was thinking about the dangers of this hike through a predator-infested swamp and what we might find when we got to the little capsule home we’d seen on the scanner. I had no idea what kind of greeting we’d receive—or if this would be another in a long line of crushing disappointments.

He kissed my forehead, slid his hands down my arms, and squeezed me gently before letting go. “Meet me at the weapons cache when you’re ready.”

Twenty minutes later, armed and dressed in rain gear, we stood at the ship’s open hatch staring out into the storm. The wind blew sheets of rain through the doorway, along with the scents of the ocean, the swamp, and all the thick foliage that surrounded the abandoned base.

Was this the sight that greeted my sister each morning when she woke? Did she smile when she heard the rain pounding on the roof of her little capsule home? Did she have to fight the creatures who lived in the swamp, and did she ever go swimming in the churning sea?

A trill made me turn. Zwee was right behind us, glancing purposefully between me and the open doorway.

“You should stay to guard the ship,” I said, crouching to put a hand on her back. “It’s going to be a long walk through the swamp.”

Zwee let out several low grunts, flashed her sharp teeth, and trundled out of the ship onto the landing pad, where she tipped her head up and closed her eyes under the deluge.

“I suppose she’s never seen or felt rain. Maybe she likes it.” I rose and put my hands on my hips. “What do you think?”

“I think she wants to go with us,” Jarrix. “But it is the captain’s decision.”

I’d learned a lot about gorgas while aboard the Wundi ship that took me off Ganai, from just how powerful their jaws and teeth were to how bad of an idea it was to get between one of them and a meal. I’d also gained a healthy respect for their instincts.

“If Zwee thinks she should go, she should go,” I said. “Siber, initiate vessel lockdown and alpha-level defense protocols.”

“Confirmed, Captain. I wish you a safe and fruitful journey.”

I squeezed Jarrix’s hand and led the way out onto the landing pad. The hatch closed and locked behind us.

The raider base looked like a battle had taken place. All the buildings were leveled except one, and as we made our way with Zwee toward the tree line, I spotted several sets of skeletal remains among the ruins. The burned-out wreckage of a single small raider ship lay half-buried in the sand.

In addition to our weapons, waterproof jumpsuits, and thick, bite-resistant boots, Jarrix and I wore matching hoods with clear plas visors that kept the rain out of our eyes. I’d armed myself with a plasma gun, daggers in thigh sheaths and in my boots, and my nivilus, which I carried on my back. Jarrix had opted for a plasma-edged sword and his favorite Havelian stunner staff, in addition to a plasma rifle, gun, and several smaller blades.

Since he carried our medkit, I’d strapped on a cross-body pack containing water, food bars, and other supplies, plus Leomer’s orb and the bio-locked datachip.

With Zwee walking ahead, me in the middle, and Jarrix watching our backs, we set off through the swamp.

True to Siber’s word, her path directed us along narrow strips of muddy land and through patches of marsh. While I focused on navigating and making sure Zwee didn’t stray, Jarrix was on high alert for danger, sword in one hand and gun in the other. During weapons practice, I’d discovered he was an equally good shot with either hand. It made me all the more determined to improve my shooting skill with my non-dominant hand beyond merely decent.

Despite the terrain and heavy rain and a brief stop to rest and drink water, we made fairly good time. Needing to focus on every step with my awareness tuned to detect any sound or movement kept me from thinking too much about what we might or might not find at the end of this soggy walk.

Zwee appeared to be enjoying her excursion immensely. She’d been born on Trakhan, and in her short life she’d only set foot—so to speak—on one planet. Saistea was hardly a treat and as far from nature as one could possibly get. By all accounts, gorgas thrived aboard ships, but her quiet

warbles and trills and obvious joy as we slogged across the swamp made it clear I'd need to let her stretch her dozens of little walking tendrils planetside whenever I got a chance.

Jarrix, meanwhile, marched on with grim determination. His wings were naturally waterproof, so they didn't become sodden or weighted down, but he definitely would have preferred to fly us to our destination rather than walk through a swamp. I would have rather flown too, but the high winds and torrential rain simply made it too dangerous.

When we were about a half kilometer from our destination, our wristcomms simultaneously buzzed a warning that we'd been detected by a scanner. Its origin was concealed, but as far as we knew, there was only one location in the entire area that might have a reason to scan the surroundings for possible interlopers.

Whoever was in that capsule home now knew we were approaching—or rather, they knew two *someones* were approaching.

My next breath was ragged. The swamp around me blurred. And despite how long and how desperately I'd wanted to be here possibly on the verge of reuniting with Calla, I had the strangest and most inexplicable desire to turn around and flee. Every uncertainty, fear, and gnawing shame I'd harbored for so many years came crashing down on top of my head.

I didn't realize I'd stopped walking until Jarrix's arms circled my chest. He rested his chin on top of my head, his chest vibrating against my back. He didn't coo, but that rumble and his warm reassurance helped me breathe and feel present in my body again. The burn in my thighs and calves from our slog through the mud was a welcome distraction.

I'd never been a coward, and I wasn't going to start now. And I loved my sister far too much to give up without seeing this through.

Aware of the dangers that might be lurking, I slipped from his embrace. "I'm all right," I murmured.

We made the remainder of the journey in silence. Even Zwee quieted, as if she could sense my rising nervousness.

The rain turned to a drizzle as we finally emerged into a small clearing. A tall, sturdy stone wall topped with sharp pieces of metal and glaz surrounded the capsule home. A single meter-wide gate made of trimetal appeared to be the only way through the wall.

The clearing was dotted with the skeletons of creatures three or four times the size of a full-grown gorga, with long tails and distinctly reptilian

heads. Were these the kaory Siber had warned us about? The metal and glaz on the wall must be there to keep the kaory and serpents away from the house and yard.

Three eyeballs on long stalks appeared above the gate and bent toward us. Whatever those eyeballs were attached to had to be sizable, judging by how easily it looked over the gate and the width between the stalks.

We stopped halfway between the tree line and the gate. Jarrix holstered his weapons and we both raised our hands. Zwee settled on her belly on the ground beside me.

The creature behind the gate hissed. Zwee twitched but didn't show her teeth.

I slid my visor and hood back to reveal my face and hair. Jarrix took his cue from me and followed suit.

I took a deep breath. "My name is Keela Wren," I called. "I'm looking for Calla."

One of the eyeballs swiveled toward something behind the wall while the other two remained focused on us. "Poe?" the creature trilled, its tone questioning.

I didn't hear anything unlock, but the gate silently swung outward, revealing a truly enormous creature. Other than its long eyestalks, six triple-jointed legs, and two powerful arms tipped with nasty-looking pinchers, most of its body was inside its shell, which was covered with moss and appeared to be decorated with rocks and bits of shell.

"Poe," it said, this time sounding distinctly menacing.

"Poe, let me through," a female voice said from the other side of the wall.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

With obvious reluctance, the shelled creature emerged through the doorway and moved aside, all three of its eyes fixed on us and its pinchers raised in warning.

My sister stepped through the gate, wearing a green tactical jumpsuit as if prepared for battle. She held a plasma gun at her side and wore two gleaming Hardanian scythe-knives in sheaths on her thighs.

Right behind her was a very large, bare-chested, humanoid male with long white hair and bioluminescent purple skin. Four thick tentacles, each as long as he was tall, grew from his back. He carried a pulse rifle in his

hands, its barrel pointed not at me but at Jarrix. Everything about him screamed *predator*.

He was unmistakably Fortusian like Jarrix, but I couldn't think about that right now. Not with my sister only a few meters away.

Calla and I stared at each other.

I drank in every detail, from her long red hair—pulled back in a long braid, just like mine—to her boots. She looked so much like the image in her Alliance Defense file, but more…alive. In that file, she'd appeared fierce and dutiful, as if she'd been captured on her way to climbing into the cockpit of her fighter.

Here in the drizzle on Iosa, surrounded by swamp and kaory bones, she looked free.

"Keela?" she whispered.

"Yes." I wanted to laugh and cry and run to her and collapse where I stood. "I…found you." It was an almost ridiculous thing to say, given we were standing right here, but suddenly everything I'd wanted to say to my sister for so long evaporated right out of my head.

"How?" her mate asked, his voice cold enough to flash-freeze the swamp we'd just slogged through.

It was a fair and logical question. If our situation were reversed, I'd have demanded an immediate explanation too.

"For years, I've been posting requests for information about your whereabouts using a pseudonym and untraceable comm code," I told Calla and her mate. "Nothing ever came of it. But a few weeks ago, I was contacted by a Kurutan named N'vera—"

Calla's mate growled, his tentacles wrapping around Calla as if to shield her.

I raised my hands a little higher. "N'vera told me they used to work for another Kurutan who was on a mission of revenge," I said quickly. "They didn't give me the other Kurutan's name or any more details than that. Apparently N'vera came here to Iosa about a year ago with their employer and saw Calla. They heard her say her full name. When they saw my posting, they contacted me. We met on a space station. First they showed me your Alliance Defense file." I swallowed hard. "It said you were dead."

Calla flinched, regret obvious in her expression.

"Then N'vera told me you were alive," I continued. "They offered to sell me your coordinates. I had no idea if they were telling the truth, but I

paid. And now I'm here." I spread my hands. "There's a little more to the story, but that's the most important parts. Well, that and N'vera's dead. Your location died with them."

"You killed them?" Calla's mate asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't kill N'vera, but I know who did. I promise I will tell you every last detail you want to know. But I swear on my life that I would die before I let anyone know where you are, Calla."

"I give my oath as well," Jarrix said. To my surprise—and Calla's—he went to one knee on the muddy ground, his gaze fixed on hers. "I am Jarrix To'vok, formerly of the GAIS. I am now your sister's bonded mate, and I will defend you as I defend her."

Calla's mate didn't relax one iota, but my sister's lips twitched as she patted one of his tentacles. "Fortusian males are notoriously protective," she said to me. "I'd say I was surprised to see you chose one as a mate, but since I did too…" When her mate didn't let go, she lightly pinched the tentacle around her waist. "Vos, it's all right. It's my *sister*."

With obvious reluctance, Vos unwrapped all his tentacles but the one on her waist. "I am Vos Turek," he said, looking back and forth between Jarrix and me. "Retired member of the Silent Guard." It was unmistakably both an introduction and a warning.

Through our bond, I sensed Jarrix's shock and wariness, as well as his respect. And judging by Calla's smirk, I was sure my eyes had just gone comically wide.

The Silent Guard, which was headquartered on Fortusia, was a league of genetically engineered assassins trained almost from birth to be the deadliest killers and private soldiers in the galaxy. Very few survived their requisite twenty years of service to reach retirement—even fewer than the number of child gladiators on Ganai who'd made it to sixteen and freedom.

Vos didn't need to tell us he'd shred anything that posed a danger to Calla. That promise was as plain to see as his tentacles and the dark stare he leveled at Jarrix and me. It was the same promise I saw in Jarrix's eyes whenever I was in danger.

"This is Poe," Calla said, gesturing at their shelled guardian, who was watching us every bit as intently as Vos. "She's an Anomuran, a native species of Iosa. Highly intelligent, but with a very limited vocabulary." She smiled at Zwee. "Who do you have with you?"

“This is our gorga, Zwee,” I said. Zwee tilted her antennae forward and flashed her serrated teeth. “Gorgas are native to the Wundi homeworld. She’s a recent addition to the crew but has already earned her keep.”

Zwee and Poe exchanged trills and warbles. I had no idea if they could understand a word each other said, but their tones seemed friendly.

Calla and I looked each other over as if neither of us yet believed we were here, together, on the same moon. Her gaze held wonder and a million unspoken questions. I imagined mine looked the same.

Jarrix and Vos seemed to be having an unspoken conversation of their own that included warily taking each other’s measure and evaluating the weapons they carried as well as their genetically engineered bodies.

Finally, I couldn’t remain still any longer and took a tentative step forward. “Calla…?”

She patted Vos’s tentacle again reassuringly, unwound it from around her waist, and took a step too.

And then we were running.

We crashed into each other hard enough that the breath left both our lungs with audible grunts. But it didn’t matter because I was holding my sister in my arms. She squeezed me so fiercely that I thought my ribs might crack but I didn’t care.

Somehow we ended up sitting on the soggy ground, sobbing against each other’s chests while Jarrix and Vos watched over us. Vos’s tentacles touched Calla’s shoulders and arms, offering quiet reassurance, while Jarrix’s tail coiled around my calf to do the same.

“I’m so sorry,” I gasped finally, moving so I could see Calla’s tear-streaked face. The rain had turned to a mist while we’d been holding onto each other. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t make Marcila take care of you. I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect you from Orqiel and the arena. I’m so sorry for everything.”

Calla cradled my head to her chest and stroked my back as if she were the older sister. “Don’t apologize. Please, *please* don’t. There was nothing you could have done. And none of it was your fault. Do you hear me? None of it.” She shook me gently. “I can’t stand to think you’ve blamed yourself all these years.” Her voice grew hard and cold. “The only people at fault were our mother and Orqiel and the rest of them who ran the arenas. And they’re all dead now.”

I jerked in her arms and drew back. “Marcila is dead?”

“Yes.” Her mouth compressed into a grim line. “When I got my freedom, the first place I went was back to the town where we were born. I wanted to confront her, maybe get some kind of revenge. But she was already dead. I found out she’d died in a transport accident several years earlier.”

I felt nothing at the news. No grief, no anger, not even satisfaction. Like Orqiel before we’d found out he was behind the bounty, Marcila had already been dead to me.

I was suddenly keenly aware of the weight of the news I carried, and of the orb and datachip in my pack. Part of me wanted to just throw them into the ocean and try to forget, but Calla deserved to have a say in what we did with our legacy.

Knowing I wasn’t alone in making that choice healed something in my heart I hadn’t realized had been damaged.

My eyes felt gritty. I rubbed my face, not caring about how dirty my hands were after our trek through the swamp and sitting on the ground for however long Calla and I had been holding each other.

Thunder rumbled, and a light rain began to fall.

“Let’s go inside,” Calla said, getting to her feet. She held out both hands for me to grab and hauled me to my feet. We were both muddy, but I don’t think she cared any more than I did. “Where’s your ship?” she asked.

“We left it at an abandoned raider base a few kilometers from here,” I said. “It looks like a battle happened there. You know anything about that?”

Calla and Vos exchanged a glance. For the first time since we’d arrived, the corners of Vos’s lips turned up.

“We know something about it,” Calla said, sliding her arm around my waist and urging me toward the open gate. “It’s been a pretty nice day, but it’s about to *really* start raining.”

I gaped at her. “What do you mean, *really* start raining?”

She chuckled. “Just you wait. They don’t call this the rainy season for nothing.” She glanced over her shoulder. “And you better bring Zwee inside if you’re not sure she can swim.”

I was *almost* certain she was joking.

Inside the wall, we found a surprisingly large garden divided into sections. Given this was the rainy season, only one was in use at the moment. It was full of thick grasses covered in little shelled creatures.

Vos and Calla's capsule home was snug and cozy, and clearly designed to withstand the weather conditions on Iosa. My sister and her mate had filled their space with little trinkets and decorations, and everywhere I looked, plants and even several small fruit trees seemed to be thriving under lights.

The main living area contained an oversized sofa and chair, a fireplace that provided both light and heat, and a large nest in one corner made of branches and moss that clearly belonged to Poe. The kitchen was part of the front room as well, with a rectangular dining table between the sitting area and food prep area as a kind of separation.

The rest of the home consisted of a single bedroom, some storage areas —one dedicated entirely to weapons and their security system—and a surprisingly enormous bathroom that appeared to have been added on to accommodate a gigantic tub. It was surrounded on three sides by glaz walls and a curved roof, offering a view of the rain and lush plants growing outside in the yard. No doubt the tub was a necessity for Vos, who clearly had cephalopod genes.

Nowhere did I see a computer interface or any other tech beyond what was absolutely necessary to operate the home and maintain its security. Neither Calla nor Vos wore wristcomms either, though they must have some way to communicate when they were apart. The lack of tech further emphasized their need for a simple, isolated life disconnected from the dangers that lurked beyond this moon.

When Calla and I returned to the front room after I'd cleaned up and dried myself off, Jarrix took a turn in the bathroom to do the same. My sister and I curled up at opposite ends of the sofa.

Vos, meanwhile, had left his plasma rifle by the door and busied himself in the kitchen making fragrant tea. Watching his tentacles move around the kitchen without seemingly needing his attention was both fascinating and a little unsettling.

Poe settled into her nest, leaving just enough room for Zwee to climb in next to her. They trilled quietly to each other, and then both closed their eyes. Calla and I exchanged a smile as we watched them rest.

"So you said there was more to the story of how you got here than buying those coordinates from a Kurutan," my sister said. "I know we have a *lot* to talk about, but if you don't mind, I'd like to start there."

“Understandable.” I accepted a cup of tea from Vos’s outstretched tentacle as he handed another to Calla. He left one on a side table, presumably for Jarrix, and kept one for himself in one of his human hands.

In a move that seemed totally natural, Vos picked Calla up with his tentacles, took her place on the sofa, and settled her in his lap, wrapping two tentacles around her. The third tentacle waved slowly back and forth in the air behind him, and the fourth wrapped around her ankle.

I suddenly realized how else Vos probably used his tentacles to show affection for my sister. My face heated.

Calla caught me averting my gaze from the tentacle on her ankle and chuckled. “Vos likes touch. Does Jarrix not do that too?”

“He, uh, uses his tail,” I said, sipping my tea and avoiding her knowing gaze so I didn’t blush more or start laughing.

Jarrix returned to the main room, clean and dry. Without missing a beat, he echoed Vos’s earlier movement by settling me on his lap and wrapping his tail around my calf before claiming his cup of tea from the table where Vos had left it.

Calla caught my gaze, looked pointedly at Jarrix’s tail tip where it was lightly stroking my leg, and raised her eyebrows. I compressed my lips and tried to signal with my eyes that this was a conversation for later in private. She chuckled and drank her tea.

As the rain thrummed on the roof and ran in rivulets down the enormous window behind the sofa, I told Calla and Vos about the bounty and how it had led to crossing paths with Jarrix on Ghira Station.

Jarrix took over the story for a bit to explain why he’d been aboard the *Fleeting Fancy*, what he’d done aboard the station to get us to safety, and then our journey to Trakhan.

I then revealed what we’d learned from Byx and what had happened on Saistea—including killing Orqiel and how we’d dealt with Jonor. Finally, Jarrix explained how he’d lured the *Fancy* away to Saistea so we could get back to our ship and head for Iosa without being tailed.

Vos cooed quietly for Calla as I described my confrontation with Orqiel. I didn’t know him well yet, obviously, but my instincts told me they loved each other very much.

“But why go after you now?” Calla demanded once the initial shock of hearing about Orqiel wore off. “After all these years? There has to be more to it.”

“There’s more.” I cradled my mug of tea, thankful for its warmth and that of the fireplace. Their home wasn’t cold, but I felt a chill nonetheless. “When we got to Orqiel’s chambers, he had a hologram recording he played for me.” I swallowed hard. “It was from a man named Leomer Casso-Wren.”

Calla paled and nearly dropped her cup.

In a blink, Vos wrapped her hand and the cup with the end of one of his tentacles to steady her, and the rest of his tentacles caressed her as he cooed softly. He didn’t ask who Leomer was and simply focused on her.

“What did he have to say for himself?” Calla asked, her voice tight.

I recounted every detail of Leomer’s story. The more I talked, the paler she became, and the more fury blazed in Vos’s black eyes. Jarrix was angry too, but he’d had far longer to process the information. His arm around my middle stayed steady and encouraging.

I went quiet for a while after I finished, letting Calla process what I’d revealed as Vos comforted her. Despite the heaviness in my heart and the tension in the air, there was something really, profoundly good about sitting with my sister like this as our mates held us—Vos with his tentacles, and Jarrix with his wings and tail.

It made our lonely, miserable lives in the arena seem very, very long ago and almost a lifetime away.

“You brought him with you?” Calla asked finally. “Leomer?”

“Yes.” I leaned over to pick up my pack from the floor and withdrew the fabric-wrapped orb. When I let the wrapping fall away, we all stared at the innocuous gray sphere.

“I want to throw it into a black hole,” Calla said, her voice toneless. “Or maybe a sun.”

“I know. Me too.” I flicked it with my finger. “And yet…”

“And yet,” she echoed quietly. She rested her head on Vos’s chest and looked away from the orb and back at me. “And what turned out to be on the datachip?”

I grimaced. “Millions of credits.”

Her jaw dropped, and all of Vos’s tentacles twitched. “*What?*” my sister gasped.

“The datachip has account information and access keys to dozens of untraceable accounts,” I said. “I don’t know where the credits came from,

and there's no way to tell. It's a fortune, and it's only accessible to someone who shares Leomer's DNA."

"Gods," she breathed. She looked at Vos and then at us. "What are you going to do with it?"

"What are *we* going to do with it?" I corrected. "I don't know. They're not my credits. There's a good chance they weren't Leomer's either. Well, maybe if he invested most of his lifetime earnings and those investments paid off…" I shrugged. "Even then, I doubt he could have amassed all of it legitimately. Odds are at least part, if not most of it, is stolen."

"Stolen from whom?" Vos asked. "The Liktarrs?"

"It seems unlikely," Jarrix said. "I doubt anyone steals from the syndicate and lives very long. Leomer might have had his own schemes. Again, we don't know, and we really have no way to find out that wouldn't call attention to ourselves we definitely don't want."

For a long time, we all sat quietly, lost in our own thoughts.

"The accounts aren't going anywhere," I said finally. "We have time to consider it. I really don't want Leomer's blood money. I could drop that datachip into a pool of lava somewhere and we can forget those credits exist."

"I feel the same way." Calla studied me, her head tilted. "But?"

"But…" I sighed. "But I'm not ready to do that yet. I don't know why I'm hesitating."

"There's something holding you back—something you might be thinking subconsciously," Jarrix said, his lips pressed to my hair. "It's like with your nivilus. Until you know for sure, wait. Let the answer come."

Calla was staring at me. "What does he mean, your nivilus?"

I reached for the sheath I'd dropped next to my pack and withdrew my nivilus, which I'd carried on my back in its compact form during our walk through the swamp.

"Oh, gods," Calla breathed. She started to reach out, then snatched her trembling hand back. Her gaze when it met mine looked haunted. "Is that really…?"

"Yes. This was my weapon in the arena." I stuck it back in the sheath and tucked it away out of sight. "It was all I had to my name when I left Ganai. That and a few credits."

"You kept it." She rubbed her arms as if she'd gotten cold. Immediately, Vos extended a tentacle and turned up the flames in the fireplace. Calla

didn’t seem to notice. “I sold mine in the market the day I turned sixteen,” she whispered. “Bought two good intanas, a couple of daggers, and a few other things. I never wanted to see it again.”

Many gladiators had felt the same way, which was why these unique weapons had found their way into dealers’ and collectors’ hands.

I needed to tell her why I’d named my ship the *Nivilus*, but that could wait.

“After I got my freedom, I never used it again, until recently,” I said, my voice quiet too. “I carried it with me for years. When I finally bought my own ship, I mounted it on the wall in the cargo bay and let it get dull and rusted. But when it came time for me to go to Saistea and find Orqiel…”

Calla’s sharp intake of breath made Vos stroke her arms with his tentacles. “You killed him with it?”

I couldn’t keep the pride out of my voice when I replied, “I did.”

She blinked rapidly. “Good.” For a beat her face crumpled, and then she took a deep, shaky breath and seemed to steel herself. “Good for you, Kee.”

Goosebumps erupted all over my body.

The only person who’d ever called me *Kee* was Calla when we were little, before we’d been sold and separated. And I’d all but forgotten her nickname for me.

Jarrix’s arm tightened around my middle. “Why don’t Vos and I prepare an evening meal while you and your sister talk?” He glanced at Vos. “If our hosts don’t mind?”

“I do not mind,” Vos said. “I very much enjoy cooking and welcome your assistance.”

“He does enjoy cooking,” Calla said, managing a small smile. She kissed her mate’s jaw and he smiled at her, revealing sharp, pointed teeth. She winked at me. “He’s been cooking for me from the moment we met.”

“Jarrix tried to cook for me,” I admitted. “But I didn’t let him.”

“She made it a rule aboard her ship,” Jarrix confirmed. “Ground rule number one, in fact. ‘The captain cooks for herself.’” He nuzzled my temple. “It has since ceased to be enforced.”

“It was the dumplings,” I muttered.

Calla perked up. “Dumplings?”

“Perhaps your sister’s mate will share his recipe.” Vos gave Calla a quick kiss and used his tentacles to put her on her feet. “You and Keela

should talk privately in our room while Jarrix and I cook. We will call you when the meal is ready."

"What about—?" I began, and then realized Zwee was snoring softly in the nest next to Poe, who'd retreated inside her shell to sleep. "Never mind," I finished. "It looks like they're fine."

"Come with me, Kee," Calla said. She took my hand, tugged me out of Jarrix's lap, and herded me down the hall toward the back of the capsule home. "Our bedroom would be fine, but I have an even *better* idea for where we can talk."

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CHAPTER 27

JARRIX



OUR MATES WERE IN THE GIGANTIC BATHTUB WEARING WHAT CALLA CALLED *swim suits*.

And they were laughing.

Vos leaned against the counter while his tentacles gathered the necessary ingredients to make a savory broth. “I have not heard my mate laugh like that before,” he said quietly, though there was no chance we would be overheard with the bathroom door closed.

“I haven’t either,” I said.

We exchanged a look of unspoken understanding.

It was surprisingly brotherly feeling, given before today I wouldn’t have thought a retired Silent Guard assassin could feel such sentiment. Every Guard I’d ever encountered had been cold and emotionless in the extreme. Their cruel training and isolated, dangerous lives made them nearly robotic.

But Vos’s love and devotion to Calla was as real and obvious as my feelings for my own mate, so perhaps our shared moment wasn’t so unexpected.

“How did you meet Calla?” I asked as I mixed the dumpling dough.

He gazed out the kitchen window toward the swamp. “In a very similar way to how you encountered Keela. My Calla crashed into the ocean not far from here. I happened to be swimming nearby that night and witnessed her ship being salvaged by the raiders who lived at the base where you landed today.” His hands flexed and his tentacles vibrated as if he was reliving the

memory. “They took her, either intending to ransom her or use her for their pleasure before she died.”

“Despicable,” I growled. “I hope they are dead.”

He flashed his pointed teeth. “Very.”

“Good.” This was a male after my own hearts. “Is that why the base is in ruins?” I asked.

Vos chuckled. “No, that was their own doing.” He set a pot on the cooking surface with more force than was necessary and hissed. “It was at those ruins that N’vera encountered my Calla and me.”

He looked at me, his gaze hard. “I know letting them leave alive led Keela to us and reunited her with her sister. I am happy when my mate is happy. But I cannot help but wish I had killed all the Kurutans that day. If this N’vera knew where my Calla is, perhaps others in their group do too.”

“I understand,” I said, and I did. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep Keela safe. Quietly, I added, “Though perhaps we do not voice this opinion to our mates.”

He returned his dark gaze to the window and the rain. “Perhaps not.”

We worked in companionable silence for a while.

“Did Calla resist your overtures?” I asked while gathering up the cut sections of dough.

“She did.” Grinning with pride and satisfaction, Vos looked up from seasoning the broth. “She is fierce, my Calla. For a time, I despaired. But our souls belong together, as I am sure you have found with your own mate. Eventually she offered me the opportunity to earn her love and trust and I committed myself to the task.” He raised his white eyebrows. “I take it Keela also resisted?”

“She threatened to kill me many times,” I confided. “With blades and with a gun, and by ejecting me into space. I was also used as bait, nearly stunned into unconsciousness, and threatened repeatedly with being ‘dumped’ at the next convenient space station.”

“Keela is a true warrior,” Vos said, nodding with approval. “From all I have heard today, she is a fearsome fighter like my Calla.”

“Like you, they paid dearly for their skills,” I observed. My training had been difficult and my career violent and dangerous, but at least I had entered the ranks of the GAIS voluntarily.

“Indeed, they suffered greatly.” Vos’s tentacles quivered again in what I’d come to recognize as rage. “I cannot forgive or forget what they

experienced in their lives, but they are both formidable survivors. We could not have asked for finer mates."

Keela and Calla were quieter now and no longer laughing, but hearing their voices—so alike, and yet so different—reminded me of perfectly tuned bells chiming sweetly.

"Magnificent females, aren't they?" Vos murmured, turning back to his broth.

"Truly magnificent," I agreed. I noticed the finely chopped purple herb he'd sprinkled into the simmering pot. "What have you added just then?"

He held up a leafy sprig. "Emera. It grows wild but we plant it in our garden and keep a pot of it during the rainy season." He gestured toward the corner of the kitchen and the herbs growing under a light. "Calla and I like it in our soups."

As the dumplings simmered, Vos and I returned to the living area, where we drank tea and revealed some of our pasts to each other. Most of what we'd done during our careers was classified—mine by the GAIS, and his by the Guard—but discussing missions in general and the planets we'd each visited led to a pleasant conversation.

Calla and Keela finally emerged from the bathroom, flushed and relaxed from their long soak in hot water. My mate had donned a tunic and pants she'd borrowed from her sister, and like Calla, she'd left her feet bare.

Her joy and relief felt effervescent through our bond, and her smile was the most carefree I'd seen since we'd met. She was truly happy, and though a trace of guilt and regret remained, her private talk with her sister had clearly eased the heavy weight she'd carried since she and Calla had been sold and separated.

I watched my mate murmuring with her sister in the kitchen as they poured themselves tea and tasted the simmering dumplings.

Now that she'd found Calla, would Keela want to stay on Iosa? Would I be content to make a home here as well, and trade my new career as a smuggler for a quiet life in a capsule home on a rainy moon?

Vos caught my eye and gave me a small nod as if he knew precisely what I was thinking. And perhaps he did. I hadn't made much effort to keep my thoughts off my face. Without realizing it, I'd let down my guard here in this little home in a way I seldom had before, other than when I was aboard the *Nivilus*.

My barefoot mate whispered something to her sister, her eyes twinkling. She glanced at me and smiled, and for that moment, I would have sworn the rain had stopped and the sun emerged.

The answer to the question of whether I could live on Iosa came surprisingly easily, bringing with it a pleasant sense of purpose and calm. If Keela wanted to remain near her sister, I would stay, and I would be happy.

Keela was my home, not the *Nivilus* or Trakhan or the void between stars. As long as we had a ship, we could always visit other places whenever we experienced wanderlust. And if ever I needed a fight, perhaps a kaory or a serpent of the swamp would volunteer its services.

Once we'd filled our bowls with dumplings, we ate our meal in the sitting area since the dining table had only two chairs.

"We almost always eat on the sofa anyway," Calla confided. She was once again wrapped in Vos's tentacles, with their shared bowl of dumplings resting on a tentacle and steadied by one of his human hands. "We like to sit by the window."

"And I prefer my mate to be in my lap," Vos said, caressing her loose hair with the tip of one tentacle while he ate. He glanced at me. "I see you feel the same."

Keela heaved an exaggerated sigh from where she was seated crossways across my thighs with my tail around her calf. "I've given up fighting him on it," she grumbled, as if she hadn't climbed into my lap of her own accord the last half-dozen times we'd ended up sitting together like this. "He seems to think this is the only appropriate way for mates to sit."

Calla paused with her spoonful of dumplings halfway to her mouth. "Wait, is it not?"

We all chuckled before focusing again on our food. Before long, our bowls were empty. Vos collected our dishes with his tentacles and set them aside on a table.

A contented quiet settled over us while the rain continued unabated outside. I toyed with Keela's hair and settled her against my chest. Vos and Calla cuddled as well, her slim body almost disappearing within the nest of his tentacles.

Yes, if Keela wanted to stay on Iosa, this would not be a bad life at all.

The next morning, I woke before my mate as usual.

But instead of waking at 0400 ship's time in a bunk vibrating with the thrumming of engines, I woke into stillness just before dawn, lying on my back on the sofa in Vos and Calla's home with Keela snoring quietly on my chest, wrapped in my wings.

The nest in the corner was empty. Poe apparently habitually guarded the outside of the home at night and Zwee had opted to keep her company. The door to Vos and Calla's bedroom was closed. Other than the gentle sound of light rain and the faint humming of the home's power systems, all I heard was my mate's heartbeat and breathing.

I might have slept in a more comfortable bed in the past, but this was, by any measure, one of the most perfect mornings of my life.

The only thing that would make it more ideal would be waking my mate with my head between her thighs. But since we were in her sister's home, I discarded the idea immediately.

Well, *almost* immediately.

Even in her sleep, Keela was contented and at peace. Possibly that had granted me a deeper and better sleep than usual, along with the soft sound of rain. I tried to imagine waking like this every day—albeit in our own bed rather than on a borrowed sofa—and found the idea very appealing.

As if she'd felt me thinking of her, Keela stirred. Blinking sleepily, she smiled at me and stretched gingerly. "How's your back?" she murmured.

"It's fine," I said softly, drawing her closer so I could kiss her forehead. "I've slept in much worse conditions than on a luxurious sofa with my mate on my chest."

She chuckled and tucked her head under my chin. "It *is* a luxurious sofa. Vos must like to sprawl out. Those tentacles take up a lot of space."

I stroked her back from the nape of her neck down to the base of her spine and the soft curve of her ass. Her borrowed clothing was extremely soft. I'd have to find out where Calla had purchased it and add some similar pieces to Keela's closet. "Do you still plan to show them the ship after the morning meal?"

"Yes." She laced our fingers together and nibbled her lip as if she wanted to say something. Was this the moment she'd tell me she wanted to stay permanently on Iosa?

"Go on," I said, giving her a little squeeze. "I'm listening."

She huffed. I nuzzled her hair and waited.

“Before we got here, I was thinking about making Trakhan our home base,” she whispered finally. “But now…I think I’d like to make Iosa our base of operations between runs.” She craned her neck to scrutinize my expression. “I know you’d probably prefer Trakhan, given Byx is there, and Felina, and of course they’re wonderful. And all the gods above and below know the view of the nebula and that arboretum are spectacular—”

“Trakhan would make a very good base of operations for a lot of reasons,” I interrupted. “But you know what it *doesn’t* have?”

“What?”

I pressed my lips to her ear. “Your sister and Vos,” I murmured. “And therefore, at least half your heart would always be missing.”

“Oh.” Her lovely green eyes shimmered. “You’d live here with me when we aren’t on a job?”

“My love, I’d live with you on the hellscape that is Forval IX if that’s what you wanted,” I said, using my thumbs to wipe away the two tears that had spilled over. “So making a home on rainy moon doesn’t seem like much of a sacrifice.”

Joy and relief poured through our bond. She kissed me hard, her fingers in my hair. “You don’t seem surprised to hear that I want a home here,” she said softly.

“I’m not,” I admitted. “No one who sees or feels how happy you are to be reunited with Calla would be the least bit surprised.”

“Surprised about what?” Calla emerged from the back bedroom, followed by Vos. Both had dressed in what appeared to be their usual attire: drawstring pants for Vos and a tunic and leggings for Calla.

“That it’s raining,” Keela said before I could answer. She extricated herself from my arms and wings and rose, stretching with a yawn. “Is the offer still open to fly us to see my ship after breakfast?”

Last night, Vos and Calla had revealed they’d recently purchased a small short-range flyer with cloaking and stealth tech to make regular trips to nearby villages. It was located between the house and the tree line on the opposite side from where we’d approached their home yesterday. The landing pad was so well camouflaged that neither Keela nor I had suspected a ship was there.

“Yes, of course,” Vos said, heading directly for the kitchen. “I will prepare the meal and we will leave once we have eaten and dressed.” He studied the sky through the kitchen window as his tentacles gathered

ingredients and put a pan on the cooking surface. “I believe the rain will be light today.”

Keela squeezed my hand before heading off to the bathroom to wash and dress.

An hour later, our group boarded the little flyer. It had room for four passengers plus a decent amount of cargo. Once Keela revealed her plan to make a home base nearby, I planned to ask Vos where he’d purchased it so I could order a similar model.

I’d already begun secretly browsing options for capsule homes with a modular design that would make it easy to add onto the main unit. The same instincts that drove me to make a nest in the arboretum and our cabin aboard the *Nivilus* were now fixated on providing a secure and comfortable home for my mate on Iosa, as well as transportation better suited to life here.

Of course, Keela would expect to finance half of everything and be just as involved in the process, but I allowed myself to get a head start on the planning.

Poe had remained behind to guard the house while we visited the *Nivilus*. Zwee had wedged herself into the space between Keela’s feet and the back of Calla’s seat for the short flight.

“The ocean is beautiful,” Keela said, her gaze fixed on the small window next to her seat. “Is it why you chose to retire to Iosa, Vos?”

“Not entirely,” Vos said, circling the abandoned raider base smoothly to bring us in for a landing on a small, cracked landing pad about ten meters from the *Nivilus*. “I had visited Jakora for work many times and always found this moon beautiful when the transport passed by. I did not know at the time what drew me here, other than it was a peaceful place to build a home and live quietly.” He kissed Calla’s hand. “Of course, now I know I was drawn here because once my hearts were ready to accept her, my mate would fall from the sky into my arms.”

Calla snorted, but her smile was indulgent. “By that he means my fighter more or less landed on top of him and almost killed him outright.”

“I was barely concussed, my Calla,” Vos countered. “And it was a very small price to pay.”

Keela slid her gaze over to meet mine and hid her grin with her hand.

We disembarked from the flyer. As Vos had predicted, the rain remained light. With far less wind to stir the waves than yesterday, the ocean was

much calmer.

“You should see Iosa during the growing season,” Calla said, hands on her hips as she surveyed the sea. “Sun every day, perfect temperatures, and our garden seems to double in size overnight. And swimming in the ocean is wonderful—as long as you stay close to shore.” She pointed at an enormous dark shape in the distance just as it disappeared below the surface. “There are very, *very* big predators out there.”

“That is good to know.” Keela linked her arm through her sister’s, her expression a mixture of excitement and eagerness. I had to hide my smile at her almost childlike impatience. “Let me give you the grand tour of my ship.”

As we crossed the soggy ground to the ship’s hatch, Calla studied the vessel with a keen eye. “So this is the *Nivilus*. I like the exterior damage. Not enough to look like obvious camouflage, not too little. Perfect for blending in at any given space station.”

Keela beamed as if she’d just been paid the ultimate compliment and used her wristcomm to open the ship’s cargo ramp.

The moment the ramp touched the landing pad, Zwee scurried up the incline and stationed herself at the top like a sentry. Vos and I followed the sisters into the ship.

“Greetings, Captain Wren, First Mate To’vok, and guests,” Siber said, sounding very formal. “Welcome aboard the *Nivilus*. I am Siber, the ship’s Arch-Core enhanced artificial intelligence system.”

“Pleased to meet you, Siber,” Calla said. “I’ve never interacted with an Arch-Core system. What are the key differences between your functions and a Velo-Diorite system?”

Keela’s eyes widened. “Now you’ve done it,” she muttered.

She dragged Calla across the cargo bay and farther into the ship as Siber launched into a diatribe about inferior AI systems.

Vos and I remained behind in the cargo bay, ostensibly so he could look over our collection of weapons.

As soon as the sisters disappeared into medbay, Vos revealed his motivation for signaling with a flick of his fingers that he wished to speak to me privately.

“Forgive me for overhearing your conversation with Keela this morning about making Iosa your home base,” Vos said, his hands folded behind his back. “Our room is not soundproof, and my hearing is quite good.”

“I fully expected you’d hear us,” I said, without adding that his hearing —not to mention his sense of smell—were the primary reasons I hadn’t woken my mate in the way to which I’d become accustomed.

I handed him the plasma-edged sword his tentacles had swayed toward multiple times. He hefted it easily, testing its balance and edge before stepping away from me and demonstrating his skills with several swings of the blade.

“I imagine Keela will tell Calla soon about her plans,” I said. “Do you have any objections?”

“I do not—only cautions.” He returned the sword to its place on the wall and turned back to me. “It is important to me that my Calla is happy. She has spoken of her sister many times in the past year, and it has always been with enormous grief and many tears.”

He rubbed his chest over his hearts with his fist. I well understood the ache caused by our mates’ pain.

“I am pleased to see them together and feel my Calla’s joy,” he continued. “I would be the most cruel of males to voice an objection.”

“However…?” I prompted.

He gave me a grave nod. “The only thing I value more than her happiness is her safety. If you establish a home on Iosa, I ask only that you follow through on your oath to do all you can to ensure she remains as safe as she can be.”

“I stand by my oath,” I stated. “I would no more endanger Calla than I would my own mate. Keela and I will make her security a top priority.”

“I accept your word on the matter.” He regarded me. “You are familiar with how those in the Guard are raised and trained?”

“Fairly familiar,” I said. “As much as anyone outside the organization can be.”

“The cruelties are endless and the loneliness soul-destroying, much like our mates’ early lives in the arenas,” he said bluntly. “Recently, my Calla and I have begun to plan for a family. If we have younglings, I want them to experience only happiness, belonging, and companionship. I…*we*…would welcome an extended family for them.”

His voice lowered further in volume, though our mates had long since gone farther down the corridor toward the cockpit. “Last night, my Calla spoke of how much she would like to see her sister play with our

younglings. Her yearning was so strong, I thought my hearts could not take it." He rubbed his chest again.

Keela and I had not yet discussed whether we might have offspring. As long as I'd worked for the GAIS, such things weren't possible. Well, they were *possible*, but I would never have sired a child and then returned to undercover assignments leaving their mother to raise them alone with no contact for long periods of time.

But now I was no longer an operative. I was no longer simply surviving day to day. I had a beautiful mate and an extended family. The possibilities for our future suddenly seemed endless.

The mental image of Keela lying in our bed with her belly rounded with our offspring stole my breath. And the thought of an infant with my mate's lovely green eyes and red hair, and perhaps my wings and a tiny tail, nursing at her breast…I nearly staggered.

With effort, I dragged my attention away from that captivating picture and back to Vos.

"I am sure Keela would like nothing more than to love and care for your younglings," I told him. "I would be privileged to do so as well."

Vos extended his hand. "Thank you, brother."

An alarm blared. Something punched me in the chest.

And everything went black.

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CHAPTER 28

KEELA



THE ALARM CUT OFF A FRACTION OF A SECOND AFTER IT BEGAN.

The *Nivilus* and everything in it went dark and silent. The only illumination in the cockpit was the lavender-hued daylight filtering through the front window.

Dread and fury washed through me like a wave of icy water.

My wristcomm was dead.

My ship was dead.

Our plasma weapons and everything else with circuits or datachips or power of any kind were dead. Smoke and the stench of melted circuitry stung my eyes and burned my nose.

And worst of all, where Jarrix's ever-present warm reassurance lived in my chest, there was a sudden, terrible, echoing silence.

Moving as one, Calla and I pulled our daggers and raced back toward the sound of plasma shots coming from the cargo bay. Through the open doorway, I caught sight of Vos and Jarrix taking cover behind a stack of cargo crates filled with all the supplies we'd brought from Trakhan.

Or rather *Vos* seemed to have taken cover, and dragged or carried an unconscious Jarrix with him, along with what looked like most of the contents of our weapons cache. Those tentacles were certainly useful.

I didn't see Zwee anywhere. Hopefully she'd hidden herself and was safe.

Before we reached the cargo bay entrance, Calla yanked me sideways through the open doors of the medbay.

As we hid out of sight, I glimpsed three males with spiky blue hair and long fingers tipped with claws advancing up the ramp into the bay. I didn't recognize the ones on the left and right with rifles at their shoulders, but I knew the male in the middle wielding a truly enormous plasma-edged sword and a smile colder than the surface of the ice planet Aloris.

Sjer.

I had no time to wonder how he'd found us or feel remorse for leading a privateer to my sister's refuge. I couldn't even grieve for my damaged ship. All my focus was on those males and their weapons.

Thanks to the illegal disruptor they'd deployed, we were severely outgunned. Ninety-nine percent of the ship's weapons and defenses were out of commission, along with my mate. Jarrix's ability to manipulate electrical fields had been an enormous boon right up until two minutes ago.

Now, thanks to the very same genetic advantages that had saved us on Ghira and Saistea, the disruptor had rendered him unconscious and vulnerable.

Sjer was a dead male, and it was going to be my hand that put an end to him.

"We are here for Tal Noku and his female," Sjer said, his voice unnaturally loud in the silence of my ship. "We have no quarrel with anyone else."

"This is not true," Vos said. "You have targeted me as well with this attack."

I'd thought Sjer was cold, but he had *nothing* on the frozen wasteland that was Vos's tone. It sent a shiver up my spine.

"I am only recently retired from the Silent Guard," Vos continued. "And you carry weapons capable of harming my mate."

I didn't need to see the males in the cargo bay to know hearing Vos was a Silent Guard assassin had just made them reconsider everything about their plan of attack. No doubt that was precisely Vos's intention when he revealed that information. Of course he wanted their attention on him and not on his mate or me, or the unconscious male next to him.

He'd just ensured he was their primary target, and it made my stomach churn.

“You have my word I will let you and your mate live, Fortusian.” Sjer somehow managed to sound both deferential and authoritative—not an easy trick. “As I said, I am only interested in Tal and his female. I give you my word on this. I am well-known as an honorable male.”

Calla let out a soft snort and drew me back from the medbay door. She pressed her lips to my ear. “What do we have for weapons in here?”

I went directly to a storage cabinet and pulled out two tranquilizer rifles I kept on hand for the rare occasions I had to land planetside and worried about local predators.

With a flick of my thumb, I switched them both to manual mode—which used compressed air to fire—and handed one to Calla.

She looked hers over in a single glance, noting the capacity and sighting line, and raised her eyebrows. “Are we taking prisoners?” she mouthed.

“No,” I murmured.

“Good.” She thumbed the dosage dial up to maximum. “I’ll take left. You take right. The captain in the middle goes to whoever gets to him first.”

I touched her arm. “Calla—”

“If you apologize, I will shoot you,” she whispered. “These males are your enemy. That makes them *our* enemies.” Her gaze turned flinty. “And nobody threatens my sister or her mate and lives.”

Letting her step out of this medbay and into the line of fire was one of the hardest things I’d ever had to do. But I had no right to fight her on this. My little sister was as much of a warrior as me.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you.” She gave my hand one last squeeze and edged toward the doors. “On two. One—”

A male screamed. Shouts and plasma blasts erupted in the cargo bay.

“Two,” she said immediately.

We ran toward the sound of fighting.

The moment we cleared the doorway, Calla and I fired our rifles almost simultaneously.

My shot hit the male to Sjer’s right in the neck above his collar. He stumbled and started to reach for the dart just before his legs went out from under him. He sprawled on the deck, convulsed a few times, and went still.

I was already in motion before he stopped moving, crossing the bay toward his dropped rifle. In my peripheral vision, I noticed a fourth male, one who hadn’t been in the bay earlier, on his back on the cargo ramp with

Zwee's teeth in his throat. I couldn't tell if he was struggling feebly or it was just her bites making his body twitch.

Meanwhile, Vos *erupted*—that was the only word for how he exploded out from behind the crates and into my line of sight—the moment Calla appeared in the bay.

She shot the male who'd been on Sjer's left. Her target had barely hit the deck when Vos was on him, his tentacles making short work of sending the male's appendages flying in different directions.

I tossed my tranquilizer gun aside, grabbed my target's dropped plasma rifle, and took aim at Sjer. The pirate captain was charging toward the crates where Jarrix was groaning and struggling to rise.

Sjer had cast aside his sword and drawn his sidearm, a high-powered plasma handgun with auto-targeting, capable of punching a hole through not only my mate but the deck of my ship and the outer hull too.

My rifle shot caught Sjer in the shoulder and spun him around. Our gazes locked.

His face twisted in pain and fury, he roared something unintelligible and fired three times at the same time I pulled my trigger again. The first bolt of plasma from his gun seared my upper left arm just as my shot hit him in the stomach.

Someone hit me from the side in a flying tackle. Calla and I went down in a tangle of limbs. Sjer's second and third bolts sizzled over our heads and burned holes in the ship's hull.

I twisted around in Calla's arms to look back at Sjer just in time to see a flash of black wings behind him.

A wide blade emerged through the center of his chest, just above the wound left by my second rifle shot. Sjer let out a garbled sound.

"I am Jarrix To'vok of the Alliance Intelligence Service," Jarrix hissed in the captain's ear. "And that is the last time you will ever hurt my mate."

And with a single twist of the blade, Sjer was dead.

With his raised boot, Jarrix shoved the captain's body off the sword and let it fall. He wiped the blade clean on Sjer's uniform, then gave the body a kick that sent it sliding across the deck until it hit the far wall.

I sagged into my sister's arms and let her hold me. The burn on my arm was agonizing and my hip hurt where I'd landed after Calla knocked me down, but I'd take a flesh wound and bruises over three holes in my chest anytime.

Vos and Jarrix reached us at the same time. As Jarrix helped me to my feet, Vos gently gathered Calla in his tentacles and ran his hands over her body, cooing while he searched for injuries.

“I’m all right,” she reassured him. “None of this blood is mine.” She cupped his cheek and gave him a kiss so sweet it made me smile despite my pain.

Jarrix wrapped his arms around me and drew me tight against his chest. “Mate,” he murmured into my hair.

I wanted nothing more than to breathe in his scent and let him heal my wounds in medbay, but we might have more problems waiting for us outside.

“We need to find the *Fancy*,” I said into his chest. “If anyone else is alive, they need to be dealt with.”

“These males were the four remaining members of the *Fancy’s* crew,” Jarrix told us, gesturing at the dead. “If there are any more aboard, they joined after I left.”

Vos set Calla back on her feet. “Let us find the ship and be certain,” he said.

“Vos…” I began.

He raised his hand, his expression surprisingly gentle. “There is no need to apologize. These males were our enemies as well. It was my honor to stand with you in this fight.”

Calla caught my eye. *Told you*, she mouthed.

He and Calla gathered all the working weapons from the bodies around us while Jarrix treated my burned arm and administered some much-appreciated painkillers.

We left Zwee to guard the ship—and finish her meal—and went hunting for the *Fancy*.

Vos and Calla’s flyer had avoided the same fate as the *Nivilus* thanks to its multiphasic shielding. I made an immediate decision to add that expensive but clearly necessary feature to our ship at my earliest opportunity.

When we finally found the clearing where Sjer had hidden the *Fleeting Fancy*—three kilometers from the raider base, in the opposite direction of

Vos and Calla's home—the ship was already gone.

Jarrix speculated the newly hired corsairs Sjer had left aboard while he and the other original crew attacked us on the *Nivilus* had taken the opportunity to steal the ship the moment the captain was dead.

Once we returned to the *Nivilus*, Vos allowed Jarrix to use the flyer's comms to transmit a secure, encoded message to Byx. We relayed our situation and requested assistance with both my ship and tracing the *Fancy*.

While we waited for Byx's response, Jarrix and I set to work cleaning the *Nivilus's* cargo bay as Zwee basked outside in the faint, lavender-tinged sunshine, her distended belly and all her tiny walking tendrils turned skyward.

Vos and Calla overrode our protests and helped us clean up and dispose of what little remained of Sjer and his crewmates, making short work of the task.

I was sitting at the top of the open cargo ramp, resting and daydreaming of a long, hot soak in Vos and Calla's bathtub, when Jarrix returned from the flyer with news.

He sat next to me, wrapped his wing around me, and coiled his tail around my calf. "According to Byx's sources, the *Fleeting Fancy* has already been re-registered with a new name and a new captain," he said.

I snorted. "That didn't take long."

He grinned, flashing his fangs. "He also informed me the bounty on my head has been withdrawn. It seems the new crew of the *Tamias* has better things to do with their time than hunt me—like try to find the crashed vessel full of luxury goods Sjer was tracking before your bounty caught his eye."

Finally, no more bounties. I heaved a sigh of relief. "I approve of the new captain's priorities."

"That crashed ship is worth a fortune. I'm sure it wasn't a difficult decision." Jarrix rubbed my back, careful to avoid areas that were still sore. "Byx is sending a trusted friend to tow the *Nivilus* to Trakhan for repairs," he added. "The ship will be here in two days."

"Is two days long enough to make amends?" I gestured toward the beach, where Vos and Calla were watching something big swimming in the distance. She was standing in front of him, wrapped in his arms and tentacles. "I did this," I said, my throat suddenly tight. "I brought this to

their door after I swore to myself I wouldn't. I don't even know how it *happened*."

"Byx has a theory," Jarrix said, his expression grim. "One of his deck crew quit abruptly. It appears he joined the crew of a merchant ship and left the station immediately before we did. Byx suspects the crew member was either bribed or forced to put a tracker on the *Nivilus* after the final scan was done. Byx apologized profusely for not suspecting the male's motives for suddenly leaving and has insisted on covering the cost of repairing our ship—including some upgrades."

He tipped my chin up and gazed into my eyes. "Vos and Calla both have said they don't hold this against us. I don't think they would say so if they didn't mean it, especially Vos. He doesn't strike me as the sort of male who spares the feelings of others."

I couldn't disagree with his assessment, but my guilt remained. "If Calla had been hurt—"

He kissed my forehead. "But she wasn't because she is a formidable warrior. All three of you—and even Zwee—fought well as a team. I wish I'd been able to do more than just stagger around for most of it."

"Hey." I poked his hard stomach. "You came into the fight just when I needed you most." I scowled. "Although I will say that I wanted to kill Sjer for hurting you twice, first by shooting you in the back on Ghira Station, and then today with that damn disruptor."

"And I wanted him dead by my sword for shooting you and for what he's done to our ship." He grinned. "You put two holes in him, I finished the job, and Zwee took a few bites for herself. I consider the debt settled on all our accounts." He nuzzled my hair. "Forgive yourself, my love. Calla and Vos already have."

Everything he said made sense, and Calla had told me in no uncertain terms—multiple times—that I shouldn't blame myself for anything that had befallen us. But when it came to my sister, letting go of that guilt and forgiving myself was much easier said than done.

We sat quietly until Calla and Vos rejoined us. Vos remained at the bottom of the ramp, keeping an eye out for predators or other dangers, while Calla plunked herself down on my other side.

"I heard you have a rescue coming in two days," she said, leaning back on her hands and staring out at the sea.

“Yes.” I plucked at one of the many tears in my jumpsuit. I needed to change, but I’d run out of energy after getting my wounds treated and cleaning out the cargo bay. “I’m glad I keep multiple backups of Siber’s systems and all my files, so I won’t lose anything that’s truly important. But I don’t know how long it will take to get the ship running again. Everything aboard is…” I waved my hand at the dark and smoky interior of the ship. “Fried.”

“Stay here while the ship gets fixed,” Calla said suddenly.

I jerked. “What?”

“You don’t have to actually be there on Trakhan during the repairs, right?” She turned to face me. “So stay here. Let your friend Byx tow the ship to the outpost and send you updates. When it’s ready, you can arrange transportation to go get it.”

I swallowed hard. “Calla—”

“I want you *here*,” she said emphatically and grabbed my hand. “I want you to stay here with me, with us, while you get your ship fixed. Before you head back out there and it’s a long time until I see you again.” The pleading in her gaze felt like a knife right to my heart.

Jarrix and I hadn’t even begun to work out the details of our plan to live here, but I couldn’t let my sister think I intended to disappear from her life as quickly as I’d reappeared into it.

“Jarrix and I have talked it over, and we want to make Iosa our home base,” I said before she could argue more.

She squealed and threw her arms around me. “Yes,” she crowed in my ear, making me wince. “Oh, Keela, I’m so happy! We’ll find you homestead near ours where you can put a capsule home, and I’m sure there’s somewhere in the city you can dock the *Nivilus* between runs, and you can get a flyer like ours to go back and forth to the dock, and—”

I hugged her back. “So I’m forgiven for this?” I said softly.

She drew back and frowned at me. “There is nothing to forgive. Because of you, I got to kill some pirates today who were trying to hurt you and Jarrix. Do you know how long it’s been since I got to kill pirates?”

“About a year?” I guessed with a smile.

“About a year,” she confirmed. “And nothing I did for the Alliance Defense felt anywhere near as good as killing these scuts.” She grinned in a way that reminded me of Vos’s toothy smile. “It was so satisfying. That Captain Sjer was a lying asshole.”

“You have no idea,” Jarrix muttered.

I squared my shoulders. “Okay, let’s say we decide to stay here while our ship is dry-docked for repairs. We can’t live on your sofa. We’ll have to look for that homestead and a capsule home right away.”

“Already started looking as of this morning,” my mate said, lacing our fingers together. “And Vos told me where we can purchase a flyer.”

My heart warmed. It felt good to be building a life together. And not just a life together with Jarrix, but with my sister and her mate on a moon I could imagine thinking of as my new homeworld.

“Also…” Calla squeezed my other hand, her expression suddenly serious. “I have an idea for what we can do with Leomer.”

The reminder of that silver orb sobered me. “What are you thinking?”

She gestured at the ocean. “Vos and I think about the sea as a place that washes things clean. There’s a story behind that and I’ll tell you all about it later, but maybe scattering Leomer’s remains in the ocean will cleanse us… and maybe him too.” Her gaze searched my face. “Unless you’d like to do something else, like leave him on Forval IX or eject his remains into space where my ship was supposedly destroyed, like he suggested.”

We gazed out at the endless waves of the lavender sea.

“I like your idea,” I said finally. “Ganai is a dirty, dusty nightmare. Saistea is a rotting city. And from everything I’ve read and seen, Forval IX is a hellscape. I don’t know what Leomer deserves, but maybe it’s to be someplace beautiful for once.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I think so too.”

“I had an idea too.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “What if we used the credits in those accounts to help fund operations that free indentured and trafficked fighters from arenas like the ones on Saistea?”

“Yes,” Calla gasped. “That’s *perfect*.”

Jarrix’s tail tip stroked my leg. “Make the machine wobble even more,” he said approvingly. “This is good thinking, my love. Byx will know who to contact, I’m sure.”

The weight that had sat on my chest from the moment I’d seen Leomer’s hologram finally lifted.

Calla put her head on my shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re really here, Kee.”

“I can’t believe I am either.” I leaned my head against hers and closed my eyes. A drop of rain hit my nose. “How much does it rain here, really?”

I asked.

“A lot,” Calla sighed as more drops landed. “A *whole* lot. But you get used to it.”

Before the heavy rain arrived, we managed to load our essentials from the *Nivilus* onto the flyer and close the cargo bay manually using a set of hand cranks I’d hadn’t needed to operate for years.

And then we all piled into the flyer and headed back to Vos and Calla’s homestead with Zwee sound asleep in the back on top of Jarrix’s jackets and trousers. If my mate had an opinion about her use of his brand-new, bespoke clothes for her nest, he kept it to himself.

He just put me in his lap, fastened the safety harness over us both, and cooed softly in my ear all the way home.

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EPILOGUE

KEELA



THREE YEARS LATER

THE JOURNEY BACK TO IOSA AFTER BEING GONE ON COURIER RUNS ALWAYS seemed to take eons, but luckily my mate had a knack for helping us pass the time.

"Jarrix," I groaned, my head falling back onto his chest as the stars streaked past the cockpit window. "Please. I can't."

"You *can*," he countered, his hands on my hips. His voice dropped and became that delicious growl that I loved so much. "You've only screamed for me twice, my love, and that is simply not enough."

A tremor rolled down my spine, and I felt a trickle of arousal drip out of me. I couldn't see over my belly to where we were joined, but I pictured my slickness rolling down his knot toward those perfect, firm balls and shivered again.

His hands slid possessively up and over my rounded belly to cup my breasts. He was so careful with me even in our most passionate moments—but that didn't mean he was merciful. Especially when it came to giving me orgasms.

"Look how beautiful you are," he murmured, caressing my breasts, belly, and spread thighs. Every contact left a soft, lingering tingle in its

wake. With practice, he'd mastered his electric touch until he could now create pulses on his fingertips and control the intensity of every spark.

And I was the sole beneficiary of all that hard-earned talent.

He opened his thighs a little more to pull mine farther apart and I groaned. My legs were draped over his as he sat in the captain's chair of the *Nivilus* with his upper cock buried inside my dripping pussy all the way to the start of his knot. I'd wanted to ride both his cocks, but he'd insisted I face the window and take only the larger one. Such a bossy male. I'd drop him at the closest space station if I didn't love him so much.

When one of his hands slipped between my thighs to rub my clit and the other cupped my breast to gently tease my pierced nipple, the twin sparks made me writhe on his cock and wail.

"You're so sensitive, sweet mate," he murmured in my ear, his voice a purr. He circled my clit with the pad of his finger, sparks hitting those nerves in a steady rhythm that drove me toward a third climax as relentlessly as our ship hurtling through space on the way home. "Gods above, you're squeezing me so tightly in that perfect little cunt. Are you going to come for me, my love? Will you scream my name and come all over my cock?"

"Yes," I gasped. I let go of the chair's armrests, arched my back, and reached up to lace my fingers behind his neck. "Jarrix, gods, please. Hold me."

He wrapped one arm across my breasts and coiled his tail tighter around my right calf while he tended to my clit. "I've got you," he purred in my ear as I whimpered and ground myself on his cock until my eyes were rolling back in my head.

Those ridges…that piercing…that *stretch*…gods above, I was a lucky woman.

I wanted his knot too, but I knew he wouldn't give it to me, or his full load of cum, until I'd come at least once or twice more. He was greedy like that.

My cries became incoherent as my pleasure crescendoed and threatened to explode. He was so good at driving me closer and closer to the edge without quite letting me go over. It was good and it was evil and merciless and *oh gods*…

He ghosted his tingling fingertip right over my clit instead of circling it, and I broke.

With a scream that was some part of his name, I came, bucking and thrashing and sobbing in his embrace, and with a gush of arousal that must have drenched his knot, lower cock, and balls.

Cooing softly so I was soft and pliant in his arms, he slid his knot inside me not with a jerk of his hips but as a gentle glide. He stretched me wide open and held me right there, with his knot halfway in, suspended perfectly between pleasure and pain.

There was another orgasm coiling inside me, softer and sweeter than the explosive one he'd just given me, and I wanted it. I wanted all of him inside me, forever.

"My love," he crooned in my ear, running his hands all over my body in a possessive kind of worship more heady and intoxicating than a full bottle of Bacoran wine. "My captain. My mate. The gods shaped me to fill you like this."

With his tingling fingertips, he caressed my pussy, exploring every detail of where I was stretched wide around his knot. I shuddered hard and moaned.

"Tell me how this feels," he murmured.

"So full," I wailed, not caring how desperate I sounded because I *was* desperate. "Gods, it feels so good. Jarrix…"

"Do you want all of my knot?" he asked, as if he didn't know I did. "Do you want to come again and be filled up until you can't take one more drop?"

"Yes," I gasped. "Please. Give me your knot. I want to be filled."

With a deep groan of satisfaction that rumbled in his chest, he held my hips and slid the rest of the way inside, wrenching a ragged cry out of me. I ground on his knot once…twice…

With a long, ragged growl and gentle thrusts of his hips, Jarrix wrapped me carefully in his arms and came. His releases were bursts of heat that filled me while his lower cock spurted onto the deck below our chair.

My final orgasm was soft and perfect, and left me boneless and gasping in his arms.

As I trembled and panted, Jarrix grabbed the blanket he'd left folded on the co-pilot's seat and draped it over me, ensuring it was tucked in snugly all around me until only my head remained uncovered.

I was warm and safe in Jarrix's arms and we were only a few hours from Iosa.

“I love you,” I murmured.

He kissed my temple. “I love you too.”

I blinked sleepily out at the stars while he played with my hair, twirling it around his fingers before letting it slip free. I’d started leaving it loose more and more in the past year, except when I was around Calla’s baby. I adored my nephew, but those little hands and tentacles loved to grab and yank.

A series of flutters and kicks in my belly made me smile. “Here.” I pressed Jarrix’s much-larger hand to my tummy so he could feel them too. “Our children are restless.”

“They’re excited.” Jarrix rested his chin on top of my head. “They know we’re almost home and we plan to stay for a while.”

I chuckled. “You think they know that?”

“Of course.” He rubbed my belly in soothing circles. “They know when their mother is happy and content just as I do. There’s a certain way you feel when we’re headed home. If these little ones are as smart as you, which I’m sure they are, they know.” He nuzzled my hair. “They know we’re ready to meet them.”

“Not yet,” I objected with a laugh. “Two more months, the doctor says. Just because the expansion on our home is done and the nursery is finished doesn’t mean we’re ready. This little duo needs to simmer a bit longer.” I sighed. “Two months of sitting at home listening to the rain, plus however many more months we want to wait before taking courier jobs again. That’s a long time without being out here. I don’t know how we’ll survive it.”

It was Jarrix’s turn to chuckle. His chest vibrated against my back. “You know exactly how we’ll survive it,” he said. “We’ll see Vos and Calla and Dari every day. We’ll all cook and eat together and watch Poe and Zwee eat enni and hiss at every sound in the swamp.” He rubbed my belly again. “And then we’ll have our hands full with our son and daughter. There will be good days, and hard days, but we will face them together as mates. As a family.”

My vision shimmered. I blinked rapidly and used part of the blanket to wipe my eyes. “Damn hormones,” I muttered. “Are you *sure* you can’t give me something for this so I’m not crying all the time for no reason?”

“My mate, you don’t cry all the time,” he scolded gently. “And it’s certainly not for no reason.”

I sniffled and huffed. He chuckled again and settled me a little closer against his chest.

My gaze drifted from the stars streaking past to the little hologram stand I kept on far left side of the cockpit controls. It was an image of Vos holding Calla in his tentacles with little Dari cradled in her arms. The infant was reaching out toward us with his hands and tiny tentacles because I'd captured the image on my datapad. Calla was looking at her son and laughing and Vos was smiling. He smiled a lot these days. So did Jarrix.

So did I.

Siber's voice interrupted my wandering thoughts. "Captain Wren, we've received a priority signal from a shipping agent on Jakora. They acknowledge that you are on leave, but they're offering double the standard rate for a direct delivery of Angel Coast Ale to a buyer located in the city of Onat'ras on Fortusia. The buyer, an Ambassador Atlath, is covering the fee. He has requested the agent employ, and I quote, 'your best and most trustworthy bonded courier.'"

I tilted my head back to meet Jarrix's dark gaze. "One last job before leave, First Mate To'vok?" I asked, my hands on my blanket-covered belly.

His mouth quirked. "Siber, tell the agent we would *consider* postponing our planned leave and taking the job if the buyer will pay triple."

"Affirmative," the AI said. "One moment."

I narrowed my eyes at Jarrix. "*Triple?*"

"We're worth it," he said simply.

"Ground rule seventeen," I reminded him. "When we disagree, the captain has the final say over what rates we charge."

"Trust me, Captain." He kissed my head. "He'll say yes. We're the *Nivilus*. We're the best."

With a sigh, I closed my eyes. No one was going to pay us triple our already high rates. So much for one last job and another visit to beautiful Fortusia.

I could have overruled Jarrix, but maybe it was for the best. I did get tired much more easily these days, and we didn't really *need* the credits.

Despite the costs of building our new home, buying a flyer, and weeks-long stays on Iosa between blocks of scheduled deliveries, we had substantial savings built up from almost three years of courier work. We'd established a reputation as dependable and resourceful—and our upgraded shielding and shadow mode systems allowed us to make deliveries in many

places other couriers couldn't travel safely. Or at least that had been the case until I became pregnant and we decided to take far fewer dangerous jobs.

I was half asleep when Siber's voice roused me.

"Captain, the buyer has agreed to triple your standard rate," the AI said, with a distinct note of pride in her voice. "According to the agent, in celebration of your happy news, the ambassador has also offered you and the first mate complimentary luxury accommodations for one week in Onat'ras so you may enjoy all the wonders of the city. He also hopes you will bring more deliveries to his establishments in the future."

My jaw dropped so far it nearly hit the deck.

With a warm chuckle, Jarrix used his index finger to gently close my mouth. "Siber, please tell the agent we accept and reroute us to the pick-up location on Jakora," he said.

To me, he added, "We'll let Calla and Vos know the change of plans and ask them if they'd like us to bring anything back from Fortusia. Vos sometimes speaks fondly of a particular fruit grown there. Jampa berries, I think they're called?"

I blinked up at him, momentarily at a loss for words.

A little more than three years ago, I was a lone smuggler with a good ship, modest savings, and little to no hope of ever finding my stolen sister. And now…

Now I was a top-rated bonded courier with a state-of-the-art vessel and a gorgeous first mate who was also a brilliant medic, cargo inventory officer, cook, and nest-builder. We also had a gorga guardian the size of an ale barrel, a growing family, and a lovely little capsule home on the rainiest moon in four sectors.

"Yes, he calls them jampa berries," I said, pretending my vision wasn't shimmering again. "Well, let's do this one last job then, mate, and then we'll go home."

Looking for art of Keela and Jarrix and the rest of the Fortusian Mates couples? Check out the full collection on my Patreon at Patreon.com/lisaedmonds.

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Thank you for reading *Shielded in the Shadows*, the fourth book in the Fortusian Mates series! I hope you enjoyed the story.

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He's a monster desperately seeking peace in the ocean's depths. She's the human fighter pilot who crashes into his sea.

Tropes include fated mates, size difference, he falls first, forced proximity, hurt/comfort, touch her and die/touch him and die, tentacle spice, and a cute animal sidekick.

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A human singer on the run, an alien bartender with secrets and nightmares of his own, and a forbidden romance that blossoms in a gangster's neon nightclub.

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She's a criminal who always flies solo. He's the intergalactic lawman who breaks the rules to steal her heart.

Tropes include fated mates, size difference, he falls first, hurt/comfort, tail play, knotting, mating bite, wing blankets

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Edmonds was born and raised in Kansas. She studied English and forensic criminology at Wichita State University. After acquiring her Bachelor’s degree, she considered a career in law enforcement as a behavioral analyst before earning a Master's in English from Wichita State and then a Ph.D. in English from Texas A&M University.

For ten years, she was an associate professor of English at a college in Texas, where she taught a variety of writing and literature courses.

Now a full-time author, she shares a cute Victorian-style home called The Storybook House with her husband and their pets, and enjoys writing, reading, traveling, spoiling her niece and nephew, and singing karaoke.

Don’t miss commissioned art, cover reveals, sneak peeks at current projects, new releases, or important announcements! Join my reader community at LisaEdmonds.com.

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