



Grumpy Alien Bodyguard

Author: *Athena Storm*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Science Fiction

Description: She was supposed to be cargo. Now she's everything.

Quinn Gellar was just another high-value target to recover.

Get in, extract the diplomat, get out.

Simple.

But then I saw her—bruised, defiant, still trying to negotiate her way out of hell.

And something in me snapped.

Now I'm not just protecting her.

I'm claiming her.

She thinks she can walk away once the mission's done.

But she doesn't get it yet.

She's not leaving my side.

Not leaving my bed.

Not leaving me.

Because the galaxy thinks she's theirs.

Let me show them what claimed really means.

Read on for forced proximity, alien bodyguard romance, and a warlord with a soft spot for his human. She was supposed to be a mission—until she became his obsession. HEA Guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 48

CHAPTER 1

QUINN

The Paris Starport hums with the low murmur of a hundred languages, the air thick with the scent of alien spices and the faint tang of ionized air. My heels click against the polished floor, the sound swallowed by the vastness of the terminal. A Grolgath businessman strides past, his scales shimmering under the fluorescent lights. A Pi'Rell pauses to adjust the strap of their satchel, their eyes catching the light like polished marble. A Shorcu with a third eye that glows faintly in the UV spectrum is arguing with a Vakutan over the exchange rate on a credstick transaction. The Vakutan's ridges flush a deeper red as the Shorcu's third eye narrows.

I'm halfway to the IEC wing when the light dims. A shadow falls over me, blotting out the overhead lights. I glance up—way up—into the face of an Odex. His fur is a deep chestnut, and he's wearing a beret tilted at a jaunty angle. It's the kind of thing that would look ridiculous on anyone else, but on him, it's almost charming. Almost.

"Human," he rumbles, his voice like gravel under a steamroller. "You look like someone who appreciates art."

"Do I?" I arch an eyebrow, glancing at the stack of canvases tucked under his massive arm. "Or do I just look like someone with a credstick?"

He chuckles, a sound that vibrates through my chest. "Both. But mostly the first one." He pulls out a painting, holding it up with surprising delicacy. It's the Eiffel Tower, but with a flying saucer hovering next to it, its metallic surface reflecting the Parisian

skyline. “What do you think?”

I tilt my head, considering. “It’s... bold. Unexpected. I like it.”

“Good taste.” He grins, revealing teeth that could probably crush a small asteroid. “Five hundred credits.”

“Five hundred?” I laugh, pulling out my credstick. “You’re lucky I’m in a good mood. Deliver it to the IEC Triumphant. I’m boarding soon.”

He nods, tucking the painting back under his arm. “Pleasure doing business with you, human.”

I wave him off and continue toward the security checkpoint. The Vakutan guard towers over the scanner, his scales a deep crimson. He glances at my ID, then down at me, his ridges furrowing.

“Diplomat Clearance?” he snorts. “Aren’t you a little young to be a diplomat?”

I plant a hand on my hip, meeting his gaze without flinching. “I wasn’t aware there was an age requirement. Besides, humans only live a little over a century, compared to almost a thousand years for you Vakutan. Aren’t we ALL a little young compared to you?”

He grunts, waving me through. “Vakutan young can hunt and slay their own dinner within hours of birth.”

“Of course you can,” I mutter, stepping past him. The terminal stretches out before me, a maze of gates and signs. I scan the board, searching for the Triumphant. My heels click against the floor, the sound echoing in the vast space. The ship awaits, and with it, whatever the galaxy has in store for me next.

I spot him before he's halfway across the terminal—General Dowron, towering over the crowd, his dark red Alliance uniform crisp even at this ungodly hour. His scales have faded to a soft pink with age, but his stride is still sharp, each step deliberate. I can practically hear the gears turning in his head as he approaches.

“General,” I greet him, my smile warm but laced with the kind of sarcasm that only comes from dealing with bureaucrats who think they're subtle. “So nice of you to see me off in person. Did you bring flowers? Champagne? Or is this just your version of a friendly goodbye?”

“Gellar.” His voice is gravel, deep and unmovable. He doesn't even crack a smile. “Cut the chatter. Did you get the files on the Jwoon incident?”

“I did.” I pat the tablet tucked under my arm. “And let me say, it's a real page-turner. Murder, malfunctions, and a mining operation that's about as legal as piracy. Speaking of which—” I tilt my head, feigning innocence. “Why hasn't Kallus Bruw's operation been moved off the planet already? He never filed the right permits, did he?”

Dowron's ridges tighten. “Bruw's challenging the vacate order. Claims it's a misunderstanding. He's tied it up in the courts—bureaucratic quicksand. It's a mess.”

“Of course it is.” I roll my eyes. “Because why wouldn't the dirtiest player in the shipping game drag this out until the Solari are out of a home moon?”

“That's why you're going to Armstrong.” His gaze locks onto mine, intense and unyielding. “Salvage this. Keep the Solari on their moon. And if you can, do it without starting another war.”

“No pressure, then.” I smirk, folding my arms. “Care to give me a hint on how to handle Bruw? Or are you just here to deliver the bad news and leave me to figure it

out?”

“You’re clever, Gellar. You’ll manage.” He steps back, giving me a curt nod. “Don’t overthink it. And don’t underestimate him.”

“Never do.” I watch as he turns and walks away, his posture as straight as ever. He’s already moving on to the next crisis, the next negotiation, the next fire to put out. Typical Dowron—straight to the point, no pleasantries. I shake my head, adjusting my grip on my bag.

The Triumphant looms ahead, sleek and elegant, a falcon ready to take flight. I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. Time to see if I can outmaneuver Kallus Bruw and keep the Solari in their home. Piece of cake. Right?

The Triumphant’s boarding ramp hisses shut behind me, sealing out the chaos of the starport. The interior is sleek, all polished metal and soft lighting, with the faint hum of the engines vibrating through the floor. The captain, a grizzled human with a salt-and-pepper beard and a uniform that’s seen better days, greets me with a nod.

“Welcome aboard, Ms. Gellar. Captain Hargrove. We’ll be underway shortly.” His voice is gravelly, like he’s been chewing on stardust for breakfast.

“Captain,” I reply, flashing him my most diplomatic smile. “Looking forward to a smooth flight.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

He grunts, already turning back to the cockpit. “Smooth as space, ma’am. Crew’ll get you settled.”

The two flight attendants are waiting just inside the cabin. One’s human, petite with a bob of dark hair and a no-nonsense expression. The other’s a Vakutan, her scales a deep crimson, her ridges catching the light as she moves. She’s easily seven feet tall, and her uniform is tailored to accommodate her bulk, though it still looks like it’s one wrong move away from tearing at the seams.

“Ms. Gellar,” the human attendant says, her voice crisp. “I’m Clara. This is T’vek. Let us know if you need anything.”

“Clara. T’vek.” I nod at each of them, already slipping into my usual charm offensive. “So, how long have you two been flying together? You look like a well-oiled machine.”

Clara’s lips twitch, almost a smile. “Three years. T’vek’s the best co-worker I’ve ever had. Doesn’t complain, doesn’t steal my lunch, and can lift a shuttle engine with one hand.”

T’vek snorts, a deep rumble that shakes the air. “Clara exaggerates. It was half an engine.”

I laugh, leaning against the bulkhead. “Sounds like a dream team. So, what’s the gossip? Anything juicy happening on the Triumphant these days?”

Clara glances at T’vek, who shrugs her massive shoulders. “Not much,” Clara says.

“Unless you count the time T’vek accidentally crushed the coffee machine.”

“It was fragile,” T’vek mutters, her ridges darkening. “Human technology is too delicate.”

“Says the woman who once punched a hull breach shut,” Clara shoots back, grinning now.

I raise an eyebrow. “You punched a hull breach shut?”

T’vek shrugs again. “It was a small breach.”

The engines hum louder, and the ship tilts slightly as it lifts off. I keep my eyes firmly on the attendants, avoiding the windows. The last thing I need is a bout of space sickness before we’ve even left the atmosphere.

“You ever get used to that?” I ask, gesturing vaguely toward the windows. “The whole ‘ship pointing straight up’ thing?”

T’vek shakes her head. “Never. I don’t look. It’s better that way.”

Clara nods in agreement. “First rule of space travel: don’t look out the window until you’re in the black.”

The ship levels out, and the blue of the sky fades to black, stars winking into existence like a thousand tiny eyes. I finally risk a glance out the window, the vastness of space stretching out before us. It’s breathtaking, as always.

The stars blur into streaks of light as the Triumphant makes the jump to superluminal speed. The hum of the engines shifts, deeper now, resonating in my chest.

“Here we go,” I say, leaning back in my seat. Armstrong awaits.

The flight attendants move to secure the cabin as alarms blare, their professionalism fraying at the edges. Clara's knuckles whiten around the seat restraints she's checking, and T'vek's ridges flush a deeper crimson.

I sink back into my seat, tapping my tablet to expand Zantress's dossier. The Grolgath's scaled face glares from the screen, her golden eyes unblinking. Records show she once stood for twelve hours in silent protest outside an IEC outpost after they detained a Solari youth for picking glow-moss outside Bruw's mining perimeter. No demands, no speeches—just presence. And now three of her people are dead, and she wants blood. Or rather, the absence of it. Total withdrawal. Full accountability.

Find out what someone wants, and either grant it or withhold it. Dad's voice echoes in my skull. That's all diplomacy is, kid—controlled leverage.

I resist the urge to snort. Easy for him to say. He never had to negotiate with a zealot whose definition of “justice” involved dismantling a billion-credit operation bare-handed.

The ship lurches violently, throwing me against the harness so hard my teeth clack. The stars outside the viewport smear, then snap back into pinpoints. The artificial gravity stutters, making my stomach flip.

“What the hell was that?” I call toward the cockpit.

T'vek braces a clawed hand against the ceiling. “Unscheduled drop from superluminal.”

Clara stumbles down the aisle toward me. “Gravity well interference. Probably just a nav hiccup?—”

TheTriumphantjerks again, harder. Metal groans, and a shower of sparks erupts from the overhead console. The lights flicker, then stabilize into an ominous dim red. Emergency protocols. My nails dig into the armrests.

Captain Hargrove's voice crackles over the comm. "Brace for impact. We've got—" A deafeningcrunchcuts him off, followed by the shriek of tearing metal. The ship slews sideways as klaxons wail.

Clara grabs my seatback, her knuckles bone-white. "That wasn't a gravity well."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

No kidding. I thumb the comm open. “Captain. Report.”

The static-filled reply makes my blood freeze. “Unmarked cruiser. They’ve got us in a disruptor net. Engines are down. Shields at—” A burst of feedback drowns him out.

The main monitor flickers to life, displaying the exterior feed. The pirate ship looms—a jagged brute of a cruiser, its hull studded with retrofitted ion cannons. No identifiers. No affiliations. Just raw threat.

T’vek growls low in her throat. “Pirates don’t hit IEC diplomats. Too messy.”

Clara exhales sharply. “Unless someone paid them to.”

Another blast rocks us. A muffled curse from the cockpit cuts off with a thud. The comm panel lights up—incoming hail.

Clara and T’vek exchange looks. Neither moves.

Right. Diplomatic immunity falls to me.

I slap the receiver. “This is the IEC Triumphant official diplomatic?—”

A laugh slices through the static. Not amused. Not even cruel. Just hungry.

“But we—” The voice rasps like steel dragged over stone. “—are a threat to you.”

Silence. Then the line dies.

Across the aisle, Clara's wrist unit flashes. Life support failing. T'vek's claws flex.

The cruiser's docking clamps thud against our hull. And suddenly, I'm not so sure we're going to make our appointment at Armstrong.

CHAPTER 2

VARNOK

Gas leans back in the pilot's chair, his golden fur catching the dim light of the cockpit. "Supernovas are taking the Bowl this year, Var. You can't argue with stats. Their offense is amachine."

I snort, my tail thumping against the floor. "Stats? The Gur Gorillas haveheart. You can't quantify that. They'll rip the Supernovas apart like a pi'rell in a meat grinder."

"Heart doesn't win championships, boss. Strategy does. And the Supernovas have it in spades." Gas grins, his sharp teeth flashing. "You're just mad because you've got a soft spot for underdogs."

"Underdogs? The Gorillas arewarriors." My fist slams down on the armrest for emphasis, and the thing snaps clean off, clattering to the floor. I stare at it, then at Gas, who's already shaking his head.

"You're gonna bankrupt us with repairs, Var. This ship's not a punching bag."

"It's a piece of junk," I mutter, tossing the broken armrest aside. "And I'm going stir-crazy. Peace is killing me, Gas. I need a fight. A real one. Not this... thisitting around."

"They gave you a promotion, didn't they? You're a big shot now. Alliance Liaison or

whatever.”

“Liaison.” I spit the word like it’s poison. “It’s a desk job. A glorified desk job. I’m not built for this. I’m no good in peacetime.”

Gas shrugs, his fur rippling. “Could be worse. You could be stuck in a cubicle on Novaria, filing reports. At least you’ve got me for company.”

“Lucky me,” I growl, leaning back in my seat. The cockpit feels smaller than usual, the walls closing in. “Nothing ever happens in this sector. It’s?—”

The comms crackle to life, cutting me off. A voice, sharp and urgent, fills the cabin. “Priority one message to all Alliance vessels in the vicinity. Ambassador Quinn Gellar’s ship, the *Triumphant*, has gone missing. Last known coordinates attached. Immediate investigation required.”

I’m out of my seat before the message finishes, my blood roaring in my ears. “Now that’s what I’m talking about. Gas, set course for those coordinates. Full speed.”

Gas’s fingers fly over the controls, his grin widening. “Finally, some action. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“For what?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

“For jinxing it. You said nothing ever happens, and bam—missing ambassador. You’re like a walking disaster magnet.”

“Shut up and fly,” I snap, but there’s no heat in it. My scales itch with anticipation. This is what I’ve been waiting for. A fight. A mission. Something todo.

TheSweet Charityhums as it accelerates, the stars blurring into streaks of light. I crack my knuckles, my tail twitching. “Let’s see what kind of mess this ambassador’s gotten herself into.”

I’m sprawled in the captain’s chair, glaring at the broken armrest like it’s personally insulted me. “This ship’s falling apartfaster than a pi’rell’s moral compass,” I mutter, flicking a piece of debris off my lap.

The comms chirp, and I perk up. “Finally. No doubt they’re commending me on my initiative. Probably promoting me to Supreme Annihilator or something equally impressive.”

The holographic display flickers to life, and General Dowron’s weathered face fills the bridge. His pink scales are duller than I remember, and the lines around his eyes are deeper. He looks like he’s aged a century since I last saw him.

“Varnok,” he barks, his voice sharp enough to cut through durasteel. “Are you en route to the coordinates where Ambassador Gellar’s ship disappeared?”

I lean back, crossing my arms. “Of course I am. I’m not one to sit around while there’s a damsel in distress.”

Dowron's jaw tightens. "This isn't a joke, Varnok. The ambassador is embroiled in very delicate negotiations. You're the wrong man for this job. Stand down and let a more...diplomacy ship handle it."

I raise an eyebrow. "Diplomatic? You mean slow and useless. I'll have her back before they've finished drafting their mission statement."

Dowron's scales flush a deeper pink, and his voice rises. "This isn't up for debate, Varnok. I'm ordering you to?"

I cut him off with a sharp gesture to Gas. My pilot grins, his golden fur catching the light as he grabs a bucket of glitter from under the console. With a flourish, he tosses a handful into the holo display. The glitter swirls around Dowron's face, distorting the image.

"What was that, General?" I ask, leaning forward with mock concern. "You're breaking up. There's a lot of static."

Dowron's eyes narrow. "Quantum entanglement comms don't have static, Varnok. And I can see your pilot throwing?"

I reach over and shut off the holo com, cutting him off mid-sentence. The bridge falls silent, save for the faint hum of the engines.

"That fooled him," I say, smirking. "Resume course, Gas."

Gas chuckles, his claws dancing over the controls. "You're gonna get us both court-martialed, you know that, right?"

"Worth it," I reply. "Let's go find this ambassador before Dowron sends someone boring to do it."

The stars snap back into place as the Sweet Charity drops out of superluminal speed. I lean forward in my chair, my tail twitching like a live wire. “Gas, where are we?”

Gas’s golden fur ripples as he scans the console. “Right where the Triumphant was last seen. No sign of her, though. Just a whole lot of nothing.”

“Scan for her transponder signal. If she’s out here, we’ll find her.”

Gas’s claws dance over the controls, and a moment later, a faint ping echoes through the cabin. “Got it. Weak signal, but it’s there. Coming from... an asteroid belt. Of course it’s an asteroid belt.”

“Plot a course. Let’s go.”

The Sweet Charity glides into the asteroid field, and almost immediately, a chunk of rock the size of a hovercar bounces off the hull with a dull thunk. I glare at Gas. “Careful, you idiot. I’d like to keep this ship in one piece.”

“It’s harder than it looks, boss. At least I’m avoiding the big ones.”

“Big ones?” I growl, just as a massive asteroid looms into view, its craggy surface blotting out the stars. It’s practically a small planet, its gravity well already tugging at the ship.

“You were saying?” I snap as red alerts flash across the console.

Gas’s hands fly over the controls, and the Sweet Charity lurches to the side, narrowly avoiding the asteroid. The ship shudders as it breaks free of the gravity well, and Gas lets out a breath. “See? No problem.”

“No problem? You almost turned us into a smear on that rock.”

“Almost doesn’t count. Besides, we’re here.” Gas points to the transponder signal, now blinking steadily on the screen. TheTriumphant’stransponder is drifting aimlessly in orbit around a smaller asteroid.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

I frown, my scales itching with suspicion. “The gravity well from the big asteroid must have pulled them out of their jump. But if the Triumphant wrecked, where’s the rest of the ship? Not one bit of debris?”

Gas shrugs. “Maybe it got pulverized. Asteroid fields are messy.”

“No. Someone wants us to think the ship was lost here. Someone who’s not very bright.” I lean back, my tail thumping against the floor. “This is a setup. And I’m not walking into it blind. Gas, scan for any other ships in the area. If someone’s playing games, I want to know who.”

Gas’s claws dance over the console, his golden fur rippling as he squints at the readouts. “No ships in the area. But there’s background radiation. The kind that says there were ships here. Recently.”

I lean forward, my tail twitching. “Ships? As in more than one?”

“Affirmative, boss. At least two, maybe three. They left a mess of ion trails and residual heat signatures. Someone was in a hurry.”

I slam a fist on the console, and the whole thing shudders. “Our computer’s not up to tracking them through superluminal speed. We’ve hit a dead end. Maybe Dowron was right—this is a job for someone with better tech.”

“Hold up, boss,” Gas says, spinning his chair around to face me. He’s got that smug look on his face, the one that usually means he’s about to say something infuriatingly clever. “I never said they made a superluminal jump. The ships left this area at

sublight speed.”

My scales itch with anticipation. “Sublight? Can you track them?”

Gas leans back, sucking on the straw of his Big Zhuvok soft drink like he’s got all the time in the galaxy. “Already found them.”

Without looking, he slaps a button on the console. The main viewing monitor flickers to life, and for a split second, I’m treated to the sight of two Fratvoyans in a position that defies both physics and good taste. The first moan echoes through the cabin before Gas’s eyes widen, and he spins back around, slamming the controls.

“Wrong file! Wrong file!” he yelps, his fur standing on end.

I raise an eyebrow, my tail thumping against the floor. “I didn’t know your people could bend that way.”

“Shut up,” Gas mutters, his snout turning a shade of pink that clashes with his fur. The screen finally clears, and an image of a battered, ancient refueling station fills the monitor. It’s a hulking mass of rusted metal and flickering lights, floating in the void like a forgotten relic.

“There,” Gas says, pointing a claw at the screen. “That’s where they went. The ion trails lead straight to it.”

I grin, my teeth gleaming in the dim light of the cockpit. “Then that’s where we’re going. Plot a course, Gas.”

Gas’s claws fly over the controls, and the Sweet Charity hums as it accelerates. “You know, boss, this could be a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap,” I growl, cracking my knuckles. “But I’m not walking into it blind. We’ll hit them hard and fast. They won’t know what hit them.”

Gas chuckles, his tail swishing behind him. “You’re gonna get us killed one of these days.”

“Better than dying of boredom,” I reply.

CHAPTER 3

QUINN

The world swims into focus—dark, jagged, and throbbing in time with the pulse behind my eyes. My wrists ache, bound behind my back with cold, unyielding metal. I groan, shifting to try and sit up, but the collar around my throat bites into my skin with every movement. It’s padlocked, the chain rattling against the rusted bars of the cage I’m in.

“Finally awake, Sleeping Beauty?” Clara’s voice cuts through the haze, her tone light despite the situation. Her wrists are bound too, and she’s leaning against the bars with a wry smirk. “We were starting to wonder if you’d decided to sleep through the whole ‘captured by Reapers’ thing.”

“Would’ve been a luxury,” I mutter, wincing as I try to stretch my neck. The cage smells like animals—stale hay, dung, and something metallic. “Where the hell are we?”

“Derelict fueling station,” T’vek chimes in from the corner, her red scales dull in the dim light. Her golden eyes flicker with annoyance, her tail twitching. “The Reapers dragged us here after they boarded the Triumphant. You tried to talk your way out of it and—well, Reku didn’t appreciate the diplomacy.”

“He hit me,” I say, the memory slamming back with merciless clarity. The Reaper captain, towering over me, his scarlet bone spurs glinting like jagged knives. I’d opened my mouth to negotiate, and he’d silenced me with a backhanded strike that sent me crashing into darkness. “Charming guy.”

“Oh, he’s a real charmer,” Clara drawls, shifting to lean her head against the bars. “He’s also got a thing for making people bleed. You should’ve seen what they did to the captain.”

“Where is he?” I ask, dread coiling in my stomach.

“Bloodsport,” T’vek says flatly, her voice low. “They took him to the arena. Reku likes to hunt his prey before he kills it.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

I swallow hard, the collar digging deeper. “We need to get out of here. Now.”

“Fantastic plan,” Clara says, wiggling her bound hands for emphasis. “Got a secret key hidden in your boot? Or maybe a Reaper weakness you’ve been keeping to yourself?”

“I’m working on it,” I snap, scanning the cage. It’s not just rusted; it’s crude, like it was cobbled together from scrap metal. The floor is littered with old straw and debris, but there’s nothing sharp enough to cut through these restraints. “You two have been here longer. Any bright ideas?”

“Well,” Clara says, tilting her head mock-thoughtfully, “I was going to suggest we wait for Prince Charming, but I think he might be busy with the captain.”

T’vek hisses, her scales shimmering faintly in the dim light. “This isn’t a joke, Clara. If we don’t get out of here, we’re next on Reku’s entertainment list.”

“I’m aware,” Clara shoots back, her usual levity cracking for the first time. “But unless you’ve got a gun hidden in your scales, I’m fresh out of escape plans.”

I press my back against the bars, testing their strength. They don’t budge, and the movement sends a spike of pain through my skull. “We need to find a way to get these cuffs off. And that collar. Then we can figure out how to get out of this cage.”

“Easier said than done,” T’vek mutters, her golden eyes scanning the room beyond our cage. “They’ve got guards posted. And not the friendly kind.”

“We’ll improvise,” I say, forcing confidence into my voice even as my heart pounds.
“We don’t have a choice.”

The cuffs bite into my wrists, and the collar feels like a noose tightening with every breath. I glance at Clara and T’vek, their faces pale and tense. No one’s coming to save us. If we’re getting out of this, it’s on me. I let out a sharp, piercing yell that echoes through the rusted metal chamber.

“Hey! Reaper scum! Get over here!”

The sound of heavy boots thuds closer, and a massive Reaper guard looms into view. His black skin glistens under the flickering lights, and his crimson bone spurs jut out like jagged knives. He slams a fist against the bars, the impact reverberating through the cage. “Shut your mouth, human, or I’ll rip your tongue out.”

“I’m Quinn Gellar,” I say, despite the way my heart hammers in my chest. “Ambassador of the Intergalactic Diplomatic Corps. I’d like to negotiate with your leader.”

The guard’s laugh is a deep, guttural sound that sends a chill down my spine. “You want to be in the presence of Reku the Ruthless? You’ve got a death wish, little human.”

“Tell Mr. Ruthless,” I say, leaning forward as far as the collar allows, “that I can get him far more riches than a handful of prisoners could fetch him on the slave market.”

He snorts, his breath hot and rancid. “Captain Reku said to beware the honeypots who aren’t scared.”

“You’re wrong,” I say, my voice dropping to a low, deliberate tone. “I’m terrified. But I also know that my only way out of this is to get your captain something more

valuable than us.”

The guard’s eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think I’ve got him. Then he shakes his head. “Captain’s busy.”

His gaze flicks down to my chest, where my dress has ripped enough to show a sliver of cleavage. I press myself against the bars, my voice softening. “I can make it worth your while.”

He hesitates, his hand twitching toward the keypad on his belt. For a second, I think I’ve got him. Then he snarls, “Nice try, human,” and stalks off, leaving me slumped against the bars, my heart pounding.

The guard yanks me forward by the leash, the collar digging into my throat as I stumble to keep up. I glance back at T’vek, who’s still in the cage, her golden eyes locked on me. She gives me a wink, her sharp teeth glinting in the dim light. I don’t know what she’s planning, but I trust her to make it count.

The guard drags me through the rusted corridors of the derelict station, the air thick with the stench of oil and decay. The walls are lined with jagged metal and flickering lights, casting eerie shadows that dance like specters. My heart pounds in my chest, but I keep my head high. If I’m going to die here, I’m not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me break.

We reach a massive set of doors, the metal warped and scarred from countless battles. The guard shoves them open, and I’m pulled into what can only be described as a throne room. The space is vast, the ceiling lost in shadows, and the walls are adorned with trophies—weapons, armor, and the skulls of Reku’s enemies. In the center of the room, on a throne made of bones dipped in liquid metal, sits Reku the Ruthless.

He’s even more imposing up close. His black skin glistens under the flickering lights,

and his wicked bone spurs jut out like daggers. His glowing blue neural whip rests across his lap, crackling with barely contained energy. At his feet, Daria clings to his leg, her eyes wide and fearful as she looks at me. She's wearing the remnants of an IEC pilot's flightsuit, the fabric torn and barely holding together. The spiked collar around her neck is padlocked, just like mine, and the leash trails up to Reku's massive hand.

The guard shoves me forward, and I stumble, catching myself before I fall. Reku's eyes narrow as he leans forward, his voice a low growl that reverberates through the room. "Why have you brought her here?"

The guard hesitates, his grip on my leash tightening. "She claims she can get you more riches than the prisoners are worth. I thought?—"

"You thought wrong," Reku snarls, cutting him off. He stands, his massive frame towering over me, and steps down from the throne. Daria scrambles to follow, her leash trailing behind her. Reku circles me like a predator sizing up its prey, his bone spurs clicking against the metal floor. "What could a little human possibly offer me that I don't already have?"

I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze. "Information. I'm a diplomat. I know things—trade routes, security codes, the locations of valuable shipments. Things that could make you the most powerful Reaper in the Badlands."

Reku stops in front of me, his eyes narrowing. "And why would you give me this information?"

"Because I don't want to die," I say. "And because I know you're not just a raider. You're a leader. A strategist. You could be more than this."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Reku's lips curl into a cruel smile, and he reaches out, his clawed fingers brushing against my cheek. "You're either very brave or very stupid, little human. But I'll give you this—you've got guts."

Daria watches me with a mix of fear and something else—curiosity, maybe. She doesn't speak, but her eyes dart between me and Reku, as if she's trying to figure out what's going to happen next.

A comm unit on the armrest of Reku's throne flashes, the harsh red light cutting through the dimness of the room. Reku's eyes flick to it, then back to me, his gaze hard and unreadable. He doesn't move for a moment, as if weighing whether I'm worth the interruption. Finally, he snarls and slams a clawed hand down on the unit, accepting the call. Audio only.

"Reku!" The voice that crackles through is male, sharp and laced with panic. "What have you done, you fool?"

Reku's lips peel back in a feral grin, his bone spurs twitching as if they have a mind of their own. "It's Captain Reku to you, worm," he hisses, his voice low and dangerous. "And I did nothing more than what you paid me for, and nothing less."

"You were supposed to scuttle the Triumphant, not steal it!" The voice is practically spitting now, the words tumbling over each other in their haste. "The lack of wreckage has the Alliance sniffing around. They've sent a ship to investigate. They could already be on their way!"

Reku's grin widens, his teeth glinting like shards of bone. "Good. I hope they are.

I've been itching for a fight."

"You're going to ruin everything!" the voice snaps, the panic giving way to anger. "You're going to expose me!"

"I will not scuttle a perfectly good ship," Reku growls, his voice rising to a roar that makes the walls tremble. "And I will kill anyone foolish enough to come here. Captain Reku out."

He slams his hand down on the comm unit again, cutting off the connection. The room falls silent, the only sound the faint crackle of his neural whip as it rests across his lap. His eyes lock onto mine, and I feel the weight of his gaze like a physical force.

"Now," he says, his voice dropping to a low, menacing purr, "it's time to deal with you. Like I dealt with your captain."

He reaches down beside his throne and grabs something, tossing it onto the floor in front of me. It lands with a wet thud, rolling to a stop at my feet. My stomach lurches as I realize what it is—the captain's severed head, his eyes wide and unseeing, his mouth frozen in a silent scream.

The room spins, my vision blurring as the concussion, dehydration, and sheer horror of the moment hit me all at once. I drop to my knees, the collar biting into my throat as I retch, bile splattering onto the expensive, looted carpet at Reku's feet.

Reku's roar of fury shakes the room. "You dare defile my spoils, human?"

I can't answer, my body wracked with dry heaves as I kneel there, trembling. All I can think is that whoever the Alliance sent, they'd better get here soon—and they'd better bring an army.

CHAPTER 4

VARNOK

The Sweet Charity drifts closer to the derelict fueling station, its cloaking device humming softly in the background. I lean over Gas's shoulder, my massive frame casting a shadow across his console. "You sure that cloaking thing's working? I don't fancy being turned into space dust before I even get a shot at these Reapers."

Gas doesn't even look up, his golden fur bristling with irritation. "It's on, boss. No electronic scans are going to find us. Trust me, I've got this."

"But they could still look out a porthole and see us," I growl, my tail flicking behind me. "We're not invisible."

He finally glances up, his beady eyes narrowing. "Why would they do that? Who stares out into the void for fun? It's all black and depressing. They're probably too busy sharpening their bone spurs or whatever Reapers do in their free time."

I grumble under my breath, my scales itching with impatience. "Just find us a place to dock without getting noticed. I don't want to show up late to this party."

Before Gas can respond, the ship shudders violently, alarms blaring. The dim lights of the cockpit flicker red as sparks fly from the console. "What the—?!" Gas's hands fly across the controls, his voice rising an octave. "We're under attack! Some kind of Reaper shuttle just came out of nowhere!"

I grip the back of his chair to steady myself, my claws digging into the upholstery. "Weapons status?"

"Offline!" Gas yelps, his fur standing on end as another blast shakes the ship. "They

took out our cannons with the first shot! I'm trying to evade, but this shuttle's fast—like, stupid fast!”

I snarl, my mind racing. We don't have the time or the firepower to outrun this thing, let alone fight back. “How long to repair the weapons?”

“Longer than we've got before they turn us into a floating scrap heap!” Gas's voice cracks as he jerks the ship to the left, narrowly dodging another volley of fire.

My eyes land on the torpedo bay, and a reckless grin spreads across my face. “Open the launch tube.”

Gas freezes, his paw hovering over the controls. “What? Why—? Oh no. No, no, no. Whatever you're thinking, I don't like it.”

I'm already moving, my boots clanging against the metal floor as I sprint toward the torpedo bay. “Just do it!” I rip the side panel off one of the torpedoes and start pulling out the warhead, scattering parts across the floor.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Gas's voice echoes over the intercom, panicked. "Boss, there's no life support in that torpedo! You'll suffocate before you even reach their ship!"

"Yes, yes, I know," I mutter, squeezing myself into the cramped space where the warhead used to be. My knees are pressed against my chest, my wings folded awkwardly. It's not comfortable, but it's not supposed to be. "Just launch me already!"

"This is insane!" Gas shouts, but I hear the hiss of the launch tube opening.

"Insane's my middle name," I snarl, my grin widening as the tube seals shut around me. The world goes dark, and I feel the faint vibration of the torpedo launching into the void.

The torpedo slams into the enemy hull with a deafening crash, the force of the impact rattling my teeth and nearly knocking me unconscious. I claw my way out of the mangled wreckage, my scales scraping against jagged metal as I emerge into the dimly lit corridor of the Reaper shuttle. The emergency force field snaps into place behind me, sealing the breach with a faint hum.

I barely have time to shake off the dizziness before a Reaper charges at me, his two-handed power blade humming with deadly energy. The blade arcs toward me, and I duck just in time, the weapon slicing through a metal support strut like it's made of paper. Sparks rain down as the strut collapses, and I roll to my feet, my tail lashing behind me.

"Nice blade," I growl, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Too bad you don't know

how to use it.”

The Reaper snarls, his bone spurs glinting in the low light as he swings again. I dodge to the side, the blade missing me by inches. He’s fast, but I’m faster. I duck under his next swing and close the distance, grabbing his wrists with a grip like a vice. His eyes widen as I twist the blade out of his hands, the weapon clattering to the floor.

“Let’s see how you like it,” I snarl, driving my forehead into his face. The crunch of bone echoes through the corridor as I headbutt him again and again, his spurs scraping against my scales but failing to pierce them. With a final, brutal strike, I send him sprawling to the ground.

I snatch up the power blade, its weight unfamiliar but manageable. The Reaper tries to rise, but I’m already on him, the blade slicing through his torso with a sickening hiss. He collapses in two pieces, his blood pooling on the floor.

I take a moment to catch my breath, the power blade humming in my hand. “One down,” I mutter, my voice low and dangerous.

But my triumph is short-lived. The sound of heavy footsteps echoes down the corridor, and I turn to see four more Reapers charging toward me, their bone spurs gleaming and their eyes filled with murderous intent.

“Oh, come on,” I groan, tightening my grip on the blade. “Can’t a guy catch a break?”

The first Reaper lunges at me, and I sidestep, bringing the blade down in a sweeping arc that takes off his arm at the elbow. He howls in pain, but I don’t have time to finish him off. The second Reaper is already on me, his spurs slashing toward my face. I duck, the blade slicing through the air above my head, and drive my elbow into his gut. He stumbles back, and I follow up with a kick that sends him crashing

into the wall.

The third Reaper comes at me with a roar, his spurs extended like daggers. I parry his strike with the power blade, the force of the impact sending a jolt up my arm. I twist the blade, disarming him, and drive it into his chest. He collapses with a gurgle, his blood splattering across the floor.

The fourth Reaper hesitates, his eyes flicking between me and his fallen comrades. I grin, baring my teeth. “What’s the matter? Scared?”

He snarls and charges, but I’m ready. I meet him head-on, the power blade clashing against his spurs in a shower of sparks. We struggle for a moment, his strength nearly matching mine, but I’m not just strong—I’m relentless. With a roar, I shove him back and bring the blade down in a devastating strike that cleaves him from shoulder to hip.

I stand amidst the carnage, my chest heaving and the power blade dripping with blood. “Four down,” I mutter, my voice rough. “How many more of you are there?”

I sprint through the Reaper shuttle’s narrow corridors, my boots slamming into the deck with enough force to leave dents. The power blade hums in my hand, its edge glowing faintly with the blood of the Reapers I’ve already sliced through. The ship’s layout is a mess of mismatched panels and exposed wiring, clearly cobbled together from whatever scraps the Reapers could scavenge. Not exactly the pinnacle of engineering.

I round a corner and slam into a bulkhead as the ship lurches sideways. “Gas, what the hell are you doing?” I bark into my comms.

“Not me!” Gas’s voice crackles back. “They’re trying to shake you off! You’re, uh, kind of making a mess of their ship.”

“Good,” I growl, pushing off the wall and charging toward the bridge. The door looms ahead, reinforced with scrap metal welded haphazardly across its surface. I don’t bother trying to open it. I rear back and slam my shoulder into the door, the force of the impact sending it flying off its hinges.

Inside, the pilot spins in his seat, his bone spurs glinting as he reaches for a weapon. He’s too slow. I cross the room in two strides and drive the power blade through his chest, the weapon slicing through his armor like it’s made of paper. He slumps to the floor, his eyes wide in shock.

I wipe the blade on his tunic and take the pilot’s seat, my massive frame barely fitting. The controls are a jumble of mismatched buttons and levers, but I don’t need finesse. I grip the throttle and yank it back, the shuttle lurching as I bring it under control.

“I have control of the enemy vessel,” I say over the comms, my voice calm despite the adrenaline roaring in my veins.

There’s a moment of silence before Gas responds, his voice tinged with awe. “Sometimes I forget how scary you really are.”

“Save the flattery for later. Did you find a docking point?”

“Yeah, but it’s not ideal. It’s right next to where the Reapers have set up their command center. There’s not going to be any sneaking in.”

“They already know we’re here,” I say, guiding the shuttle toward the derelict station. The massive structure looms ahead, its rusted hull riddled with blinking lights and patched breaches.

The shuttle docks with a shudder, the airlock hissing as it seals. I grab a spare sidearm

from the pilot's seat and holster it, then step into the airlock. "Gas, stay on Sweet Charity and fix the weapons system. We might need them before this is over."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

“On it, boss. Try not to kill everyone before I get the chance to help.”

I grin, baring my teeth. “No promises.”

The airlock cycles open, and I step into the station, my blade ready. The Reapers might know I’m here, but they don’t know what’s coming for them.

CHAPTER 5

QUINN

The captain’s head stares up at me, glassy-eyed and slack-jawed, a grim reminder of what’s coming. My stomach churns, but there’s nothing left to heave. Reku looms over me, his bone spurs glinting like bloodied knives under the dim light. He snaps the leash in his hand, and the sound cracks through the room like a gunshot.

Daria moves fast, her bare feet silent on the grimy floor. She’s at my side before I can flinch, her hands working the manacles with practiced ease. The metal clatters to the ground, and I rub my raw wrists, my pulse racing.

“Why is he letting me go?” I whisper, my voice trembling. My eyes dart to Reku, who’s watching us with a twisted grin, his neural whip coiled at his side like a serpent ready to strike.

“He’s not.” Daria’s voice is low, urgent. Her red mohawk brushes my cheek as she leans in. “He wants to make it more entertaining for himself. Freeing your hands so you can fight back.”

I glance at Reku again, his massive frame blocking the only exit. My stomach drops. “I’m not a fighter.”

“Then run.” Her fingers tighten on my arm, her nails digging into my skin. “I’ll distract him.”

Reku’s laugh booms through the room, deep and guttural. “What’s the matter, little diplomat? Scared of a fair fight?” He cracks the whip, and the air sizzles with the sound of it. “Or are you just too weak to even try?”

Daria darts to Reku, her movements fluid and practiced, like a dancer who knows every step of a dangerous routine. She drops to her knees at his feet, her hands pawing at his thigh with a familiarity that makes my skin crawl. Her red mohawk brushes against his leg as she looks up at him with wide, pleading eyes.

“Please, Master Reku,” she says, her voice soft, almost childlike. “Please don’t kill her.”

Reku tilts his head, his bone spurs catching the light like jagged shards of obsidian. “Why not?” he asks, and it’s not mocking. He sounds genuinely curious, like a predator trying to understand why its prey would beg for mercy.

“Because I could use the help,” Daria says quickly, her fingers tightening on his thigh. “I’m tired of scrubbing pots and cleaning up after the entire crew. If she helped me, I’d have more time to spend making you happy...”

I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. Reku’s eyes soften, the red glow in them dimming to a warm, almost affectionate light. He reaches down, his massive hand cupping Daria’s cheek with a tenderness that makes my stomach twist.

“Would you like me to give her to you, my pet?” he murmurs, his voice low and

intimate.

This is my chance. I don't think, I just move. My feet hit the floor hard as I bolt for the throne room door, my heart pounding in my ears. The door is so close, just a few more steps?—

It slams shut with a deafening bang, the sound reverberating through the room like a death knell. I skid to a stop, my hands slamming against the cold metal.

“Going somewhere, Ambassador?” Reku's voice is a low growl behind me, dripping with amusement.

The power blade hilt clatters across the floor toward me, its weight unmistakable even before I catch it. My fingers scramble to grip it, but it's like holding a lead pipe—awkward, unwieldy, and completely beyond my ability to swing with any kind of precision. I barely manage to keep it from slipping out of my hands.

Reku grins, his bone spurs catching the dim light as he flicks his neural whip. The air crackles with the sound, and a faint blue glow emanates from the weapon. "Come, Ambassador. Your captain met his end with courage. Don't disappoint me."

"Master, no!" Daria shrieks from the corner, her voice cracking with desperation.

"Silence," Reku snaps, not even glancing at her. His eyes are locked on me, gleaming with sadistic glee. "You'll be punished later."

Daria shoots me a helpless look, her red mohawk trembling as her body tenses. The collar around her neck seems to tighten, her fingers instinctively brushing against it. My hands grip the hilt tighter, but it's no use. The blade feels like a death sentence in my hands, not a weapon.

With a sharp exhale, I throw the hilt to the floor. It clangs against the metal, rolling away uselessly. "You don't want a fight," I say, a storm raging inside me. "Because me facing off against you like this isn't a fight. It's an execution."

I spread my arms wide and tilt my head back, exposing my throat. "So if you want an execution, let's be about it. No more pretense of this being a fight."

Reku's grin falters, replaced by a scowl that twists his face into something even more monstrous. His grip tightens on the whip, and he lashes out with a vicious crack. The neural whip strikes my shoulder, and pain explodes through my body like fire in my veins. I bite down on a scream, my knees buckling as I collapse to the floor.

"Pick it up," he growls, his voice low and feral.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

I don't move. My breaths come in shallow gasps, my vision swimming with spots of light. The pain is everywhere, a relentless wave that threatens to drown me. But I force myself to stay upright, to meet his gaze.

"Pick. It. Up."

I shake my head, my jaw clenched. The whip cracks again, and this time it's my back that takes the brunt of it. My body arches involuntarily, a strangled cry escaping my lips. My fingers claw at the floor, but I don't reach for the blade.

"I'm not going to fight for your amusement," I spit, my voice wavering but defiant. "That's all you'll get from me."

Reku roars, his whip lashing out again and again, each strike a torrent of agony. My vision blurs, tears streaming down my face. I can feel the warmth of blood trickling from my ears, my nose, the corners of my mouth. My body shakes uncontrollably, but I don't move. I don't fight.

Finally, he throws the whip to the ground with a snarl, his chest heaving. "I can't break this human," he spits, his voice dripping with disgust. "I can only kill her."

I crumple to the floor, my body trembling in a pool of my own blood. The pain is unbearable, but I don't scream. I don't beg.

"And I think that perhaps I just have."

Reku's shadow looms over me, his massive frame blotting out the dim light. He

crouches, his bone spurs scraping against the floor like knives on glass. His hand—huge, calloused, and stained with blood—grabs a fistful of my hair. He yanks my head up, forcing me to meet his gaze. My scalp burns, my vision swims with stars, but I refuse to cry out.

"Foolish human," he sneers, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through my bones. "You could have died quickly, painlessly." His blood-red eyes flicker toward Daria, who's crouched in the corner, her hands clasped over her mouth, herred mohawk trembling. "My mate's tender heart does not like to see women suffer, so I planned to just take your head in one fell stroke."

He shakes his head, his lips curling into something that might pass for a smirk—if it weren't so full of malice. "You were brave, Ambassador. Perhaps braver than even your captain." His free hand gestures toward the severed head still lying on the floor, the captain's lifeless eyes staring into the void. "I will display your spine as a trophy over my throne with honor."

I mutter something and gasp. He leans in closer, putting his ear next to my lips.

"I would hear your last words, human," he says. "Speak."

I cough, blood spattering my lips and dripping down my chin. My voice is barely a whisper, ragged and broken. "I said..." I pause, my breath hitching, my body trembling with pain. "I have the power blade... dumbass."

Reku's eyes narrow, but before he can react, I twist my wrist. The power blade hums to life beneath my palm, its plasma beam slicing through the air with a hiss. The white-hot blade cuts cleanly through the toes of his right foot, severing them in an instant. The smell of burnt flesh fills the air, acrid and choking.

Reku howls, a sound so primal it sends shivers down my spine. He releases my hair,

gripping his mangled foot with both hands. Blood pours from the stumps of his toes, pooling on the floor. His eyes blaze with fury, his bone spurs gleaming like daggers in the dim light.

"You little—" he snarls, his voice a guttural growl. He grabs me again, this time by the throat, lifting me off the ground like I weigh nothing. My feet dangle in the air, my vision darkening at the edges. His grip tightens, cutting off my air.

"Proceed on your way to oblivion," he hisses, his lips curling back to reveal rows of sharp, pointed teeth. He raises me higher, my body limp and helpless, ready to slam me down onto the deck and crush my skull.

My vision swims, the edges of it dark and blurry. Reku's grip is crushing, my throat burning as my feet dangle uselessly in the air. I can't breathe. I can't think. My body feels like it's about to shatter.

Then I see it—movement behind him. A figure, massive and scaled, stepping into the throne room. Red scales glint under the dim light, a torn and bloody Alliance uniform hanging off his broad frame. My brain stumbles. Is this a hallucination? A last-ditch fantasy conjured by my oxygen-starved mind? A half-naked, ridiculously handsome alien coming to save me? Yeah, sure. Because that's exactly how my luck works.

Daria gasps, her voice slicing through the haze. Reku's grip falters for a fraction of a second, his red eyes flicking toward her. That's all the warning he gets.

The red-scaled Vakutan moves like a missile. His fist connects with Reku's face with a sickening crunch. Bone spurs snap, blood sprays, and Reku's grip on my throat vanishes. I hit the floor hard, my body crumpling as I gasp for air. My vision clears just enough to see Reku stumble back, his face a mess of blood and broken spurs.

This is no hallucination.

Reku roars, his voice shaking the room. He lunges at the Vakutan, his massive frame hurtling forward like a freight train. But the Vakutan doesn't flinch. He meets Reku head-on, their bodies colliding with a sound like thunder.

The fight is brutal, a blur of fists and blood. Reku is fast, his neural whip lashing out like a serpent, but the Vakutan is faster. He catches the whip midair, yanking it from Reku's hand and tossing it aside like it's nothing. Reku's eyes widen, fear flickering across his face for the first time.

It's over in seconds.

The Vakutan grabs Reku by the head, his massive hands gripping either side of his skull. With a roar, he slams his forehead into Reku's face. The impact sends Reku flying across the room, his body hitting the wall with a crunch and sliding to the floor in a heap.

I blink, my brain struggling to process what just happened. The Vakutan turns, his purple eyes locking on me. He's breathing hard, his chest rising and falling like a storm-tossed sea. Blood drips from a broken spur on his face, but he doesn't seem to notice.

Then he's there, kneeling beside me, his hands surprisingly gentle as he scoops me up. His arms are like steel, but the way he cradles me is almost tender. My body feels like it's held together by string, every breath sending sharp pains through my ribs.

"Everything is fine now, Ambassador," he says, his voice deep and sure, like he's stating an immutable fact.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

I stare at him, my lips parting as I try to speak. My voice comes out in a croak. “Why?”

He grins, a dazzling, smug thing that should be obnoxious but somehow isn't. “Because,” he says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world, “I am here!”

I blink, my brain short-circuiting. “Who the hell are you?”

“Varnok the Annihilator,” he says, his brow ridges arching high on his face. “But you can call me... your next lover.”

I cough, blood spilling from my lips. My body feels like it's about to give out, the pain and exhaustion finally catching up to me.

“You're out of your goddamn mind,” I sputter, my vision fading to black.

The last thing I see is his grin, smug and unshaken, as the darkness takes me.

CHAPTER 6

VARNOK

I frown as the ambassador's eyes flutter shut. “Wait a minute,” I mutter, my voice low and gravelly. “Humans aren't supposed to bleed out of their nose and ears. You need medical attention!”

I scan the room, my sharp eyes landing on the human woman crouched over the

fallen Reaper. She's holding a tissue regeneration unit, her hands trembling as she tries to patch up her monstrous captor. I stride over, my heavy boots thudding against the metal floor, and snatch the device from her grip.

"I'll take that," I say, not bothering to wait for her protest. I flick the switch, and the surgery stick hums to life, its Zerberu-class Theta waves already working their magic on Quinn's battered body.

Her breathing steadies, the color returning to her pale cheeks. Her eyes flutter open, and she blinks up at me, dazed but alive. "You're real," she murmurs, her voice soft and groggy.

Our gazes lock, and for a moment, the chaos of the room fades into the background. She's stunning, even bruised and bloodied, and I feel a jolt of something I haven't felt in a long time. I shake it off, my Vakutan discipline kicking in. Now's not the time.

"Stay here," I say, my voice firm but not unkind. I gently lower her into Reku's throne, the oversized seat dwarfing her small frame. She looks up at me, her blue eyes wide and questioning, but I don't have time to explain.

I turn, my hand tightening around the hilt of the power blade. The plasma beam ignites with a sharp hiss, the white-hot light casting long shadows across the room. Daria scrambles back, her eyes wide with fear, but I'm not here for her.

Reku's on the floor, his massive body twitching as his regeneration kicks in. He's not down for long, and I'm not about to give him the chance to get back up. I step over him, the power blade humming in my hand, and plant a boot on his chest.

The human woman—Daria—throws herself over Reku's body, her arms spread wide like she's trying to shield a mountain. Her red mohawk is matted with sweat, and her eyes are wild, desperate. "Don't kill him!" she screams, her voice cracking. "Please!"

I lower the power blade, the plasma beam flickering out with a hiss. “He’s your captor,” I say, my voice flat, confused. “He’s a Reaper. He’s a monster.”

“He’s my soul!” she cries, tears streaming down her face. Her hands clutch at Reku’s chest, her fingers digging into the black, spiked skin. “He’s my jalshagar. I can’t lose him. I won’t.”

I stare at her, my scales itching with discomfort. Jalshagar. The word hits me like a plasma bolt to the chest. I’ve heard the stories, the legends. Two bodies, one soul. A bond that defies logic, reason, even sanity. And here it is, staring me in the face—a human woman willing to die for the monster who enslaved her.

I turn off the power blade and slide it back into its holster. “Fine,” I grunt, turning my back on them. “He’s your problem now.”

Quinn wobbles to her feet, her hand gripping my arm for balance. Her skin is soft, warm, and I feel a jolt of something primal, something I haven’t felt in a long time. I push it down, hard. Now’s not the time.

“Can you walk?” I ask, my voice gruff but not unkind.

“I’ll try,” she says, her voice shaky but determined. She takes a step, then another, leaning on me more than she probably wants to admit. Her skin brushes against mine, and I feel my cock twitch. I grit my teeth, forcing my body to behave. Focus, Varnok. Focus.

We’re almost to the door when Quinn stops, her hand tightening on my arm. “Wait,” she says, her voice sharp. “You can’t just leave her here!”

I glance back at Daria, still crouched over Reku, her body trembling. “I can’t take her either,” I say, my voice low. “There are no good endings here.”

Quinn's eyes narrow, her lips pressing into a thin line. "She's a victim, Varnok. She needs help."

"She's jalshagar," I snap, my patience wearing thin. "She's not going anywhere without him. And I'm not dragging a Reaper back to the Alliance. End of discussion."

Quinn opens her mouth to argue, but I cut her off with a sharp look. "Let's go," I say, pulling her toward the door. "Before more of them show up."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

She hesitates, her eyes lingering on Daria for a moment longer, but she doesn't argue. Together, we step into the dimly lit corridor, leaving the throne room—and its twisted love story—behind.

We reach a T-junction in the dimly lit corridor, and I start to pull Quinn toward the dock where Sweet Charity waits. But she digs her heels in, her small frame surprisingly stubborn.

“The flight attendants,” she says, her voice firm. “We can't just leave them.”

I growl, low and guttural. “Quinn, we don't have time for this. Every second we waste is another chance for more Reapers to show up.”

“They're not jelly car,” she snaps, her blue eyes blazing. “They didn't ask for this, and they sure as hell don't want to stay here.”

“Jalshagar,” I correct her, my voice sharp. “And I don't care what they asked for. The Precursors have their own plans, and I'm not about to mess with them.”

“Please,” she says, her voice softening. Her hand grabs my arm, and her fingers are warm against my scales. “They want out of here, trust me.”

I look down at her, and something in my chest twists. Her eyes are pleading, but there's steel in them too. She's not backing down. I grit my teeth. Damn her for being so stubborn. Damn her for making me care.

“Fine,” I growl. “But with one caveat.”

Her brow furrows. She releases my arm and takes a step back, crossing her arms over her chest. “What’s that?”

“You move much too slowly.”

Before she can protest, I bend down and scoop her up, tossing her over my shoulder like a sack of groceries. She yelps, her hands flailing as she tries to grab onto something for balance. “Varnok! Put me down!”

“No can do, Ambassador,” I say, my voice smug. Her squirming nearly sends her tumbling, and I slap a hand onto her backside to hold her in place. Her ass is firm and round under my palm, and I t enjoy the feel of it. Not that I’d ever admit it. I’m just keeping her safe. That’s all.

“You didntjust spank me!” she shouts, her voice rising an octave.

“No, I didn’t,” I lie, my tone matter-of-fact. “I’m just making sure you don’t fall. Now hold still.”

She mumbles something under her breath that sounds suspiciously likebarbarian, but she stops squirming. I adjust my grip and start moving, my boots thudding against the metal floor. The sooner we find her flight crew, the sooner we can get out of here.

And the sooner I can get Quinn off my shoulder—and out of my head.

I set Quinn down gently,her feet barely touching the ground before she wobbles. She glares at me, her blue eyes sharp despite the blood still smeared across her face. “I can walk, you know,” she snaps, brushing herself off like I’ve just insulted her entire lineage.

“Sure you can,” I grunt, not bothering to argue. I turn to the cage where Clara’s still

locked up, her face pressed against the bars. She's got that look humans get when they're trying to decide if they're about to be rescued or eaten. Spoiler: it's the first one.

"You're late," Clara says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten about me."

"I was busy," I shoot back, grabbing the cage door and yanking it open with a screech of metal. "Where's T'vek?"

Clara steps out, stretching her arms like she's just been cooped up in a luxury suite instead of a livestock cage. "One of the Reapers took her down that way." She points to a dimly lit corridor. "She didn't look too upset about it, though."

I groan. Of course she didn't. T'vek's always been a little too eager for her own good. I pull out my comm and hit the button. "Gas, get the ship ready. We're leaving soon."

"Already on it, boss," Gas's voice crackles back. "Weapons are online, engines are warm, and I've got a fresh batch of glitter for the next time Dowron calls."

"Great," I mutter, cutting the comm. I glance at Quinn and Clara. "Stay here. I'll be back."

"Like hell," Quinn says, stepping forward. "I'm not sitting around while you?—"

I cut her off with a look. "You're in no shape to fight, Ambassador. Stay. Here."

She glares at me but doesn't argue. Good. I don't have time for her stubbornness right now. I head down the corridor, my power blade humming in my hand. The air smells like rust and sweat, and the walls are lined with scratches and scorch marks. Typical Reaper decor.

I hear voices up ahead, one raspy and low, the other... amused? I slow my steps, pressing myself against the wall as I peek around the corner. There's T'vek, chained to a wall, her red scales gleaming in the dim light. A Reaper guard looms over her, his bone spurs glinting like knives.

"You are mine now, Vakutan," the Reaper growls, his voice like gravel in a blender.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

T'vek smirks, her golden eyes sparkling. "Oh no," she says, her tone dripping with mock distress. "I'm all chained up and helpless. You can do anything you want to me."

I roll my eyes. Of course. I step into the room, my power blade slicing through the air with a hiss.

The Reaper's eyes go wide as I plant my boot in his ribs, sending him sprawling into the wall. His bone spurs scrape against the metal, but before he can recover, I'm on him. My power blade hisses through the air, the plasma beam slicing through the chain holding T'vek in place.

She drops to the floor with a huff, dusting herself off like she's just been inconvenienced by a minor delay in her day.

"You could've waited about five more minutes before you rescued me," she says, glaring at me like I've just ruined her favorite holovid.

I grunt, slicing through the rest of the chains with a flick of my wrist. "Next time, I'll check your schedule before saving your scales, T'vek."

She smirks, her golden eyes glinting with mischief. "Promises, promises."

I roll my eyes and grab her arm, hauling her to her feet. "Let's go. We've got a ship to catch."

We make our way back to Clara and Quinn, who are waiting by the throne room.

Clara's pacing, her arms crossed over her chest, while Quinn's perched on the edge of Reku's throne, looking like she's seriously considering burning it down just for the hell of it.

"What took you so long?" Clara snaps as soon as we're in earshot. "We were starting to think you'd gotten lost."

"Had to stop for tea," I deadpan, earning a snort from T'vek.

Quinn stands, wobbling slightly, and I instinctively reach out to steady her. Her skin is warm under my hand, and I feel a jolt of something I haven't felt in a long time. I pull back quickly, clearing my throat. "Let's move."

The journey back to Sweet Charity is uneventful, but Quinn's quiet the whole way. Her blue eyes are distant, like she's lost in thought, and every now and then, she glances at me like she's trying to figure me out.

We reach the ship, and Gas is waiting at the ramp, his golden fur glinting in the dim light. "Took you long enough," he says, his voice cheerful despite the chaos. "I was starting to think you'd gotten lost."

"I just heard that you unoriginal bastard," I mutter, ushering the women onboard.

As I check the ship's systems, I glance over at Quinn. She's leaning against the bulkhead, her arms crossed, watching me with those piercing blue eyes. There's a spark in them, something fierce and unyielding, and I feel my scales itch with something I can't quite name.

Maybe this rescue op wasn't so bad after all.

CHAPTER 7

QUINN

The bridge of Sweet Charity smells faintly of burnt circuitry and old leather. The hum of the engines vibrates through the floor, a low thrum that matches the pounding in my temples. I press my fingers into my skull, the ache from Reku's whip still sharp and insistent.

Var sprawls in the captain's chair, his massive frame making the seat look like it belongs in a nursery. His purple eyes scan the console, claws clicking against the armrests. Beside him, Gas—a golden-furred Fratvoyan—navigates with the kind of casual ease that suggests he's flown through worse than this asteroid belt.

"You should go below," Var grumbles without looking at me. "Rest. You're no use to anyone with that head of yours throbbing like a broken engine."

"My place is on the bridge," I snap, straightening despite the way my vision swims. "I'm on an official mission, or did you forget?"

He snorts and a snarl twitches over his lips. "Stubborn."

"Look who's talking."

Gas snorts, his long snout twitching as he tries to stifle a laugh. Var's head whips toward him, his glare sharp enough to cut through steel.

"You think this is funny, Gaspard?"

Gas shrugs, his furry shoulders bouncing. "Well... kinda? Yeah."

Var growls low in his throat, but before he can unleash whatever scaly tirade he's brewing, an alert chimes on the console. My head jerks up, the pain momentarily

forgotten.

“Is it General Dowron?” I ask, leaning forward.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

“I hope not,” Var mutters. He taps a claw against the screen, and a holographic image flickers to life. It’s Daria, Reku’s... whatever she is. Her red mohawk is tangled, her face smeared with dirt. The collar around her neck gleams even in the dim light.

I’m out of my seat before I even think about it, leaning over Var’s armrest, blocking his view of the holo. “Daria! We’ll turn around immediately. Just hold on?—”

“No!” Her voice cracks, sharp and desperate. “That’s not why I’m calling.”

Var grabs my arm, his grip firm but not painful, and pulls me back into my seat. I glare at him, but he’s focused on Daria. “Then why are you?”

She hesitates, her fingers twisting in the ragged remains of her flightsuit. “I wanted to thank you. For sparing Reku.”

I blink, my mind stumbling over her words. “Thank you?Thankyou? That monster?—”

“And,” she interrupts, her voice steady, “I have information. Critical information.”

Var leans forwardly. “Go on.”

Daria glances over her shoulder, as if afraid someone might overhear. “Reku wasn’t acting alone. Someone hired him to sabotage theTriumphant. Someone powerful.”

The silence on the bridge is thick, the kind of silence that feels like it’s pressing against your eardrums.

“Who?” I demand, my voice cutting through the stillness.

Daria’s image flickers, her face pale and drawn under the dim light of whatever hovel she’s calling from. I lean closer, my fists clenched so tightly my nails dig into my palms. “Kallus? You’re sure that’s the name you heard?”

She nods, her spiky mohawk bobbing slightly. “I never saw him. But Reku mentioned him once. Said he was ruthless.” Her voice trembles, and she glances over her shoulder, her fear palpable even through the holo feed.

I glance at Var, who’s leaning back in his chair, claws drumming on the armrest. His purple eyes gleam with something between amusement and annoyance. “Ruthless, huh?” I say, my voice sharp. “More ruthless than your lover?”

Daria’s face hardens, her lips pulling into a tight line. “You don’t understand. Reku is—he’s?—”

A roar cuts through her words, guttural and furious, and Daria flinches like she’s been struck. Her eyes widen, and she reaches for the console. “I have to go.” The feed cuts out abruptly, leaving the bridge in silence.

Var lets out a low whistle, tilting his head toward me. “Well, Ambassador, looks like we’ve got ourselves a lead.”

“A lead? That’s it?” I snap, pacing the narrow space. “Daria’s word isn’t enough to hold Kallus accountable. We need proof. Evidence. Something tangible to present to the Alliance.”

Var taps the plasma blaster at his side, the motion deliberate. “Legally?” He smirks, his fangs flashing. “How do your people say it? Un legal is just a sick parakeet? I bet I can get a full confession out of Kallus if I shove this blaster right up his?—”

“Just get me to Armstrong,” I interrupt, my voice colder than I intend. “And then we’ll never have to see each other again.”

The smirk vanishes from Var’s face, replaced by something that looks almost... hurt. His massive frame shifts in the chair, his claws stilling. “Why wouldn’t we see each other again?”

The question catches me off guard. I stop pacing, staring at him. His purple eyes meet mine, and for once, he doesn’t look smug or arrogant. He looks... genuine. I feel a pang of guilt, which I immediately hate. He saved my life, sure, but that doesn’t mean I owe him anything. Does it?

“Because,” I say, my voice softer than I mean it to be, “this isn’t my world. It’s yours. And as soon as I’m back on Armstrong, I’m going to do my job. And I assume you need to get back to YOUR job, um, blowing stuff up and causing mayhem.”

"Damn right that's our job!" Gas whoops.

"I see," he says coolly. "So, we walk in different worlds, is what you're saying."

"We're FROM different worlds," I say with a sigh. "It's nothing against you, and I'll always be grateful that you saved my life, but once we get to Armstrong...well...That's it."

Var watches me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he leans back, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Armstrong it is, then.”

The bridge feels claustrophobic, the tension between Var and me thick enough to choke on. My head still pounds, and the way Var’s purple eyes keep flicking toward me isn’t helping. I clear my throat, breaking the silence.

“Mind if I use your comms? I need to reach out to the Alliance and IEC. Let them know I’m alive and... intact.” I gesture to myself, the motion a little too sharp.

Var leans back in his chair, his massive frame making the thing creak in protest. His claws tap against the armrest. “Gas,” he barks, not taking his eyes off me. “Take her to the ready room. Set her up.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Gas hops down from his seat, his golden fur catching the dim light. “Right this way, Ambassador,” he says with a grin that’s way too cheerful for the situation.

I follow him off the bridge, my boots clicking against the metal floor. The ready room is small, barely more than a closet with a console shoved against one wall. Gas gestures to it with a flourish. “All yours. Just link your compad into the QE system here—” He taps a port on the console. “—and you’re good to go.”

I nod, pulling my compad from my pocket. “Thanks, Gas.”

He lingers, his long snout twitching like he’s chewing on something to say. “You know,” he starts, his voice casual in a way that immediately makes me suspicious, “the boss isn’t such a bad guy. Once you get to know him, I mean.”

I snort, plugging my compad into the console. “He’s impulsive, rude, and cocky. What’s not to love?”

Gas chuckles, his furry shoulders bouncing. “Yeah, sure. He’s all those things. But he’s also got a good heart. And he’d never do anything dishonorable.”

I glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “Are you... trying to nudge me into seeing him as more than a rescuer? Or even a friend?”

He shrugs, his grin widening. “I’m just saying, the way you guys keep checking each other out when you think the other won’t notice is getting kind of embarrassing.” He gestures vaguely toward the bridge. “I mean, damn, sometimes I feel like I should just leave the room and give you two a little privacy.”

My face burns, and I quickly turn back to the console, fumbling with the connection. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I mutter, my voice tighter than I intend.

Gas laughs again, heading for the door. “Sure, Ambassador. Sure.” He pauses in the doorway, looking back at me with a wink. “But just so you know, I’m rooting for you two. You’d make a cute couple.”

“Out,” I snap, pointing at the door. He’s still chuckling as it slides shut behind him.

I sink into the chair, my cheeks still flaming. I thought I’d been subtle. Discreet. Clearly, I’d been wrong. I shake my head, forcing myself to focus on the console. I need to reach out to the Alliance, not dwell on whatever ridiculous notions Gas has in his furry little head.

But as I start typing, I can’t help the nagging thought that maybe, just maybe, he’s not entirely wrong.

The holo image of General Dowron flickers to life in front of me, his pink scales dulled by the low light of the ready room. His stooped posture and the deep lines etched into his face make him look older than the last time I saw him, but his eyes are as sharp as ever. Relief flashes across his features the moment he sees me.

“Ambassador Gellar,” he says, his voice gravelly but warm. “You’re alive. I’ll admit, I was... concerned.”

“Thanks for being worried about me,” I say, crossing my arms. “I’m fine, by the way. I wasn’t raped and killed by space pirates. Thanks for asking.”

Dowron’s expression tightens, and he lets out a low, rumbling sigh. “My apologies, Ambassador. I didn’t mean to be brusque. But while you were missing, the situation on Jwoon X and with Bruw Interstellar Shipping has escalated. It’s reached a fever

pitch.”

I lean forward, my irritation momentarily forgotten. “What’s happened?”

“When you didn’t arrive on Armstrong, Kallus used his influence to push for a new ambassador to be assigned—a former employee of Bruw Interstellar Shipping. Someone who is, shall we say, biased in his favor.”

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Of course he did. Let me guess, this new ‘ambassador’ is already pushing for a settlement that benefits Kallus and screws over Zantress and the Solari?”

Dowron nods. “Precisely. I’ve been stalling, and Prime Minister Serenity Garsdotter has flat out refused to allow the negotiations to continue if Kallus gets sole say in who the mediator will be. But time is running out.”

I pace the small room, my boots clicking against the metal floor. “Kallus very well may have tried to have me killed,” I say, stopping abruptly. I explain what Daria told us about Kallus hiring Reku to sabotage the *Triumphant*.

Dowron’s eyes narrow, and he leans closer to the holo feed. “The word of a traumatized slave girl isn’t enough to convict Kallus of anything. But it’s clear your life continues to be in danger.”

“No kidding,” I mutter, crossing my arms again. “So, what’s the plan? You’re not expecting me to waltz back into Armstrong without some kind of protection, are you?”

“Of course not,” Dowron says, his tone firm. “That’s why I’m assigning Varnok the Annihilator as your personal bodyguard.”

I stare at the flickering holo image of Dowron, my brain struggling to process his words. Then I laugh—a sharp, humorless sound that echoes in the small room. It’s the kind of laugh that makes me wonder if I’m losing my mind.

“Excuse the fuck out of my French, General,” I say, my voice rising, “but what in the hell did you just say?”

Dowron’s holo image flickers as I stare at him, my mouth hanging open. “You’re assigning Varnokas my bodyguard? Are you out of your mind? He’s not exactly the subtle type, General. He’s more the ‘smash first, ask questions never’ type.”

Dowron’s expression doesn’t change, but I swear I see the faintest twitch of amusement in his eyes. “I don’t have a choice, Ambassador. The Armistice treaty between the Coalition and the Alliance prohibits military forces from entering Armstrong’s controlled space. Varnok, however, is technically a Liaison. It’s a loophole, but it’s one we can use.”

“A loophole?” I throw my hands up, pacing the small room. “He’s a walking, talking wrecking ball. How is that a loophole?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

“Because he’s not officially military,” Dowron says, his voice calm but firm. “And he’s the best protection you’re going to get. Kallus has already tried to kill you once. I’m not taking any chances.”

I stop pacing, crossing my arms over my chest. “Fine. But you’d better make sure he knows to keep his mouth shut during negotiations. The last thing we need is someone named ‘the Annihilator’ at the peace table.”

Dowron nods, his expression serious. “I’ll make sure he understands the importance of discretion.”

“Discretion?” I snort. “Varnok doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”

Dowron’s holo image flickers again, and he leans forward slightly. “Ambassador, I know this isn’t ideal, but it’s the best option we have. Trust me, Varnok will keep you safe.”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “Fine. But if he starts a war because he can’t keep his claws to himself, I’m blaming you.”

Dowron’s lips twitch into a faint smile. “Noted. I’ll inform Varnok of his new assignment. Good luck, Ambassador.”

The holo image fades, leaving me alone in the ready room. I lean against the console, my head still throbbing. Varnok as my bodyguard. Great. Just great. I can already imagine the chaos he’s going to cause.

The door slides open, and I turn to see Varnok himself standing there, his massive frame filling the doorway. His purple eyes lock onto mine, and he smirks. “So, I hear I’m your new bodyguard.”

“Lucky me,” I mutter, crossing my arms. “Just so we’re clear, this doesn’t mean we’re friends. You’re here to keep me alive, not to chat.”

He steps into the room, his claws clicking against the floor. “Oh, come on, Ambassador. You’re not even a little excited to spend more time with me?”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help the faint heat that rises to my cheeks. “Excited? No. Tolerating? Barely.”

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that sends a shiver down my spine. “We’ll see how long that lasts.”

I glare at him, but there’s no real heat behind it. “Just remember, Varnok. Keep your mouth shut during negotiations. The last thing we need is you scaring everyone off.”

He grins, his fangs flashing. “Don’t worry, Ambassador. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” I mutter, but I can’t help the small smile that tugs at my lips. Despite my grumbling, a part of me is secretly thrilled that Varnok is going to be spending more time around me. At least I’ll have some eye candy.

CHAPTER 8

VARNOK

Gas’s voice crackles over the comms as we break through the atmosphere. “Uh, boss? We’ve got company. Two Armstrong starfighters just locked onto our position.

They're flanking us like we're about to pull a heist."

I lean forward in my seat, my scales itching with irritation. "Tell them to back off. We're not here to start a war."

"Already tried. They're not budging. Guess they don't trust a Trident Alliance gunship dropping into their backyard unannounced."

Quinn steps onto the bridge, her heels clicking against the metal floor. She's got that look on her face—the one that says she's about to take charge whether I like it or not. "Let me handle this."

She grabs the comms before I can protest. "This is Ambassador Quinn Gellar of the Intergalactic Exchange Commission. We're here on official diplomatic business. Stand down and let us land."

There's a pause, then a crisp voice responds. "Ambassador Gellar, we were expecting you on the *Triumphant*. This is... unexpected. Please proceed to the Christmasville starport. We'll escort you in."

Quinn shoots me a look that's equal parts smug and exasperated. "See? Easy."

"Easy for you," I grumble. "I don't like being babysat by a couple of tin cans with wings."

She rolls her eyes. "They're starfighters, Varnok. Not tin cans. And they're just doing their job."

"Their job is to make me feel like a criminal."

"Maybe if you didn't fly around in a ship that looks like it belongs to a warlord,

they'd be less suspicious.”

I cross my arms, my tailbone twitching in annoyance. “Sweet Charity is a perfectly respectable vessel.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

“It’s a nine-pointed death machine with enough firepower to level a city.”

“Exactly. Respectable.”

She shakes her head, muttering something under her breath that sounds suspiciously like “insufferable.”

The starfighters stay glued to our sides all the way down, their sleek, angular frames glinting in the sunlight. Christmasville sprawls below us, a glittering mosaic of towering spires, holographic displays, and winding streets. Even from this high up, I can see the city’s festive energy—holographic snowflakes drifting through the air, twinkling lights tracing the outlines of buildings, and the occasional oversized Santa Claus waving from a rooftop.

“It’s beautiful,” Quinn says, her voice softening.

I grunt in agreement. “For a city built on peace, it’s got a lot of sparkle.”

She glances at me, a small smile playing on her lips. “You’re not entirely immune to charm, are you?”

“Don’t push it, Ambassador.”

We touch down at the starport, the gangplank hissing as it lowers. Quinn turns to me, her expression serious. “Listen, Varnok. These negotiations are delicate. The wrong word, even the wrong facial expression, could reignite the war. So just stay out of my way and try to be invisible.”

I bristle, my scales rippling with irritation. “And as your bodyguard, if it pertains to your safety, I’m in charge. If I say duck, you duck. If I say we move, we move.”

She opens her mouth to argue, then visibly reins it in. “Fine. But don’t make me regret this.”

We step onto the gangplank, the crisp Armstrong air hitting me like a slap. A contingent of officials waits for us, led by a tall, statuesque woman with deep lavender eyes. Prime Minister Serenity Garsdotter. She’s every bit as imposing as her reputation suggests.

“Ambassador Gellar,” she says, her voice smooth and measured. “Welcome to Armstrong. We’re relieved to see you safe.”

Quinn steps forward, her posture perfect, her smile diplomatic. “Thank you, Prime Minister. It’s good to be here.”

Serenity’s gaze shifts to me, her expression unreadable. “And you must be Varnok the Annihilator.”

I nod, my chest puffing out a little. “That’s me.”

Her lips twitch, almost like she’s suppressing a smile. “I’ve heard... quite a lot about you.”

“All good things, I hope.”

“Let’s just say you’re exactly as advertised.”

Quinn shoots me a look that screams behave. I smirk. This is going to be fun.

The Prime Minister gestures to a sleek shuttle waiting on the tarmac, flanked by a squadron of Armstrong starfighters. Their pilots stand at attention, their helmets gleaming under the city's artificial sunlight. I raise a brow, my scales rippling with skepticism.

“Armstrong security, huh?” I grunt, crossing my arms. “You sure they’re up for the job? I’ve seen better defenses on a cargo barge.”

Quinn’s heel connects with my shin, sharp enough to make me flinch. I glare down at her, but she’s already turned to Serenity with a diplomatic smile plastered on her face.

“Ignore him, Prime Minister,” Quinn says smoothly. “He’s just... protective.”

Serenity doesn’t even blink. If anything, she looks amused. “I appreciate your concerns, Varnok. But the Armstrong Militia is more than capable of ensuring Ambassador Gellar’s safety.”

“Militia?” I snort, stepping closer to tower over her. “Those are full-blown soldiers. Call it what it is—an army. And I’ve seen plenty of armies fail.”

Serenity’s smile doesn’t waver. If anything, it deepens, like she’s enjoying this little sparring match. “Semantics, Mr. Annihilator. We’re a planet of peace, but we’re not naive. We’ve learned to protect what matters.”

Quinn cuts in before I can retort, her voice tight with irritation. “Enough, Varnok. Prime Minister, when can we begin the negotiations?”

Serenity gestures toward the shuttle, her movements as graceful as a dancer’s. “The formal talks will begin tomorrow. But tonight, I’m hosting a reception in your honor. It’ll be an informal setting where you can assess the... dynamics of our guests. Both Kallus Bruw and Speaker Zantress will be in attendance.”

My jaw tightens at the mention of Kallus. That slimy, scale-covered snake. Hiring Reapers to take out Quinn? That's a level of cowardice even I can't stomach.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

“A reception?” I growl, my voice low and dangerous. “You’re inviting the man who might’ve tried to have her killed to a party?”

Quinn steps between Serenity and me, her glare sharp enough to cut through steel. “Varnok, stop it. This is political, not personal.”

“It’s personal now,” I snap, my claws flexing.

“Then keep it to yourself,” Quinn fires back, her tone icy. “I don’t need you making this harder than it already is.”

Serenity watches us like we’re some kind of entertainment. “I assure you, Mr. Bruw will be on his best behavior. And if he’s not, well, we’ll deal with it.”

I clench my fists, my scales shimmering with barely contained rage. “I’d love to deal with it.”

Quinn grabs my arm, her grip surprisingly strong for someone so small. “You’re not dealing with anything. You’re here to protect me, not start a war. Understood?”

I glance down at her, her blue eyes blazing with determination. She’s got a fire in her, I’ll give her that.

“Fine,” I grumble. “But if he so much as looks at you wrong...”

She releases my arm, smoothing out her jacket. “I’ll handle it. Now, can we get to the shuttle without any more... commentary?”

I don't answer, just follow her toward the shuttle, my gaze scanning the perimeter. Those starfighters might look fancy, but they're not stopping me if Kallus tries something.

As we board, I catch Serenity's eye. She gives me a knowing look, like she's already two steps ahead. I don't trust her. I don't trust any of them.

But Quinn does, and for some reason, that makes it even worse.

The shuttle glides through Christmasville's skyline, weaving between holographic displays of snowflakes and prancing reindeer. I keep my trap shut, focusing instead on scanning every face, every corner, every shadow. Old habits die hard.

Armstrong Peacekeepers line our route—a mishmash of former Alliance and Coalition troops standing shoulder to shoulder. I catch sight of their weapons—top-grade plasma rifles with enhanced targeting systems. Not bad. Some of them even have the stance of veterans, alert without being twitchy.

"Impressed?" Quinn asks, noticing my appraisal.

I grunt. "They'll do. Kallus would be stupid to try anything with this much firepower around."

"That's... almost a compliment."

"Don't get used to it."

The shuttle touches down at Superior Gardens, a horseshoe-shaped monstrosity of a hotel that screams "more money than sense." We disembark into a lobby that could swallow a small starship, all gleaming marble and floating light sculptures.

I lean closer to Quinn, keeping my voice low. "Kallus probably didn't expect you to survive Reku's crew. He won't have a backup plan ready."

She nods slightly, her expression unchanged. "Then we have a small window of advantage."

"Exactly. But don't think for a second he won't come up with something new. These corporate types always have contingencies for their contingencies."

"Then it's a good thing I have you, isn't it?" There's a hint of teasing in her voice that makes my scales warm.

The Prime Minister guides us through the lobby toward a grand reception hall. The doors slide open to reveal a scene that's trying way too hard to be elegant—a string quartet of mixed species sawing away at Vivaldi, waiters gliding between clusters of well-dressed dignitaries, and enough food to feed a small army laid out on gleaming tables.

"Subtle," I mutter.

Quinn elbows me. "Be nice."

My eyes immediately lock onto two figures standing at opposite ends of the room—Kallus Bruw and Speaker Zantress. If looks could kill, the entire room would be a smoking crater from the glares they're shooting at each other.

Kallus stands tall and imposing, his light red scales catching the light as he gestures dramatically to a group of admirers. He's dressed in what I assume is the height of galactic fashion—all sharp angles and metallic accents that probably cost more than Sweet Charity.

Zantress, by contrast, looks like she'd rather be anywhere else. The female grolgath's dour expression is fixed in a permanent scowl as she nods curtly to anyone who approaches.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"Those two look ready to tear each other apart," I observe.

Quinn sighs. "And I'm supposed to get them to agree on something. Fantastic."

"Good luck with that."

As we move through the reception, Quinn is immediately swarmed by diplomats, politicians, and various hangers-on. Everyone wants a piece of her—to hear about her abduction, to get her take on the Jwoon Incident, to curry favor with the woman who might prevent another interstellar conflict.

I stay close, my hand never straying far from my blaster. A few of the dignitaries eye me nervously, which gives me a small satisfaction. Good. They should be nervous.

"Ambassador Gellar, your thoughts on mineral rights in disputed territories?" asks a thin human with spectacles.

"Minister Yularen, what a pleasure to see the Odexian delegation here!" Quinn deflects smoothly.

"Is it true you fought a Reaper captain?" a young aide whispers excitedly.

Through it all, Quinn navigates with the precision of a starfighter pilot, never revealing too much, never committing to anything. It's impressive, in its way.

What a time to be stuck in a historical moment, I think glumly to myself. All things considered, I preferred the War. At least you knew who was trying to kill you, and

when. This smiling-while-plotting-your-demise business gives me a headache.

But watching Quinn work the room, her small frame somehow commanding the attention of beings twice her size, I can't help but feel a grudging admiration. She might not fight with plasma blasters, but she's a warrior in her own arena.

And I'm starting to think that arena might be more dangerous than any battlefield I've faced.

CHAPTER 9

QUINN

I'm trying to steady my nerves while maintaining the practiced diplomat's smile that's been plastered on my face for the past hour. The reception hall buzzes with conversation, laughter, and the string quartet's gentle melodies floating above it all. Every few seconds, I feel Varnok's presence shift behind me—a mountain of muscle and scales constantly scanning for threats.

"Quite the turnout," Prime Minister Serenity Garsdotter remarks, her tall frame towering over me. The half-human, half-Pi'Rell woman surveys the room with those striking lavender eyes that miss nothing. "Representatives from fifty-three systems at last count."

General Dowron nods, his pink scales catching the light. "Everyone wants to be present when history is made—or unmade."

"Let's aim for the former," I say, taking a sip of my champagne.

Dowron's gaze drifts across the room to where Kallus Bruw stands surrounded by a circle of admirers. "For someone with such a notorious reputation, he looks rather...

ordinary."

I follow his gaze, studying the shipping magnate. Kallus laughs at something one of his sycophants says, revealing perfect teeth.

"I respectfully disagree, General," I say, keeping my voice low. "Look at his eyes. There's a predatory gleam there—the look of someone who sees people as resources to be exploited, not as beings with inherent worth."

Serenity raises an eyebrow. "Strong words, Ambassador."

"Backed by stronger evidence. His actions have had devastating effects on local populations wherever he sets up operations." I turn to face them fully. "Right now, Bruw Interstellar faces forty-seven separate lawsuits for environmental damage caused by his mining operations. Entire ecosystems destroyed, indigenous species pushed to extinction, water tables poisoned with industrial runoff."

"Yet he walks free," comes a gravelly voice from behind us.

I turn to find Zantress approaching, her dour expression somehow even more severe in the bright lights of the reception. The female grolgath inclines her head slightly in greeting.

"Speaker Zantress," I acknowledge. "I'm glad you could join us."

"I observe that all those lawsuits are in Alliance or League space," Zantress continues, ignoring pleasantries. "In Coalition territory, Kallus would already be imprisoned for the harm he has caused."

Dowron stiffens beside me. "We have a thing called due process in the Trident Alliance, Zantress."

"Which you suspended for any and all Coalition citizens—including those who did not serve in the military," Zantress counters, her voice sharpening.

"We had no way of knowing which of them were spies," Dowron says, his stooped posture straightening as decades of military bearing reassert themselves. "It was a necessary sin."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

I can feel the temperature of the conversation rising dangerously. Old wounds from the Centuries War reopening right before my eyes.

"Stop," I say sharply, cutting through their argument. "Both of you. We're here to find a peaceful resolution to the Jwoon incident. Not re-ignite the Centuries War over your clashing ideologies."

Behind me, Varnok lets out a deep, rumbling laugh. I glance back to see him grinning, clearly entertained by my bluntness. Dowron shoots him a withering glare, but the younger vakutan seems entirely unperturbed.

"Fair enough, Ambassador," Dowron concedes after a moment.

Zantress gives me an appraising look. "You speak with unusual directness for a diplomat."

"Sometimes directness is what's needed," I reply. "Especially when dancing around issues has cost lives."

Prime Minister Serenity nods approvingly. "Armstrong has always valued straightforward speech. It's refreshing to see it from an IHC representative."

A server drifts by with a tray of hors d'oeuvres, and I take the opportunity to change the subject. "Have you tried these, Speaker Zantress? They're made with vegetables grown right here on Armstrong."

The grolgath reluctantly accepts one of the small canapés. "This world has done well

for itself, considering its history."

"That's what we're trying to prevent on Jwoon," I say, seizing the opening. "Another world torn apart by conflict between greater powers."

Serenity's expression grows serious. "The Prime Minister before me was on Armstrong during the battle. She always said the worst casualties weren't from the fighting itself, but from the environmental collapse that followed."

"Exactly," I nod. "And Jwoon's ecosystem is far more fragile than Armstrong's ever was."

Zantress finishes her canapé. "The Solari have lived in harmony with Jwoon for generations. They understand its rhythms and needs in ways Bruw's mining operations never could."

"Yet the mineral deposits on Jwoon could provide energy for billions," Dowron counters, though his tone is more measured now. "There must be a middle path."

I catch movement from the corner of my eye—Kallus Bruw is making his way toward our little group, his entourage trailing behind him like the tail of a comet.

"Speaking of middle paths," I murmur, "our other principal party approaches."

Varnok steps closer to me, his massive frame almost brushing against my back. I can feel the heat radiating from him, and despite myself, I find it oddly comforting.

"Ambassador Gellar," Kallus calls out, his voice smooth as silk. "What an absolute pleasure to finally meet you in person." His light red scales gleam under the reception lights as he extends a hand. "I was devastated to hear about your ordeal. Space pirates—how utterly barbaric."

Something in his tone makes my skin crawl. I shake his hand briefly, noting the expensive fabric of his sleeve, the perfect manicure of his claws.

"Mr. Bruw," I reply evenly. "I appreciate your concern. I'm just grateful to have arrived safely—if somewhat delayed."

His eyes flick briefly to Varnok, then back to me. "And with such impressive... security, I see."

"This is Varnok," I say, deliberately omitting his more colorful title. "He's been assigned as my liaison during these negotiations."

"How fortunate for you," Kallus says, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. "I've heard so much about the famous Varnok the Annihilator."

"All true," Varnok rumbles behind me, and I resist the urge to step on his foot.

Kallus turns his attention to Zantress. "Speaker, you're looking well. How are your people faring on Jwoon? Still living in those charming mud huts, I presume?"

I can practically feel Zantress bristle beside me. "Our dwellings are constructed in harmony with the planet's natural resources, using sustainable methods that have served us for generations."

"How quaint," Kallus says with a condescending smile.

I step forward slightly, inserting myself between them. "I believe we'll have plenty of time to discuss housing and infrastructure during tomorrow's formal negotiations. Tonight is simply an opportunity for us all to become acquainted."

"Of course, Ambassador," Kallus says smoothly. "I'm looking forward to finding a

solution that benefits everyone involved."

The lie is so transparent I'm surprised it doesn't shatter like glass on the marble floor.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

The string quartet transitions from their gentle background melodies to something more spirited—a classic waltz with a contemporary twist. Conversations pause as couples begin moving toward the dance floor.

"Ambassador Gellar," Kallus says, his voice silky smooth as he extends a hand toward me. "Would you do me the honor of this dance?"

I see Dowron and Serenity exchange glances. This is unexpected—and potentially problematic. But also an opportunity.

Before I can respond, Varnok steps forward, his massive frame inserting itself partially between us.

"No," he snaps, the single syllable hanging in the air like a thunderclap. "I will not allow it."

The conversation around us stutters to a halt. Even the servers pause, drinks balanced precariously on their trays as they sense the sudden tension.

I feel heat rising to my cheeks—not from embarrassment, but from anger. I turn to face Varnok, arching a single eyebrow.

"You... won't allow it?" My voice could freeze nitrogen. "I hardly think that Mr. Bruw is going to snap my neck on the dance floor, BODYGUARD. So I'm overriding your objections."

Varnok's eyes widen slightly at my tone. For a moment, I think he might actually

argue further, but he takes a half-step back, his jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscles working beneath his red scales.

I turn back to Kallus with a practiced diplomatic smile and offer my hand. "Shall we?"

Kallus takes my hand with a triumphant smirk directed at Varnok. "Delighted."

As he leads me onto the dance floor, I can feel Varnok's gaze burning into my back. Kallus positions himself with perfect technical form—one hand at my waist, the other clasping mine—but there's a clinical detachment to his touch. His body maintains a precise, almost mathematical distance from mine.

"You handle your pet vakutan well," Kallus murmurs as we begin moving with the music.

"He's not a pet," I reply, matching his steps effortlessly. "He's a professional doing his job—sometimes with excessive enthusiasm."

Kallus guides me through a turn. "I was so terribly upset to hear about your troubles on the way to Armstrong," he says, his smile and tone completely at odds with the cold calculation in his eyes.

"The trouble was most unexpected," I reply, maintaining eye contact. "But now I have my eyes wide open. Such 'trouble' is unlikely to prevent me from doing my duties again."

His rhythm falters for just a fraction of a second—so brief anyone else might have missed it. But I don't.

"Yes, I noticed you hired a bodyguard," Kallus says, recovering smoothly. "Varnok

the Annihilator. Not exactly the walking powderkeg I would choose to bring to peaceful negotiations."

I arch my eyebrows, feigning surprise. "Why, I think his presence is most appropriate," I reply with perfect civility. "Your mining operation threatens to annihilate the Jwoon settlers' way of life."

Kallus's smile tightens. "A pity you're clearly so biased against me and my company," he says as the song comes to an end. "I had hoped for an impartial mediator. No matter. Justice is on my side."

We stop dancing, though he doesn't immediately release my hand.

"I'd ask you to stay for the next song, but I'm afraid your bodyguard might decide to cause violence upon my person." He bends slightly at the waist, bringing my hand to his lips for a kiss that doesn't quite make contact with my skin. "Good evening, Ambassador."

With that, he turns and walks away, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the dance floor.

I've been outplayed. The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. Kallus maneuvered me perfectly—using Varnok's protective instincts against both of us. Now he has grounds to question my impartiality, all without ever having to defend his actions on Jwoon.

I make my way back to where Serenity and Dowron stand watching. Varnok looms behind them, his expression thunderous.

"Well," Serenity says quietly, "that was... illuminating."

"He's good," I admit, accepting a fresh glass of champagne from a passing server.
"Very good."

"What did he say to you?" Dowron asks.

"Nothing of substance. But everything of intent." I take a sip of my champagne. "He's laying groundwork to challenge my neutrality."

Varnok steps forward. "I should not have spoken out of turn," he says stiffly, the words clearly difficult for him. "I compromised your position."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"Yes, you did," I agree, but without the ice in my tone from before. "But Kallus would have found another way. He's determined to control these negotiations."

"Or derail them entirely," Serenity adds.

I nod slowly, watching Kallus across the room as he charms a group of officials from the Mining Regulatory Commission. "Either way, we need to be smarter. All of us." I glance meaningfully at Varnok.

He meets my gaze, and for once, there's no swagger in his expression—just determination and something else I can't quite identify.

"Agreed," he says simply.

I shoot Varnok a frustrated glance as we step away from Serenity and Dowron. The reception continues around us, but there's a subtle shift in the atmosphere—like everyone's watching us without actually looking our way.

"What were you thinking?" I hiss under my breath. "You practically handed Kallus exactly what he wanted."

Varnok's jaw clenches, but then his expression changes. The anger in his eyes softens into something else entirely, and he extends his hand toward me.

"Perhaps Kallus has outplayed us tonight," he says, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. "But we can still show him up."

I stare at his outstretched hand, baffled. "How is that?"

"By teaching Kallus what dancing is all about," Varnok says, his lips curling into a smile that's both challenging and inviting.

I hesitate, my diplomatic instincts screaming this is a terrible idea. But there's something in his expression—a sincerity I haven't seen before—that makes me place my hand in his.

Varnok escorts me back to the dance floor as the string quartet finishes their current piece. The musicians look up nervously as the enormous vakutan approaches.

"Do you know Sunrise on the Third Moon?" Varnok asks, his tone making it more command than question.

The musicians exchange glances, then nod fearfully.

Varnok waits a beat, then makes an impatient gesture with his massive hand. "Well, play it, then!"

"Varnok," I say with a patient sigh, "you really don't have to?"

The first notes cut through my protest—rich, sensual, unmistakable. A tango. My eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

Before I can process this unexpected choice, Varnok's hand finds the small of my back, pulling me tight against him. The sudden contact sends a jolt through my body—his scales radiating heat through the thin fabric of my dress.

Then we're moving, and I nearly gasp aloud.

Varnok isn't just competent—he's magnificent. His massive frame moves with a grace that defies logic, each step precise and powerful. He leads with absolute confidence, his body communicating his intentions so clearly I can follow without thought.

I'm no stranger to formal dancing—it's practically a requirement for diplomatic functions—but this is something else entirely. This isn't the clinical, proper waltz Kallus led me through. This is raw, primal communication between bodies.

I give myself over to his lead, matching his intensity. My diplomatic mask slips away as we move across the floor in perfect synchronicity. His hand at my back guides me through each turn, each step, each pause with exquisite control.

The room blurs around us. I'm vaguely aware that people have stopped their conversations to watch, but I can't bring myself to care. For these few minutes, there is no negotiation, no Kallus, no interstellar incident—just the music and the dance and Varnok.

He spins me away from him, then pulls me back with such perfect timing that I feel weightless. When he suddenly lifts me, his hands spanning my waist completely, I don't hesitate. My body arches instinctively, trusting him completely as he sets me down in perfect time with the music.

The tango grows more intense. Varnok executes a complex sequence of steps, and I match him beat for beat. When he suddenly hooks my leg up and places it on his shoulder, I maintain perfect balance, our faces inches apart, his breath warm against my skin.

The music builds toward its climax, and Varnok's eyes never leave mine. There's something almost predatory in his gaze now, but not threatening—possessive, intense, consuming. I should be terrified by the raw emotion I see there, but instead, I

feel more alive than I have in years.

As the final notes approach, he spins me one last time, then pulls me against him and dips me so low my hair nearly brushes the floor. His powerful arm supports me effortlessly, our bodies pressed together from chest to hip. My back arches over his arm, my throat exposed, completely vulnerable in his embrace.

The music stops, and for one breathless moment, we remain frozen in that position, gazes locked. His pupils are dilated, his breathing as rapid as my own. The silence stretches between us, charged with something I'm afraid to name.

Then the room erupts in spontaneous applause, breaking the spell. Varnok slowly raises me back to standing, but doesn't immediately release me. His hand lingers at my waist as we acknowledge the applause with slight nods.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

As reality crashes back in, a single terrifying thought forms in my mind with perfect clarity: Oh no. He wants me. Worse, I want him!

The realization hits me like a physical blow. This wasn't just a dance. This was a declaration—one my body responded to before my mind could intervene.

I catch sight of Kallus across the room, his expression unreadable but his eyes calculating. Serenity and Dowron look stunned. And Zantress—Zantress is actually smiling, which might be the most disconcerting sight of all.

CHAPTER 10

VARNOK

Varnok offers me his arm as we leave the reception. I take it, feeling suddenly self-conscious about how small my hand looks against his massive forearm. The scales are smoother than they appear, warm to the touch.

"I should review my notes before tomorrow," I say, trying to sound casual. "The first official negotiation session starts at nine."

"Then we should get you to your quarters, Ambassador." His voice is still rough, but quieter now.

The hotel hallway stretches before us, mercifully empty. I can't handle another diplomat's knowing smirk or raised eyebrow. That dance will be the talk of Armstrong for weeks.

I pull out my compad and check the room details. "Looks like they've given us the Orion Suite. Two bedrooms, thank goodness."

Varnok makes a dismissive sound. "We'll only need one bed."

I stop walking, my face flushing hot. "I think you're counting your chickens before they hatch, Mr. Annihilator."

His ridge-lined brow furrows in genuine confusion. "Chickens? What do Earth fowl have to do with security protocols?"

"It's just an expression that means—" I stop myself. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

"As your bodyguard, I won't be sleeping." He says this as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "I'll be standing guard instead. Vakutans can go days, even weeks without sleep if necessary, though we prefer six to eight hours nightly when circumstances allow."

Oh.Oh.

My cheeks burn hotter. Great. Now it looks like I'm the one with sex on the brain.

"Right. Of course. That's... very professional of you." I start walking again, faster this time.

But my mind keeps replaying the dance—his massive hands spanning my waist, the heat of his body pressed against mine, the intensity in his eyes. We practically dry-humped on the dance floor in front of half the diplomatic corps! How am I supposed to focus on negotiations when all I can think about is what those powerful hands would feel like elsewhere?

We reach the suite door, and I raise my compad to unlock it.

Varnok's hand shoots out, blocking mine. "Allow me, Ambassador."

"It's just Quinn when we're alone," I say, then immediately regret my phrasing. "I mean?—"

"Stay here." He draws his sidearm with practiced efficiency. "I'll clear the room first."

I sigh dramatically, but secretly appreciate his thoroughness. "Is that really necessary?"

"Someone already tried to kill you once." His voice is deadly serious. "I won't allow a second attempt."

He unlocks the door with his own security override and disappears inside, leaving me waiting in the hallway. I hear him moving methodically through the suite, checking closets, under furniture, behind curtains.

I lean against the wall, surprised by the warm feeling spreading through my chest. No one's taken care of me like this since... well, since my father died. I've been so focused on being self-sufficient, on proving I could handle everything alone, that I forgot how nice it feels to have someone watching out for me.

Even if that someone is a seven-foot-tall red-scaled warrior who makes my pulse race for entirely unprofessional reasons.

Varnok gives the all-clear and I enter the suite, kicking off my heels with a sigh of relief. The accommodations are spectacular—all cream and gold with high ceilings and panoramic windows showcasing Armstrong's twin moons hanging like perfect pearls in the night sky.

But my mind won't stop spinning. The day's events play on repeat—Kallus's calculated manipulation during our dance, the way he maneuvered me into admitting bias. Then Varnok swooping in, our bodies moving together with impossible synchronicity...

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"I'm going to check the perimeter once more," Varnok announces, interrupting my thoughts. "The balcony has insufficient security measures."

"Knock yourself out," I mutter, massaging my temples.

While he inspects the balcony doors, I change into more comfortable clothes—silk loungewear that feels like heaven against my skin after hours in formal diplomatic attire. I pile my hair atop my head in a messy bun and wash the makeup from my face.

When I emerge, Varnok is examining the suite's security panel with intense focus. He's removed his formal jacket, revealing a tight-fitting undershirt that does nothing to hide his impressive physique. The red scales covering his arms catch the light as he moves, creating patterns that draw my eye.

I sink into the plush sofa, knowing sleep is a lost cause. My mind races too much—reviewing negotiation strategies, replaying Kallus's smug expression, feeling Varnok's hands on my waist...

"Computer, play music. Something relaxing." Soft jazz fills the room, a saxophone crooning low and sweet. "God, I could use a drink."

Before I can reach for the room service menu, Varnok abandons the security panel and plops down heavily beside me. The sofa dips dramatically under his weight, sliding me a few inches closer to him.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" he asks, digging a metal flask out of a pouch on his

belt. The flask looks old, with intricate engravings etched into its surface. He undoes the cap and hands it over.

I take it with open suspicion. "What is this, Vakutan rot-gut deathrattle blood wine or something?"

I sniff cautiously and frown in confusion. "It smells like brandy, from Earth."

"Because it is brandy, from Earth," Var says with a hint of amusement. "My people are fine warriors, and expert engineers. But when it comes to the finer arts of fermented beverages, they are somewhat lacking."

I take a tentative sip. The liquid burns down my throat, spreading warmth through my chest and into my limbs. My skin flushes, and alarm bells ring in my head. Oh no. Var is already looking too damn good as it is. The last thing I need is lowered inhibitions.

"Thanks, but no more for me." I hand the flask back quickly.

"Is it not good?" His ridged brow furrows in concern.

"That's not the problem," I reply, looking away.

The silence stretches between us, filled only by the sultry saxophone. I'm acutely aware of his massive presence beside me, the heat radiating from his body, the subtle scent of him—something like sandalwood and metal.

Var puts his hand on my thigh and squeezes gently. My heart thunders in my chest, and I can't seem to breathe properly.

"If you're growing impatient, we can skip the brandy," he rumbles, his voice dropping

to a register that sends shivers down my spine.

I stare at his hand on my leg—red scales against pale silk, powerful fingers that could crush stone resting with surprising gentleness on my thigh. My mouth goes dry. Every logical part of my brain is screaming that this is a terrible idea. I'm here on a diplomatic mission. He's my bodyguard. We're completely different species.

But logic seems very far away right now.

My head spins from the brandy, or maybe it's just the overwhelming presence of Varnok. I can't think straight with him this close, his hand on my thigh, his dark eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that borders on feral.

"I've been dying to taste those amazing lips for days," Var growls. His voice rumbles through me like distant thunder, making my stomach flutter with anticipation.

Before I can even process his words, he's moving—a swift, decisive motion that pins me against the back of the sofa. His massive hands grip my shoulders, pulling me into him. His kiss is deep and claiming, hard and fierce, and it ignites something primal within me.

My hands fly to his chest instinctively, fingers splayed against the firm muscle beneath his undershirt. I'm caught off-guard by the suddenness of it all, but his kiss consumes me, and any resistance I might have mustered melts away under the onslaught of his passion.

I throw my arms around his huge neck, surrendering to the moment, to the unspoken desire that's been simmering between us since we first met. I kiss him back with equal fervor, our tongues dueling in a dance as heated and desperate as the one we shared on the dance floor earlier that evening.

With a boldness that surprises even me, I climb up onto his lap and straddle him. The leather of the sofa creaks under our combined weight. I can feel the hard ridge of his arousal pressing against me through the fabric of our clothes, and I grind against him shamelessly, relishing the low growl that vibrates in his chest.

His grip on me tightens, fingers digging into my hips with bruising force. I'm vaguely aware that I should probably be concerned about the strength he's displaying, but all rational thought is driven from my mind by the raw need coursing through my veins.

Suddenly, Varnok pushes me away from him slightly, though I remain rooted on his lap. His dark eyes bore into mine, full of challenge and barely restrained hunger.

"You think you're in charge?" he growls, the words sending a thrill down my spine.

I open my mouth to retort, to assert some semblance of control, but before I can form the words, he rips my top in half as easily as if it were made of paper. The sudden exposure sends a jolt of shock through me, followed by a rush of heat that pushes me even closer to the edge.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

His eyes drink in the sight of my naked breasts, and the raw hunger in his gaze makes my breath catch in my throat. With a feral sound, he crushes me to him again, his lips and tongue blazing a trail of fire down my neck and across my collarbone.

I throw my head back, giving him better access, my fingers tangling in his short, bristly hair. My entire body feels electrified, every nerve ending alight with sensation. His kisses, his licks, the occasional nip of his teeth—each touch sends me spiraling higher and higher.

My hands, driven by a desperate need to feel his skin against mine, go to work on his belt. The buckle resists my fumbling attempts to unfasten it, and a frustrated sound escapes my throat.

Varnok chuckles against my skin, the vibrations making me squirm. With one hand, he effortlessly undoes the belt and opens the fly of his trousers, freeing himself. I gasp at the feel of his hard length against my palm—impossibly big, just like the rest of him.

I stroke him slowly, delighting in the way his breath catches and his eyes darken with desire. The power dynamics between us—the predator and the diplomat, the bodyguard and the ambassador—seem to blur and shift until they're almost unrecognizable.

With a swift motion, Varnok lifts me off his lap and sets me down on the plush rug in front of the sofa. He looms over me, the dim lighting casting shadows across his ridged brow and chiseled jaw. He looks like some ancient war god, fierce and unstoppable.

I reach for him, wanting to bring him back down to me, but he captures my wrists in one large hand and pins them above my head. With his other hand, he tugs at my ruined top, pulling it off me completely and tossing it aside.

"Let me worship you, Quinn," he murmurs, his voice a low, guttural rumble that makes my heart race and my pulse pound in my ears.

He kisses his way down my body, lavishing attention on my breasts before moving lower, mapping out every curve and hollow with his lips and tongue. I writhe beneath him, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensations he's evoking, by the sheer ferocity of his desire.

When he finally reaches the apex of my thighs, I'm practically trembling with anticipation. He hooks his fingers under the waistband of my silk pants and pulls them off, exposing me to his hungry gaze.

The first touch of his tongue against my most sensitive spot sends shockwaves of pleasure rippling through me. I cry out, my hips bucking reflexively, but he holds me firmly in place, continuing his relentless exploration with a skill that leaves me breathless and shaking.

My climax builds quickly, fueled by the pent-up tension between us and the skillful ministrations of his mouth. It crashes over me like a tidal wave, dragging me under in a maelstrom of ecstasy. My body arches off the floor, and I'm vaguely aware of Varnok's triumphant growl as he drinks in my pleasure.

As the aftershocks subside, he releases my wrists and crawls up my body to claim my lips in a searing kiss. I can taste myself on his tongue, an intimate reminder of the pleasure he's just given me.

"You're mine, Quinn Gellar," he whispers against my lips, his voice full of possessive

pride. "And I am yours."

And in that moment, surrounded by his strength and warmth, I can't find it in me to argue.

CHAPTER 11

QUINN

I rise from the floor, my body still humming with the afterglow of my release, and take Varnok's hand. His grip is firm, yet gentle, and I marvel at the contrast between his strength and his tenderness. I lead him toward the bedroom, my heart pounding with anticipation, but before we can make it, he sweeps me off my feet—literally.

With a playful growl, Varnok hoists me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, just as he did back on the derelict fueling station. The sudden change in position sends a thrill of excitement coursing through me, and I can't help but let out a surprised yelp followed by a fit of giggles.

He adds a couple of playful spanks to my upturned backside, each one a little harder than the last, and I squirm with a mix of shock and delight. The sensation is new, exhilarating, and it ignites a fresh wave of desire within me.

Var doesn't give me a chance to catch my breath. He plops me down on the bed with a grin, his purple eyes gleaming with mischief and hunger. I look up at him, my breath hitching as he begins to peel out of his Alliance uniform.

The armor-like material falls away, revealing the hard, muscular planes of his body. His scales glisten in the soft light, their crimson hue reminiscent of a sunset on some far-off world. Every inch of him is a testament to his warrior heritage, from the broad expanse of his chest to the powerful muscles of his arms and legs.

I take a moment to drink in the sight of him, my gaze lingering on the sharp angles of his face and the fierce pride in his eyes. I've never been with an alien man before, and certainly never with anyone who possessed the raw physicality that Varnok does.

And yet, despite his size and strength, I do not fear him. I trust him implicitly, knowing he would never intentionally harm me. There's a connection between us that transcends the brief time we've known each other. It's as if some part of me has always known him, always recognized the warrior spirit that resides within his chest.

Varnok hooks his thumbs under the waistband of his undergarments and tugs them down, freeing his vakutan cock. The initial shock of its alien nature quickly fades, replaced by a deep sense of rightness. The heart-shaped head, the undulating ridges of scales, the raised ridge along the top of the shaft—it's all so perfectly Var, so perfectly designed to pleasure a woman.

I find myself anticipating the feel of him inside me, imagining the way those ridges will move and flex, increasing my pleasure tenfold. My core clenches at the thought, and a fresh wave of wetness floods my already drenched folds.

"You say nothing, but your gaze speaks volumes, Ms. Ambassador," Varnok rumbles, his voice a low, vibrating purr that makes my toes curl. "It pleases me that we are of a like mind."

I meet his gaze, my lips curling into a sly smile. "For a change," I tease, my voice husky with desire.

He throws his head back and laughs, the sound deep and rich and full of life. "Yes," he agrees, his eyes growing narrow with lust. "For a change."

Then, without warning, he pounces, his body covering mine in an instant. His weight is a welcome presence, pinning me to the bed with an ease that speaks to his strength.

His lips crash into mine, stealing my breath away with the intensity of his kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

His tongue sweeps into my mouth, claiming me with a passion that leaves me reeling. I kiss him back with equal fervor, my hands roaming over the sculpted muscles of his back, tracing the lines of his scales.

The world seems to narrow down to the two of us, the air charged with electricity and raw, primal desire. Var's touch is firm, confident, as he spreads my legs wide, revealing every inch of my most intimate places to his hungry gaze. His hand traces a fiery path up my inner thigh, stopping just shy of where I need him most.

I can feel the heat emanating from his body, the hardness of his cock pressing against my wetness. He teases me with the swollen head, rubbing it over my pussy lips with deliberate slowness. Each pass sends shivers of pleasure coursing through my body, the ridges of scales along his shaft creating a sensation that is both maddening and exhilarating.

"Please, Var," I beg, my voice barely more than a whisper. My hands claw at the bedsheets, my body arching off the bed in a silent plea for more. "Fuck me. Please, I need you inside me."

A low growl rumbles in his throat, a sound that is equal parts amusement and arousal. "As you wish, Ms. Ambassador," he says, his voice thick with lust.

Then, with a single, fluid motion, he glides inside me. The feeling is indescribable, a mix of fullness and pleasure that borders on pain. His vakutan cock stretches me, filling me in ways I never thought possible. I can feel the ridges around the crown of his cock undulating with each movement, stimulating every nerve ending within me.

I gasp, my body tensing around him as I fight the urge to come undone right then and there. It feels so amazing, so overwhelming, that I'm on the brink of orgasm from the insertion alone.

Var begins to thrust, his movements slow and steady. Each stroke is measured, deliberate, building up the intensity with an ease that speaks to his experience. He moves with a warrior's grace, his body in perfect sync with mine as he claims me with an intensity that leaves me breathless.

The pace quickens, his thrusts growing more powerful with each passing moment. He slams into me with such force that it drives the air from my lungs, leaving me gasping for breath. My body is a helpless bundle of orgasmic squirming, each thrust pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

And then I'm falling, my orgasm crashing over me like a tidal wave. I cry out, my voice echoing off the walls as wave after wave of pleasure courses through my body. It's so intense, so all-consuming, that I can't think, can't breathe, can only feel.

Var shows no signs of slowing down. He continues to fuck me with a relentlessness that is both thrilling and terrifying. I'm dimly aware of the sounds of our bodies coming together, the wet slap of skin on skin, the soft, desperate whimpers that escape my throat with each powerful thrust.

I'm dimly aware of the sounds of our bodies coming together, the wet slap of skin on skin, the soft, desperate whimpers that escape my throat with each powerful thrust. I can feel another orgasm building within me, a sensation so intense that it borders on overwhelming.

"Var, I—," I manage to gasp out, my body trembling beneath him.

In response, he clamps his hand down on my throat, silencing my protests. His grip is

firm but not painful, a clear assertion of his dominance. The action sends a jolt of arousal coursing through my body, the thrill of being so completely under his control heightening my pleasure.

He fucks me even harder, his hips pistoning against mine as he drives me relentlessly toward another release. I writhe and buck, my body fighting against the pleasure-pain that threatens to consume me. But there's no escape, no reprieve from the onslaught of sensation.

And then I'm coming again, my body convulsing beneath him as another powerful orgasm rips through me. My vision goes white, my ears filled with the sound of my own heartbeat as I succumb to the pleasure.

Var doesn't give me a chance to recover. With a strength that is both awe-inspiring and a little terrifying, he flips me over onto my belly. His hand comes down on my ass, the sharp sting of the spanking making me yelp in surprise.

"Stick it in the air," he commands, his voice a low, rumbling growl that sends shivers down my spine.

I do as I'm told, pushing my ass up into the air with shaky, rubbery legs. I'm exposed, vulnerable, but I trust him implicitly. I know that he will use his control to bring me pleasure, to push me to new heights of ecstasy.

Var grips my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as he positions himself behind me. I can feel the swollen head of his cock pressing against my entrance, the anticipation making my heart race with excitement.

And then he's inside me once more, his cock filling me with a single, powerful thrust. The new angle allows him to go even deeper, the ridges along his shaft stimulating me in ways I never knew were possible.

He sets a brutal pace, his hips slamming against my ass with enough force to make the bed shake beneath us. Each thrust sends me spiraling closer and closer to the edge, my body a live wire of sensation and need.

I can feel another orgasm building, a sensation so intense that it's almost too much to bear. I claw at the bedsheets, my body tensing as I brace myself for the inevitable explosion of pleasure.

And then it's there, crashing over me with the force of a supernova. I scream his name, my voice breaking as I succumb to the most powerful orgasm of my life. My body convulses, my pussy clamping down around his cock as I ride out the waves of pleasure.

Var continues to thrust, drawing out my orgasm until I'm a boneless, quivering mess beneath him. Only when the last of the aftershocks have faded does he allow himself to find his own release.

With a final, powerful thrust, he buries himself deep inside me. I can feel his cock pulsing, his hot seed filling me as he finds his own release. The sensation is so intimate, so raw, that it brings tears to my eyes.

For a long moment, we remain joined, our bodies slick with sweat and wracked with the aftereffects of our lovemaking. Then, with a gentleness that belies his size and strength, Var withdraws from me and collapses onto the bed beside me.

I roll over to face him, my body still humming with the afterglow of our shared passion. His gaze meets mine, the intensity of his purple eyes making my heart flutter in my chest.

"That was... incredible," I breathe, my voice barely more than a whisper.

A slow, satisfied smile spreads across his face, his eyes gleaming with a mixture of pride and possessiveness. "Indeed," he rumbles, his voice a low. "And we are only just getting started, Ms. Ambassador."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

With those words, he pulls me into his arms, holding me close as our bodies cool and our heartbeats return to normal. And as I drift off to sleep, safe in the arms of my alien warrior, I wonder if this flame is going to burn out fast or shine longer than the stars.

CHAPTER 12

VARNOK

I stroll down the plush corridor of Superior Gardens, swinging an empty ice bucket like it's a battle trophy. The soft carpet feels good under my bare feet, and I'm wearing nothing but my underwear briefs—black, tight, and leaving little to the imagination. Not that I care who sees me. I'm feeling too damn good right now.

"Bah-doo-bah-doo-wah," I whistle, mimicking the smooth jazz tune that was playing in Quinn's suite. The melody keeps looping in my head, much like the memories of what just happened between us.

A human couple exits their room, takes one look at my nearly naked, seven-and-a-half-foot red-scaled body, and promptly retreats back inside. I chuckle. Can't blame them. I am rather impressive.

I reach the ice machine, jab the button with perhaps too much enthusiasm, and watch the cubes tumble into my bucket. The cold against my fingers feels refreshing after the heat Quinn and I generated. By the Vakutan gods, that woman is fire incarnate.

Bucket filled, I make my way back to her suite, still whistling. For once, a diplomatic

mission has yielded something worthwhile. Something perfect. Quinn Gellar—all fire and fury wrapped in a tiny, delicious package.

When I slip back into the room, she's still sprawled across the bed, gloriously naked and fast asleep. Her blonde hair fans out across the pillow, and the sheet only partially covers her curves. My body instantly responds to the sight.

My compad buzzes on the nightstand. Without taking my eyes off Quinn, I reach for it and accept the incoming call.

Pyke's face materializes in holographic form above the device. "Varnok, about tomorrow's security—" He stops mid-sentence, his eyes widening as he takes in my state of undress and the obvious aftermath of exertion on my face. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Commander Pyke," I say, keeping my voice low so as not to wake Quinn. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Pyke's holographic face contorts with disbelief. "Please tell me you didn't just?—"

"I didn't just what?" I ask innocently, setting down the ice bucket.

"You know exactly what." Pyke rubs his temples. "You're supposed to be protecting the ambassador, not sleeping with her!"

I glance back at Quinn's sleeping form, a surge of possessiveness washing over me. "I can do both."

"This is completely unprofessional, even for you," Pyke continues. "You're compromising the entire mission."

"She might be my jalshagar," I say quietly, the words feeling right as they leave my mouth.

Pyke barks out a laugh. "That's what you said about the Kilgari princess! And that Novarian dancer! And let's not forget the twins from?—"

"This is different," I interrupt, my voice dropping to a growl. "I feel it, Pyke. This is real."

He sighs, the sound crackling through the compad's speaker. "Whatever you say, Annihilator. I suppose if she is your jalshagar, you'll be even more motivated to keep her safe."

"Damn right."

"Just don't lose sight of what's important here," Pyke warns. "The negotiations. The peace process. Millions of lives depend on Ambassador Gellar's success."

I nod solemnly. "I understand the stakes."

"Good. And for the record, I don't believe this jalshagar nonsense for a second, but if it keeps you focused on your job..." He trails off, then fixes me with a stern look. "Just remember who you're dealing with. Quinn Gellar isn't some conquest—she's a skilled diplomat with a crucial mission."

"I know exactly who she is," I reply, my gaze drifting back to her sleeping form.

"We'll talk more about the security protocols tomorrow," Pyke says. "And Varnok?"

"Yes?"

"Put on some damn pants before our next call."

The hologram flickers out, and I set the compad down with a chuckle. Pyke's words echo in my mind as I slide back into bed beside Quinn. Her body instinctively curls against mine, seeking my warmth even in sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Maybe Pyke's right to be skeptical. I've claimed to find my jalshagar before. But lying here with Quinn's soft breathing against my chest, I can't shake the feeling that this time really is different. This fierce little human has gotten under my scales in a way no one else ever has.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her closer. Whatever happens with the negotiations, whatever danger lurks ahead, one thing is certain—anyone who tries to harm her will have to go through me first.

And no one goes through Varnok the Annihilator.

I shower quickly, the hot water sluicing over my scales, washing away the sweat and scent of our passion. Dressing in my usual black tactical gear, I find myself pacing the suite, unable to settle. My mind races with thoughts of Quinn. What if she is my jalshagar? How am I supposed to know for sure? I've never felt this pull, this magnetism toward anyone before. It's unsettling, yet exhilarating.

Eventually, I sink onto the sofa, my body exhausted but my mind still whirring. I must have dozed off because the next thing I know, cold metal presses against my temple, and I'm staring down the barrel of my own blaster.

"Some bodyguard," Quinn teases, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief. She's fully dressed in her official IEC uniform, the blue and green fabric hugging her curves in a way that makes my heart pound. "Whatever happened to staying vigilant?"

I chuckle, slowly reaching up to push the blaster away. "Your honeypot was more potent than I anticipated. Left me more exhausted than a battle with a horde of

Reapers."

Quinn blushes, a delightful pink spreading across her cheeks. "Well, we have to get to the negotiations soon. So, up and at 'em, soldier."

I stand, towering over her, and take in her appearance. The uniform is sharply tailored, accentuating her figure perfectly. I approve. "You look... official."

She raises an eyebrow. "Just official?"

I lean in, my voice dropping to a low rumble. "And utterly ravishing."

We step into the elevator, the doors sliding shut behind us. I move close to her, my mouth near her ear. "You know, I've been thinking about what I want to do to you next."

Quinn's breath hitches, but she keeps her gaze forward, trying to maintain her composure. "Oh, really?"

"Mm-hmm," I murmur, my fingers tracing the line of her jaw. "I want to bend you over that negotiation table, hike up this prim little skirt, and?—"

"Varnok," she hisses, her cheeks flaming red. "I'm on duty now. So behave."

I grin, loving the way her skin changes color with her emotions. It's like a secret language, one I'm eager to learn. "Spoilsport."

The elevator dings, signaling our arrival at the rooftop dome. Just before the doors open, I give her ass a playful spank, eliciting a surprised yelp from Quinn. She shoots me a glare, but there's no real heat behind it.

As we step out into the lush gardens of the Dome of Repose, I feel a sense of pride. Quinn is a vision of confidence and authority, ready to take on the challenges ahead. And I'll be right by her side, protecting her, supporting her.

Maybe she is my jalshagar. Maybe this is what it feels like—this constant tug, this need to be near her, to touch her, to keep her safe. Whatever it is, I'm not fighting it. I'm all in, ready to see where this path leads us.

But for now, we have a job to do. Negotiations await, and I'll be the silent, vigilant guardian at her side. Ready to annihilate anyone who dares threaten her.

The Dome of Repose lives up to its name—if you're not involved in the negotiations. The air smells of exotic flowers and fresh water from the miniature waterfalls. Birds chirp and flutter between branches. It's all very peaceful.

Too bad I want to rip someone's throat out.

The horseshoe-shaped table sits in the center of this botanical paradise, with Kallus and his four stuffed-shirt lawyers on the left, and Zantress with her single bodyguard on the right. Quinn takes her position in the middle, the mediator between two opposing forces.

Prime Minister Serenity Garsdotter steps forward, her lavender eyes scanning the assembly. "Ladies, gentlemen, and beings of all designations, welcome to Armstrong. I am Prime Minister Serenity Garsdotter, and I officially open these negotiations between Bruw Interstellar Shipping and the Solari of Jwoon X."

I stand behind Quinn, arms crossed, doing my best to look intimidating without actually threatening anyone. My eyes drift to Zantress's bodyguard and I freeze.

Drach.

The one-eyed Odex stares back at me, his cybernetic red eye glowing with recognition. Last time I saw him, we were on opposite sides of a battlefield on Praxis VII. I killed three of his squad mates before he nearly took my head off with that power blade of his. The scar on my neck throbs with the memory.

Drach's lips curl back, revealing teeth that could crush bone. I respond with a growl so low only another predator could hear it.

Quinn shoots me a sharp look over her shoulder. Her eyes narrow in warning. I swallow my growl and force myself to relax my posture, though every muscle in my body remains coiled, ready to spring.

"Let's begin," Quinn says, her voice clear and professional. "I'd like both parties to openly state their goals for these negotiations. Speaker Zantress, would you care to start?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Zantress rises, her dour expression matching her blunt words. "The Solari want one thing—for Kallus's mining operation to leave our moon immediately. That is all."

Kallus leans forward, a practiced smile on his face. "Surely there must be some wiggle room here, or there's no point in negotiation at all." He spreads his hands in a gesture of apparent generosity. "In exchange for allowing our mining operation to continue, Bruw Interstellar is prepared to build roads, schools, banks, prisons, power plants—all the modern infrastructure that the Solari currently lack."

I watch Quinn's back stiffen. She turns to Kallus, her voice dropping several degrees in temperature. "Mr. Bruw, I feel compelled to remind you that the Solari explicitly reject the concepts of prisons and banks. Their cultural values?—"

"And that's precisely my point," Kallus interrupts smoothly. "If they reject basic pillars of civilized society, how can we expect them to engage in rational negotiation?"

I see the trap immediately. This slick bastard is trying to paint the Solari as primitive, unreasonable. And from the way Zantress is clenching her fists, she's about to take the bait.

"Rational?" Zantress stands abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. "You call your endless greed rational? Your mining operation has poisoned our water, killed our sacred trees, and disrupted our ceremonies with your constant drilling and blasting!"

I grind my teeth so hard I'm surprised they don't crack. This is exactly what Kallus

wants—to make Zantress look unhinged while he sits there, calm and collected, the picture of reasonable business.

"Our operation follows all IEC environmental guidelines," Kallus replies, still maintaining that infuriating smile. "We've conducted multiple impact studies?—"

"Impact studies!" Zantress slams her palm on the table. "Did your impact studies predict that three of our children would develop respiratory diseases? Did they predict that our sacred pool would turn green with your chemical runoff?"

I catch Drach's eye again. Despite our history, I see something familiar in his expression—the frustration of a warrior forced to stand by while others fight with words. His cybernetic eye dims slightly, almost in acknowledgment of our shared predicament.

Quinn raises her hands. "Let's take a step back. Speaker Zantress, I understand your concerns. Mr. Bruw, the environmental impact is clearly a major issue here."

Kallus nods as if in deep thought. "Perhaps we could relocate our main processing facility to reduce noise pollution. And implement additional filtration systems for any water runoff."

"That's not enough," Zantress insists. "Your very presence violates our way of life. The Solari have lived in harmony with Jwoon X for centuries. We reject your technological solutions because they only create more problems!"

I watch helplessly as Zantress falls deeper into Kallus's trap. She's passionate, righteous—and playing right into his hands. He's making her look like an unreasonable zealot while positioning himself as the flexible businessman willing to compromise.

Quinn catches my eye briefly. I see the concern there, the recognition of what's happening. She turns back to the table, her voice calm but firm.

"I think we've established the starting positions clearly enough. Let's take a short recess before diving into specific proposals."

As the others rise and move toward the refreshment tables, Quinn steps close to me.

"This is going to be harder than I thought," she whispers.

I lean down, my voice for her ears only. "Kallus is playing her like a harp. And she's letting him."

CHAPTER 13

QUINN

I push through the glass doors onto the rooftop terrace, desperate for fresh air. The negotiations have left me with a throbbing headache and a sour taste in my mouth. I tug at the high collar of my IEC uniform, finally popping it open and letting the cool evening breeze hit my skin.

Christmasville sprawls before me, a glittering tapestry of lights and motion. From this height, the city seems peaceful, orderly—everything our negotiations aren't. I grip the railing, my knuckles turning white.

Heavy footsteps approach from behind, but I don't turn. I know it's Var. His presence has become unmistakable to me, like recognizing a familiar scent or sound without having to look.

He settles beside me at the railing, his massive frame dwarfing mine. For a moment,

we stand in silence, watching the city lights twinkle against the darkening sky.

"Your task is a difficult one," Var says finally, his voice surprisingly gentle.

I let out a humorless laugh. "That's putting it mildly." I run my fingers through my hair, loosening it from its tight diplomatic bun. "Kallus has connections everywhere—the Alliance Council, IEC Trade Commission, even Space FleetCommand. He's broken at least six interplanetary mining regulations, but I've been ordered to find a 'mutually amicable solution.'" I make air quotes with my fingers, not bothering to hide my disgust.

"And Zantress isn't making it any easier," I continue. "She won't accept anything less than complete removal of the mining operation from Jwoon X. No compromise, no middle ground."

Var shifts his weight, his scales catching the city lights. "Kallus is the clear villain here. He set up operations without proper notification, his security killed three Solari, and now he's trying to manipulate the negotiations to his advantage."

"You're not wrong." I turn to face him. "But this isn't just about right and wrong anymore. The Alliance is using this incident to punish Zantress—and by extension, the entire Ataxian Coalition."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"Politics," Var spits the word like it's poison.

"Exactly. The Centuries War might be officially over, but the wounds are still fresh." I gaze back out at the city. "It's going to be a long time before the anger fades."

Var nods, his massive head bobbing in agreement. "The battlefield has changed, but the war continues in other forms."

His insight surprises me. For someone called "the Annihilator," Var understands the subtleties of post-war politics better than most career diplomats I've met.

"What will you do?" he asks.

I shrug, feeling the weight of responsibility press down on my shoulders. "Keep trying. Find some compromise that lets both sides save face. Though right now, I have no idea what that might look like."

Var shifts closer, and his arm—warm, solid, strong—settles around my shoulders. The gesture is so natural, so comforting, that I find myself leaning into him, resting my head against his chest.

I breathe in his scent—earthy and alien yet somehow familiar now. There's something calming about his presence, something that goes beyond his role as my protector. In these quiet moments, I glimpse the Varnok beneath the warrior facade—thoughtful, perceptive, even gentle in his own way.

"You'll find a solution," he says with such certainty that I almost believe him.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I've seen you in action now. On the dance floor, in negotiations—" his voice drops lower, "—in bed. You're formidable, Quinn Gellar."

I feel my face flush but don't pull away. "I'm glad you think so."

"I know so."

I sigh, letting myself enjoy this moment of connection. Varnok is more than just alpha male impulses and destruction. He sees the complexities of this situation as clearly as I do. That makes me glad, because I feel justified in being attracted to him—not just to his physical strength or prowess, but to his mind as well.

The city continues to sparkle below us, oblivious to our momentary peace on this rooftop. Tomorrow, we'll go back into that negotiation room and face Kallus's manipulations and Zantress's righteous inflexibility. But for now, with Var's arm around me and the cool night air on my face, I allow myself to simply breathe.

I'm about to respond to Varnok when the glass doors behind us slide open. Prime Minister Serenity Garsdotter steps onto the terrace, her tall, elegant frame silhouetted against the light from inside. Even in the dim evening light, her lavender eyes seem to glow with an inner intensity.

"Ambassador Gellar," she says, her voice carrying a note of urgency. "I apologize for interrupting your moment of respite."

I straighten immediately, moving slightly away from Var's embrace. "Prime Minister. Is everything alright?"

Serenity's expression is grave as she approaches us. "I've just received troubling

news. Kallus is petitioning the Alliance for a Writ of Industrial Conscription."

My stomach drops. "He wouldn't dare."

Var looks between us, his brow furrowed. "What the hell is that?"

I turn to him, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. "It's a legal maneuver that would essentially place Kallus above laws and regulations as they pertain to his mining operation on Jwoon X." I pause, my face twisting with distaste. "The Writ of Industrial Conscription is a holdover from the Centuries War. It was designed to allow rapid resource extraction for military purposes during times of crisis."

"But we're not at war anymore," Var growls, his scales darkening with anger.

"Technically, we're in a ceasefire, not peace," I explain. "The distinction matters legally. As long as the final peace treaty hasn't been ratified, these emergency powers can still be invoked."

Serenity nods. "Kallus is arguing that the minerals on Jwoon X are vital to Alliance security interests. If the Alliance Council grants his petition..."

"They wouldn't," I say, but even I don't believe my words.

Var slams his fist against the railing, making the metal vibrate. "This is outrageous! If this Writ is granted, it will destroy Jwoon X completely. The Solari will have no choice but to relocate." His voice drops to a dangerous rumble. "This isn't business anymore. This is an act of aggression against a peaceful people."

I've never seen him this angry outside of combat. His rage isn't the berserker fury I witnessed when he fought Reku, but something colder and more focused.

"I need to contact Dowron," Var says suddenly. "The Supreme General might be able to block this Writ before it's granted. He has enough influence with the Alliance Council to at least delay the decision."

I nod, grateful for his quick thinking. "That's a good idea. If we can buy some time, I might be able to find another solution."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Var's eyes meet mine, and I see a fierce determination there that matches my own. "I'll return as soon as I can." He hesitates, then reaches out to briefly touch my face, his scaled fingers surprisingly gentle against my cheek. Then he's gone, striding purposefully back through the doors.

I watch him leave, my mind already racing with potential strategies and counter-arguments. I'm so lost in thought that I almost forget Serenity is still standing beside me.

"You've grown rather close to your bodyguard," she observes, a knowing smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

I feel heat rise to my cheeks. "I... we've been through a lot together in a short time."

"Clearly." Her smile widens slightly.

I sigh, turning back to look out over the city. "He's more than meets the eye, you know. Behind all that 'Annihilator' bravado, there's intelligence, honor, even compassion." I pause, my fingers tracing patterns on the cold metal railing. "But his job is destruction, and mine is building peace. How can we ever make that work?"

Serenity moves closer, placing her hand on my shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. "From where I'm sitting, it looks like you make it work just fine."

I glance up at her, surprised by her directness.

"Life is complicated, Quinn," she continues. "Especially after centuries of war. We're

all trying to find our place in this new reality." Her lavender eyes hold mine. "Sometimes the most unlikely combinations create the strongest bonds."

She gives my shoulder one final squeeze before stepping back. "I should return to the reception. Don't stay out here too long—it gets cold quickly once the sun sets completely."

As Serenity leaves, I'm left alone with my thoughts and the glittering expanse of Christmasville below. The city seems different now, its beauty marred by the knowledge of what Kallus is attempting. If he succeeds, the fragile peace we've all been working toward could unravel completely.

I think about Var, rushing to contact Dowron, fighting this battle in his own way. We're so different—a diplomat and a warrior, a human and a Vakutan—yet somehow, when we're together, those differences seem to complement rather than divide us.

The night air grows colder, but I don't move. Not yet. I need this moment to gather my strength, to prepare for what comes next. Because tomorrow, I'll need to find a way to outmaneuver Kallus and protect the Solari—or watch as everything I've worked for crumbles into dust.

And as I stand there, I realize something else: I don't want to face this challenge alone. I want Var beside me—not just as my protector, but as my partner. The thought should terrify me, but instead, it fills me with a strange, quiet certainty.

Whatever happens next, we'll face it together.

CHAPTER 14

VARNOK

I stomp up the ramp into Sweet Charity, my footfalls echoing through the empty ship. Gas is probably out enjoying Armstrong's nightlife—good for him. The quiet suits my mood.

The holocom chamber is tucked behind the bridge, a small room with nothing but a circular platform surrounded by projectors. I step onto the platform and punch in Dowron's personal code. It's late, but this can't wait.

The system hums to life, the air shimmering before me. After several moments, Dowron's image flickers into existence—disheveled, his pink scales dull with age and sleep.

"This better be important, Annihilator," he growls, blinking rapidly. He's wearing what appears to be sleeping robes, and his ridge is flattened on one side where he must have been lying on it.

"Apologies for waking you, General," I say, straightening my posture automatically. "But we have a situation. Kallus Bruw is petitioning the Alliance for a Writ of Industrial Conscription for Jwoon X."

Dowron's eyes sharpen immediately, sleep falling away. "Serenity Garsdotter told you this?"

"Yes. Is it true?"

He sighs, a heavy sound that seems to carry the weight of his five centuries. "It is. My sources on the Alliance Council confirmed it yesterday."

I slam my fist against the wall. "We are no longer at war, General. Why the writ? These emergency powers should be buried with the dead!"

"The war might be officially over, Varnok, but the danger never is." Dowron's image steps closer, his voice dropping. "Just saying the war is over doesn't make it over for the entire galaxy. There are splinter groups of former Alliance and Coalition fighters alike who refuse to cease hostilities."

"Rogue elements," I say dismissively.

"More than that. Former war generals on both sides have chosen to become warlords instead of disarming and returning home as ordered. They control entire systems now, with battle-hardened troops loyal only to them." Dowron's eyes meet mine. "In fact, I believe the galaxy is a MORE dangerous place now that the Centuries War is over."

"How so?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"During the war, we knew who our enemies were. Now?" He shakes his head. "The lines are blurred. Opportunists like Kallus exploit the chaos, while legitimate security concerns make it difficult to deny requests like his without appearing weak."

I pace the small chamber, processing his words. "So Kallus claims these minerals are vital to Alliance security?"

"Precisely. And there's enough truth in it to make the argument compelling. The minerals can be used in next-generation shield technology."

I stop pacing, a realization hitting me. "This isn't just about profit for him, is it? This is about power."

"Always has been." Dowron nods. "Kallus lost billions when the war ended. This is how he plans to reclaim his position."

My blood burns hot in my veins. The ambassador—Quinn—is walking into a battle far more dangerous than she realizes. "Our duty never ends, does it, General?"

"No," Dowron says, his voice firm despite his obvious fatigue. "And every time that duty calls, the Vakutan will be there to answer."

Pride swells in my chest. "Damn right we will." I thump my fist against my heart in salute. "The Vakutan have always stood between the innocent and those who would prey upon them. War or no war, that doesn't change."

"What will you do now, Annihilator?" Dowron asks.

I bare my teeth in what humans might mistake for a smile. "Whatever is necessary to protect the ambassador and stop Kallus from destroying an entire civilization for his profit margins."

"Be careful, Varnok," Dowron warns. "This is a different kind of battlefield."

"All battlefields are the same, General," I say, reaching to end the transmission. "They're won by those willing to fight the hardest for what they believe in."

I leave Sweet Charity with my mind churning. The writ changes everything. If Kallus gets his way, the Solari are finished. I need a drink.

The neon lights of Christmasville's entertainment district pull me in. I find a place called The Broken Orbit—dim lighting, strong drinks, and minimal conversation. Perfect.

I duck through the doorway, my head nearly scraping the ceiling. The patrons glance up at me, then quickly return to their drinks. Smart. I'm not in the mood for small talk.

The bartender—a burly human with cybernetic arms—nods as I approach. "What'll it be?"

"Something strong. Vakutan if you have it."

He slides a mug of frothy blue liquid across the bar. I drop my credstick on the counter and find an empty booth in the corner.

The drink burns pleasantly going down. I've barely taken my second sip when a shadow falls across my table.

"Mind if I join you?"

Kallus Bruw stands before me, immaculately dressed in what must be the latest fashion from some overpriced human designer. His light red scales gleam under the bar lights, polished to an unnatural shine.

"Actually, I do mind," I growl.

He slides into the seat across from me anyway, signaling the bartender. "Two more of whatever my friend is having. And put his tab on mine."

I bare my teeth. "In that case, I'll take one of every appetizer you have on the menu."

Kallus laughs, a practiced sound that never reaches his eyes. "A small price to pay to make good friends."

"We're not friends."

"That's because you don't know me yet." He leans forward, lowering his voice. "We have more in common than you think, Varnok."

The bartender delivers our drinks. I push mine aside, suddenly wary.

"I doubt that very much."

Kallus takes a delicate sip. "We're both pragmatists. Warriors. We understand how the galaxy really works." He gestures toward the window, toward the diplomatic center of Armstrong. "Not like those idealists playing at peace."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"You mean Ambassador Gellar?"

"Among others." He waves dismissively. "Come on, Varnok. Since when do Ataxian priestesses convert to the way of the Solari? Zantress is playing the Alliance. The Solari are just the beachhead for a potential Ataxian invasion."

I laugh. The idea is so absurd it's almost brilliant.

"You're good, Kallus. Trying to play on my prejudices against the Ataxians, of which I admittedly have many." I lean forward, my eyes narrowing dangerously. "But the war is over. And with it, any grudges I had against the Coalition."

"Really?" Kallus raises an eyebrow ridge. "What about Drach? Drach killed one of your crew, didn't he? On Proxima VI, during the Battle of the Crimson Nebula."

My blood runs cold. "How do you know about that?"

Kallus just smiles, his teeth gleaming. A server arrives with a platter of appetizers—fried wings, something tentacled, and various skewered meats.

"I make it my business to know things, Annihilator. Information is more valuable than credits." He pushes the platter toward me. "Eat. We're just two veterans having a friendly conversation."

I don't touch the food. "What do you want, Kallus?"

"Wouldn't you like to get back to the business of fighting, Varnok?" His voice drops

to a conspiratorial whisper. "It would be so easy. Without Ambassador Gellar, the negotiations will come to an end. All you have to do is just stay here at the bar for another hour, then go back to the hotel, and we'll all get what we want." He slides a plate of wings toward me. "More hot wings?"

There's more than wings on the plate. A credstick gleams among the food, its display showing a balance that makes my eyes widen. Ten million Alliance credits, at least.

"I've lost my appetite." I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor.

Kallus remains seated, perfectly composed. "Think about it, Annihilator. The war may be over, but there will always be battles to fight. Choose the right side."

I turn and stride toward the door, my mind racing. The moment I step outside, I break into a dead run. Kallus's words echo in my head: "Without Ambassador Gellar, the negotiations will come to an end."

Quinn is in danger.

My feet pound the pavement as I sprint through the streets of Christmasville. Civilians scatter out of my path, some crying out in alarm at the sight of a fully-armored Vakutan warrior charging through the night. I don't care. Let them stare. Let them fear. Right now, all that matters is getting to Quinn before Kallus's agents do.

I tap my wrist communicator as I run. "Gas! Gas, come in!"

Static crackles, then Gas's voice, slurred with what sounds like several drinks. "Heyyy, boss. What's up?"

"Get to the Superior Gardens now! The ambassador's in danger!"

"On my way!" His voice instantly sharpens, the professional beneath the party animal emerging.

I push myself harder, my muscles burning with exertion. The Superior Gardens looms ahead, its elegant spires gleaming against the night sky. I barrel through the front entrance, nearly taking the ornate glass doors off their hinges.

The Odex hotel manager—Roleach—steps forward with an indignant expression. "Sir! I must insist?—"

I seize him by the front of his uniform, lifting him off the ground. "Ambassador Gellar. Where is she?"

"The—the rooftop garden," he stammers. "But security protocols?—"

I drop him and sprint for the elevators, smashing the call button with my fist. Too slow. I turn to the emergency stairs and take them three at a time, my heart hammering in my chest.

Twenty-seven floors. I count them as I climb, each step bringing me closer to Quinn. Please let me be in time. Please let her be safe.

I slam my palm against the elevator call button. The doors slide open and I step inside, punching the button for the rooftop garden. My heart pounds against my ribs as the elevator begins its ascent.

Floor twelve... thirteen... fourteen...

The elevator jerks to a halt between floors. Something's wrong.

I flatten myself against the wall, instinct taking over just as a hail of plasma fire tears

through the ceiling. The shots punch through the metal like it's paper, leaving molten edges around each hole. The acrid smell of burnt circuitry fills the small space.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"Coward!" I roar. "Face me like a warrior!"

More shots answer me, this time in a sweeping pattern across the elevator roof. I crouch low, then spring upward with all my strength. My fist punches through the weakened metal, and my fingers close around something solid—an ankle.

I yank downward with all my might. There's a startled cry as my attacker crashes through the roof, landing in a heap at my feet.

A Vakutan. One of my own kind.

He scrambles to his feet, plasma rifle aimed at my chest. His scales are a dull orange, his ridge marked with the scars of old battles. I recognize the pattern of those scars—the 23rd Assault Division. He fought at the Battle of Antares Prime. A fellow veteran.

"Why?" I demand, not moving. "This is dishonorable. We are Vakutan."

His laugh is bitter. "Honor?" He spits on the floor. "Honor doesn't put food on the table, Annihilator. Honor doesn't rebuild what was lost when they told us to lay down our weapons and go home."

"So you sell yourself to Kallus? Disgrace everything we fought for?"

"We fought for victory!" he snarls. "Not this... peace." He says the word like it's poison. "Kallus understands. The war never ended. It just changed battlefields."

"And Quinn? The ambassador? She's innocent in all this."

He shrugs. "Collateral damage. Nothing personal."

"It's personal to me." I tense, ready to spring.

He sees the shift in my stance and fires, but I'm already moving. The shot grazes my shoulder as I close the distance between us. His rifle clatters to the floor as I slam him against the wall, the impact denting the metal.

"For the glory of Vakuta," he hisses, drawing a vibroblade from his belt.

The blade slices across my abdomen, cutting deep. Pain flares, hot and sharp, but I don't release my grip. I can't. Quinn's life depends on it.

"For its honor," I reply, seizing his wrist and twisting until the blade falls.

We grapple in the confined space, two warriors bred for battle. He's good—trained like I was—but desperation gives me strength. I drive my knee into his stomach, then grab his head in both hands.

One sharp twist. A sickening crack.

His body goes limp in my grasp. I lower him to the floor, my breathing ragged. Blood—my blood—pools at my feet.

"You fought well," I murmur, closing his eyes with my palm. "May you find the battle you seek in the next life."

I retrieve his rifle and force the elevator doors open with my bare hands. The car has stopped between floors. I climb up to the next level, ignoring the burning pain in my

side. Blood seeps through my fingers as I clap a hand to the wound.

Back in the hallway, I find another elevator and punch the button for the roof. As the doors close, I lean against the wall, leaving a smear of blood.

The cut is deep. Too deep. But I've fought with worse. I've survived worse.

Hold on, Quinn, I think as the elevator climbs. I'm coming.

The numbers tick upward. Twenty-five... twenty-six... twenty-seven.

The doors slide open to reveal the rooftop garden, the night air cool against my face. Somewhere among the exotic plants and twinkling lights, Quinn is in danger. And I won't let Kallus win. Not tonight. Not ever.

I step out of the elevator, weapon ready, blood dripping onto the polished floor. One thought drives me forward through the pain.

Find Quinn. Protect Quinn. Nothing else matters.

CHAPTER 15

QUINN

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

I walk through the winding paths of the Dome of Repose, my fingers brushing against exotic leaves and flowers. The scent of alien blossoms fills the air, sweet and heady. Water trickles somewhere nearby, a peaceful sound that does nothing to calm my racing thoughts.

The negotiations are stalled. Kallus sits smug and self-satisfied while Zantress grows increasingly desperate. And me? I'm distracted by thoughts of red scales and purple eyes.

Last night was supposed to be simple. A release. Sex as stress relief—something to clear my head so I could focus on saving an entire moon of pacifists from corporate exploitation.

Instead, I'm worse off than before.

I pause beside a small pond where luminescent fish dart beneath lily pads. My reflection ripples back at me, distorted and uncertain.

"You're a professional," I whisper to myself. "Act like it."

But Varnok isn't just a fling anymore. The way he looked at me this morning—like I was something precious, something worth protecting beyond just professional duty—it made my chest ache.

I close my eyes and lean against the railing. For a moment, I swear I can feel him—his frustration, his determination, a flash of pain so sharp it makes me gasp.

Is this what happens when you let someone in? This strange connection, this feeling of another presence inside your mind?

My father would have laughed at me. "Quinnie," he'd say, "you're overthinking again." Then he'd ruffle my hair and tell me to trust my instincts.

But my instincts led me straight into Varnok's arms, and now I can't think straight. If I let myself care too much, if I let myself believe we could be more than just a diplomatic fling...

I'd lose him. Just like I lost Dad.

Just like the Solari are going to lose their moon.

The thought ignites a flash of anger. I reach down, grab a smooth stone from the decorative border of the path, and hurl it as hard as I can into the dense foliage.

There's no sound of impact. No rustle of leaves. Nothing.

Then, a figure emerges from between the fronds of a massive fern. A Vakutan, scales black as obsidian, holding my stone between two clawed fingers.

"For a second, I thought you aimed this at me on purpose," he says with a smile that sends ice down my spine.

I take a step back. This isn't right. Security should have flagged an unauthorized Vakutan in the dome. The way he's looking at me—predatory, calculating—makes my skin crawl.

"Who are you?" I keep my voice steady despite the alarm bells ringing in my head.

He sighs dramatically, rolling the stone between his fingers. "Bored," he says. "My partner got the fun assignment of taking out your bodyguard. I'm stuck with a weak human..." He looks me up and down with contempt. "And a female at that. Tell you what, I'll give you a twenty second head start to make it more fun."

My blood freezes. Varnok. They're after Varnok.

I stand rooted to the spot, mind racing. The Dome is nearly empty at this hour. Security is focused on the entrances, not the interior. No one knows I'm here except?—

"Twenty," the Vakutan begins counting, his voice casual. "Nineteen..."

I fumble for my compad, fingers trembling as I try to send an emergency alert. The screen flashes red: SIGNAL BLOCKED.

"Eighteen... seventeen..."

I spin and run, my formal shoes slipping on the polished path. I dart around a massive potted tree, down a side path lined with bioluminescent fungi. The dome is a maze of greenery, and I have no idea if I'm heading toward an exit or deeper into isolation.

"Sixteen... fifteen..."

His voice carries easily through the garden. He's not even trying to chase me yet.

I duck behind a waterfall feature, my breath coming in quick gasps. Think, Quinn. Think.

Varnok is in danger. The sharp pain I felt earlier—was that him? Is he already hurt?

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"Fourteen... thirteen..."

I slip off my shoes, clutching one in my hand. Not much of a weapon, but better than nothing. The heel is metal-tipped and pointed.

"Twelve... eleven..."

My thoughts aren't on my own survival. They're on Varnok. Where is he? Is he alive? The connection I felt earlier—I reach for it now, desperate for any sense of him.

There. Faint but present. Determination. Pain. He's alive.

"Ten... nine..."

I move again, keeping low, following the curve of the path toward what I hope is the main exit. If I can reach the security station?—

"Eight... seven..."

The counting is closer now. He's tracking me, taking his time. Playing with his food.

I spot a maintenance door half-hidden behind a trellis of climbing vines. I dart toward it, yank it open, and slip inside.

It's dark. The air smells of soil and fertilizer. I feel my way forward, bumping into shelves of gardening supplies.

"Six... five..."

His voice is muffled through the door, but still audible. Still coming.

My hand closes around something solid—a garden trowel. I grip it tightly, backing deeper into the shed.

"Four... three..."

The maintenance door creaks open. Light spills in, silhouetting the massive Vakutan.

"Two... one..." He chuckles. "Ready or not, here I come."

I raise the trowel, heart hammering in my chest. But all I can think is: Varnok, please be alive. Please find me.

The Vakutan steps into the shed, his eyes gleaming in the darkness.

"There you are," he says. "Now the fun begins."

A blur of red scales crashes into the shed, slamming the assassin against a wall of gardening supplies. Tools clatter to the ground as Var and the black-scaled Vakutan collide in a tangle of limbs and snarls.

"Quinn! Run!" Var shouts, his massive fist connecting with the assassin's jaw.

But I can't move. My eyes lock on the dark stain spreading across Var's abdomen. Blood—his blood—soaking through his clothing. The wound is deep, and he's already lost too much.

"You're hurt," I whisper, though neither Vakutan can hear me over their combat.

They fight like titans, smashing through shelves and equipment. The black-scaled assassin moves with predatory grace, while Var's movements are powerful but sluggish. He's injured, weakening with each passing second.

The assassin notices too. His reptilian eyes narrow, calculating, and he begins targeting Var's wound with vicious precision. Each blow to Var's abdomen makes him roar in pain, makes me flinch as if I can feel it too.

"Not so mighty now, Annihilator," the assassin taunts, driving a knee into Var's wound.

Var doubles over, purple eyes clouding with pain. Blood drips onto the floor, forming a small pool at his feet.

Something inside me snaps.

I scramble across the floor, grabbing the first substantial tool I can find—a three-pronged cultivator with a long metal handle. It's heavy in my hands, but anger makes me strong.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"Get away from him!" I scream, charging forward.

The assassin turns, surprised by my attack. I drive the tines toward his face with every ounce of strength I possess. The metal connects with his scales and—shatters. The prongs break off, leaving me holding nothing but a useless handle.

The assassin's laugh is cold and cruel. "Is this your backup plan, Annihilator? A tiny human with a garden tool?"

Before I can react, his hand connects with my face. The force of the blow sends me flying across the shed. My back slams against the wall, and pain explodes through my body. I slide down to the floor, the world spinning around me.

Through blurred vision, I see Var's face transform. The pain in his eyes shifts to something primal, something terrifying. His lips pull back from his teeth in a snarl that makes my blood run cold.

"You. Touched. Her." Each word emerges as a guttural growl.

The assassin doesn't have time to respond. Var launches himself forward with renewed strength, moving so fast he's almost a blur. His massive hands grip the assassin's shoulders, and there's a sickening crack as he twists the Vakutan's head with brutal force.

The assassin's body goes limp, head facing backward, eyes staring blankly at nothing.

Var drops the corpse and staggers toward me, collapsing to his knees at my side. His

breathing is labored, his scales pale.

"Quinn," he gasps, cradling my face with surprising gentleness. "Are you alright?"

I try to nod, but the movement sends pain shooting through my skull. "You're bleeding out," I whisper, reaching for his wound.

"It's nothing," he lies, his massive body swaying slightly.

I try to sit up and immediately regret it as the shed spins around me. "We need to get help."

"I've had worse," Var insists, though his voice is weaker than I've ever heard it.

Despite his injury, he gathers me into his arms and struggles to his feet. I can feel his body trembling with the effort, feel the warm stickiness of his blood against my side.

"All you ever do is carry me around," I mumble groggily against his chest.

He lets out a pained chuckle. "It's a job."

We both laugh, then groan simultaneously as the movement aggravates our injuries.

"We should get ourselves some medical attention," Var admits, leaning heavily against the doorframe.

I rest my head against his shoulder, breathing in his scent. Even bleeding and battered, he makes me feel safe. "Var," I whisper, "who sent them?"

His arms tighten around me. "Kallus," he growls. "It has to be."

The name ignites fresh anger in my chest. "We need proof."

"What we need is a doctor," Var counters, stumbling out of the shed and into the garden. "Then we can worry about bringing Kallus down."

As he carries me through the lush pathways of the Dome, I feel his strength fading. Each step is slower than the last, his breathing growing more labored.

"Put me down," I insist. "You're making your injury worse."

"And let you walk with a concussion?" He shakes his head stubbornly. "Not happening."

"We're quite the pair," I murmur, fighting to stay conscious. "The diplomat and the destroyer."

His chest rumbles with another painful laugh. "We make it work."

And despite everything—the pain, the danger, the impossible situation—I find myself smiling against his scales. Maybe we do.

CHAPTER 16

VARNOK

I stand at Quinn's shoulder, close enough to feel the heat radiating from her small frame. My wound throbs beneath the hastily applied medi-patch, but I ignore it. Pain is just weakness leaving the body, as we Vakutans say.

What I can't ignore is Kallus Bruw's smug face across the table. His scales gleam under the artificial lighting, meticulously polished to highlight their reddish tint. He's dressed in what I assume is the height of galactic fashion—some ridiculous outfit with too many layers and not enough armor. Every few minutes, he checks his wrist chronometer, a gesture that makes my fingers itch to wrap around his throat.

This snake sent assassins after Quinn. After me. And here he sits, acting like a legitimate businessman.

Quinn's voice remains steady as she outlines another compromise proposal. Professional. Diplomatic. But I can sense the tension in her shoulders, see the slight tremor in her hands as she arranges her data tablets. The attack shook her more than she'll admit.

Kallus steepled his fingers, that infuriating smile never leaving his face. "A fascinating proposal, Ambassador Gellar. However, I believe we should wait for General Dowron's communication before proceeding further."

Of course he wants to wait. He knows what's coming.

My gaze shifts to Zantress. The Solari representative sits motionless, her expression

serene. Too serene for someone whose entire world is about to be stripped away.

I lean down, my mouth close to Quinn's ear. "Something's off with Zantress," I whisper, keeping my voice low enough that only she can hear. "She doesn't look worried at all."

Quinn's eyes flick toward the Solari representative. "I noticed," she murmurs back. "She hasn't contested a single point in the last hour. It's like she's just... waiting."

"For what?"

"That's what worries me."

The communication alert chimes, and the holographic display in the center of the table flickers to life. General Dowron's weathered face materializes, his pink scales looking paler than usual in the blue glow of the projection.

"Ambassador Gellar," he acknowledges with a nod. "Representatives." His eyes meet mine briefly. "Varnok."

I straighten my posture automatically. Old habits.

"I'll get straight to the point," Dowron continues. "The Alliance Council has reviewed Bruw Interstellar's petition for a Writ of Industrial Conscription regarding the mining operation on Jwoon X."

Kallus leans forward slightly, barely containing his anticipation.

"The writ has been granted."

Kallus's facesplits into a triumphant grin. He tries to contain it, schooling his features

into something resembling humility, but the gleam in his eyes betrays him. The smug bastard got exactly what he wanted.

"Well," Kallus says, spreading his hands in a gesture of conciliation, "I understand this might seem like a setback for the Solari, but I assure you there are no hard feelings on my part." He turns to Zantress, his voice dripping with false sincerity. "In fact, I'm prepared to compensate your people for their mineral rights in the form of one hundred billion credits."

The number hangs in the air. Even I'm impressed despite myself. That's enough money to buy a small moon in some systems.

Dowron's holographic image nods approvingly. "A generous offer, considering the Writ means you're under no obligation to pay the Solari anything at all."

I study Zantress's face, searching for signs of anger, disappointment, anything. But her expression remains unnervingly placid as she rises from her seat.

"I will inform my people of these developments," she says, her voice as calm as still water. No rage. No protest. Just acceptance.

Something is definitely wrong here. The Solari speaker should be fighting tooth and nail for her people's home. Instead, she's walking away like she already knew the outcome. Like she has another plan.

As Zantress exits the room, Kallus turns his attention to Quinn. "Ambassador Gellar, thank you for being such a great mediator in this difficult situation."

Quinn's spine stiffens. "An odd thing to say to someone who you tried to have killed."

I clap my hand over my mouth, barely containing a bark of laughter at her directness.

By the stars, this woman has more courage than most warriors I've fought alongside.

Kallus's scales seem to pale slightly. "Ambassador, I must protest these baseless accusations. I had nothing to do with any attempt on your life."

"Of course not," Quinn says, her voice sweet as poison. "And I'm not going to press charges against you, Mr. Bruw. You're right—I have no evidence."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Kallus visibly relaxes, but Quinn isn't finished.

"What I am going to do," she continues, leaning forward, "is use every contact I have in the Alliance and the IEC to make sure that NO ONE purchases minerals from your company. Not a single gram of ore. Not a single crystal."

The blood drains from Kallus's face. "You can't do that."

"I can. I will."

"You'll never stop commerce," Kallus snarls, his composed façade cracking. His hand slams down on the table. "It's the most powerful force in the galaxy after all."

"More powerful than friendship? Than loyalty?" Quinn stands, matching his intensity. "I've spent six years building relationships across seventeen systems. People trust me because I've never lied to them, never manipulated them. How many people trust you, Kallus?"

Dowron watches this exchange with interest, his holographic eyebrows rising slightly.

"This is absurd," Kallus says, but there's a tremor in his voice now. "The Alliance Council has already ruled in my favor."

"They've given you the right to mine," I interject, unable to stay silent any longer. "They haven't guaranteed you customers."

Kallus glares at me, his nostrils flaring. For a moment, I think he might actually try to attack me—which would be the highlight of my week—but he regains control of himself.

"This isn't over," he says, gathering his data tablets. "Not by a long shot."

As he storms out, Quinn sinks back into her chair, looking suddenly exhausted. The fight has drained her.

"That was impressive, Ambassador," Dowron says from the holographic display. "Though perhaps not the most diplomatic approach."

"With all due respect, General," Quinn replies, "diplomacy failed the moment the Alliance granted that Writ."

Dowron sighs. "Perhaps. But the Council made their decision. The war with the Ataxians cost us dearly. We need those minerals."

"At what cost?" I ask.

Dowron gives me a long look. "That remains to be seen. I must go—there are other matters requiring my attention." His image flickers. "Ambassador, Varnok... be careful. Kallus Bruw is not a man who accepts defeat graciously."

The hologram disappears, leaving Quinn and me alone in the suddenly quiet conference room.

"You realize you just made an extremely powerful enemy," I say, breaking the silence.

Quinn rubs her temples. "Add it to the list."

I admire her courage. Most beings would cower before someone like Kallus. But not Quinn. She faces danger head-on, just like a Vakutan warrior.

"What do you think Zantress is planning?" I ask, circling back to my earlier concern.

Quinn shakes her head. "I don't know. But the Solari are pacifists. Whatever it is, it won't be violent."

"Sometimes the most dangerous weapons aren't the ones that draw blood," I say, remembering an old Vakutan proverb.

Quinn looks up at me, her blue eyes sharp with sudden interest. "That's... surprisingly insightful."

I puff out my chest. "I contain multitudes."

She actually laughs at that, a genuine sound that makes my hearts beat faster. "Come on," she says, standing. "We need to find Zantress before she disappears completely."

I stride alongside Quinn through the corridors of the Superior Gardens Hotel, my senses on high alert. After the assassination attempts, I'm not taking any chances. Every shadow could hide a threat, every passing guest a potential assassin. Quinn's heels click rapidly against the polished floor as she keeps pace with my longer strides.

"Gas should have Sweet Charity prepped and ready," I say, checking my wrist communicator. "We'll be wheels up in twenty minutes."

Quinn nods, her blonde hair bouncing with the movement. "Good. The sooner we get to Jwoon X, the better. I need to see what Zantress is planning."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

We exit through a service entrance, avoiding the main lobby where Kallus might have eyes watching. The Armstrong air feels crisp against my scales as we cross the landing pad where Sweet Charity waits, her engines already humming with pre-flight checks.

Gas meets us at the boarding ramp, his golden fur ruffled by the wind. "Got her all warmed up and ready to go, boss! Oh, and I fixed that thing with the environmental controls. No more random cold spots in the cargo bay."

"Good work," I grunt, ushering Quinn aboard first.

Once inside, Gas seals the hatch and scurries to the pilot's seat. "Coordinates?" he asks, his fingers dancing across the navigation console.

"Jwoon X," Quinn answers before I can speak.

Gas whistles. "Back to where it all started, huh? Setting course now."

I drop into the captain's chair, feeling the familiar contours embrace my frame. Quinn takes the seat beside me, her small form dwarfed by the Vakutan-sized chair.

"Superluminal jump in three... two... one..." Gas announces, and the stars outside the viewport stretch into brilliant lines as Sweet Charity leaps into faster-than-light travel.

With the immediate rush over, I turn to Quinn. "I guess you don't need a bodyguard anymore, now that the assignment is officially over." The words taste bitter in my mouth.

Quinn's eyes remain fixed on the streaking stars outside. "This Jwoon matter is far from over, Varnok. But you're right about one thing." She turns to face me. "I don't want you to be my bodyguard any longer."

Her words hit like a physical blow. After everything we've been through—the fighting, the dancing, the nights spent exploring each other's bodies—she's just cutting me loose?

"Why not?" I demand, my voice rising with indignation. "Did I not perform adequately? Was I not attentive enough to your safety?"

A smile plays at the corners of her lips. "Because," she says softly, "it would be awkward if my bodyguard turned out to be my jalshagar."

The word stops my hearts. Jalshagar. Two bodies with one soul. The most sacred bond a Vakutan can experience.

"What did you say?" I whisper, hardly daring to believe my ears.

"You heard me," Quinn says, her blue eyes meeting mine without wavering. "I've been doing some research. The connection we have... it's not normal, is it? The way we move together, think together. The way I can almost feel what you're feeling sometimes."

I surge forward, capturing her lips with mine in a kiss that contains all the fire and passion of my warrior heart. She responds immediately, her small hands gripping my shoulders as she rises up to meet me.

"Oh, come on!" Gas groans from the pilot's seat. "You two need to be hosed down! There are perfectly good quarters below deck, you know!"

I break the kiss, but keep Quinn close, my forehead pressed against hers. "My jalshagar," I rumble, the word sacred on my tongue.

"Your jalshagar," she confirms with a smile that outshines the stars streaking past us.

The ship lurches as we drop out of superluminal speed, and I instinctively reach out to steady Quinn. My jaw drops at the sight before us.

"By the seven moons of Vakuta," I breathe.

Jwoon X hangs like a green jewel in space, but it's the ships surrounding it that steal my attention. Hundreds—no, thousands—of Ataxian vessels form a protective sphere around the planet. The massive capital ships dwarf even the largest Alliance cruisers I've fought against, their distinctive flame-shaped hulls gleaming in the light of Jwoon's sun.

"No wonder Zantress was so relaxed," Quinn whispers, her face pale as she stares at the armada. "She had backup."

Gas's fingers fly across the control panel, his golden fur standing on end. "I'm counting at least thirty capital ships, over a hundred cruisers, and... sweet mother of mercy... thousands of star fighters." His voice cracks. "Boss, they could glass half the sector with that kind of firepower."

I slam my fist against the armrest of my chair, denting the metal. "That conniving little—" I cut myself off, remembering that Quinn respects the Solari leader. "She played us. Played everyone."

"But the Solari are pacifists," Quinn protests, though I can see doubt creeping into her eyes. "They wouldn't..."

"They wouldn't fight," I finish for her. "But apparently they're fine with others fighting for them."

Gas's ears flatten against his head. "What happens when the Alliance fleet gets here to enforce the Writ?" he asks fearfully.

The answer is obvious, hanging between us like a blade about to fall.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

"The Centuries War," I growl, the words tasting like ash in my mouth. "Starts up all over again."

Quinn sinks back into her chair, her small frame seeming to collapse in on itself. I know what she's thinking without her having to say it. Not only did she fail to help the Solari, but now it looks like she failed so badly that she's going to start an intergalactic war.

I reach over and take her hand in mine, my red scales a stark contrast against her pale skin.

"This isn't your fault," I say firmly.

"I was supposed to find a peaceful solution," she whispers. "And now look what's happening."

"We don't know what's happening yet," I counter, straightening in my seat. My warrior instincts are kicking in, pushing aside shock and replacing it with tactical assessment. "Gas, any communications from either side?"

"Nothing on open channels, boss," Gas replies, his paws still working the console. "But there's a lot of encrypted chatter between the Ataxian ships."

I make a decision. "Hail Zantress."

Quinn looks at me with surprise. "What are you planning?"

I bare my teeth in what humans might mistake for a smile. "To remind her what it means to face a Vakutan warrior in battle—even if it's just with words."

CHAPTER 17

QUINN

I watch Varnok's massive red finger stab the comms button with more restraint than I'd expect. My heart hammers against my ribs. This can't be happening.

"Hailing Speaker Zantress," Gas announces, his voice tight with tension.

The holoscreen flickers, and Zantress's weathered grolgath face materializes before us. Her leathery skin looks more drawn than usual, her expression solemn.

"Ambassador Gellar," she says, inclining her head slightly. "I had not expected to see you again so soon."

"What's going on, Zantress?" I demand, stepping forward. "An Ataxian fleet? This wasn't part of our negotiations."

Zantress folds her hands in front of her, the picture of calm despite the armada surrounding her. "The negotiations failed, Ambassador. I have formally petitioned for the Solari of Jwoon X to be incorporated into the Ataxian Coalition. They have agreed to grant us provisional membership and are here to protect their territory."

My mouth goes dry. "Their territory? Zantress, this is insanity. The Alliance will be here any moment with their own fleet to enforce Kallus's Writ. This is only going to lead to war." I step closer to the screen, desperate to make her understand. "Is that what you want? Aren't the Solari supposed to be about peace?"

Something flickers across Zantress's face—doubt, perhaps, or regret. For a moment, the mask of the hardened negotiator slips, and I glimpse the true believer underneath.

"The Solari way is peace," she says quietly. "But what peace is there in being driven from our homes? In watching our sacred groves torn apart for profit? Sometimes standing for peace means standing against those who would destroy it."

"There has to be another way," I plead. "We can still resolve this matter without bloodshed."

Zantress's eyes soften. "I wish that were true, Ambassador. You have tried harder than most would have in your position. But I fear the time for talk has passed."

She raises her hand in the traditional Solari farewell gesture. "May you find peace, Quinn Gellar."

"Wait," Varnok's deep voice rumbles beside me.

Zantress pauses, her hand still raised.

Varnok steps forward, his massive frame filling the pickup area of our comm system. "I've listened to all of you talk for days," he says, his voice surprisingly measured. "Quinn, Kallus, you, the Prime Minister—everyone's had their say."

He crosses his arms over his chest, his purple eyes gleaming with determination. "Now it's my turn to speak, and for all of you to listen."

Zantress lowers her hand slowly, studying Varnok with newfound interest. The tension in the cockpit is thick enough to cut with a knife as Varnok draws himself up to his full, imposing height.

I hold my breath, not knowing what to expect. Varnok the Annihilator is about to address a diplomatic crisis that could restart the bloodiest war in galactic history. Part of me wants to jump in front of him and cut the transmission before he can make things worse.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

But another part—the part that recognizes him as my jalshagar—trusts him completely. And so I stand beside him, waiting to hear what the warrior has to say to the pacifist about avoiding war.

Varnok's massive chest expands as he draws in a deep breath. I've never seen him look so serious, so focused. Gone is the brash warrior who introduces himself as my next lover. In his place stands a veteran who's seen too much death.

"Speaker Zantress," he begins, his voice surprisingly gentle. "The Solari are unique among all peoples in our galaxy. You aren't a single sapient species bound by shared biology or homeworld. You're a collective of many different types from many different worlds."

I watch Zantress's expression shift subtly. She hadn't expected this level of insight from someone called "the Annihilator."

"What unites the Solari isn't the land you stand on," Varnok continues. "It's your philosophy, your deep love for each other, and your commitment to peace."

He steps closer to the holoscreen, his massive frame somehow less threatening than usual. "There are literally trillions of planets in this galaxy. What's so damn great about Jwoon? Let Kallus have it. Take the hundred billion credit payday and just relocate."

I bite my lip, watching Zantress closely. Her reptilian features remain impassive, but I can see her considering his words.

Suddenly, a massive figure shoves into view beside Zantress—a towering Odex with dark red fur and a glowing cybernetic eye that pulses an angry crimson.

"No one should trust the bastard who took my eye in the Centuries War," the Odex growls, baring his teeth at Varnok.

"Drach," Varnok acknowledges with a slight nod. There's history between them—violent history—written in the scars they both carry.

I step forward, ready to intervene, but Varnok's hand gently touches my shoulder, keeping me back. This is between warriors.

"Drach," Varnok says, his voice steady. "Both you and I lost a lot in that war. I took your eye. You took my brother."

The admission hangs in the air between them. I glance at Varnok, seeing the pain etched in the lines around his eyes. He's never mentioned a brother to me.

"But maybe," Varnok continues, "if two old soldiers like us can learn a new way, maybe the entire galaxy can too."

Drach's cybernetic eye flickers, its red glow dimming slightly.

"Don't just tell everyone you stand for peace, Zantress," Varnok says, turning his attention back to the Solari leader. "Show it by standing down."

The cockpit falls silent. Gas has stopped fidgeting with the controls. Even the ship's ambient hum seems to have quieted, as if the universe itself is holding its breath.

Zantress looks at Drach, then back at Varnok. "Your words are... unexpected, Varnok the Annihilator. But you ask us to abandon our home. Our sacred groves. The place

where many of our children took their first breaths."

"I'm asking you to save those children," Varnok counters. "Because the moment the Alliance fleet arrives, there will be no sacred groves left. Just debris fields and body bags."

I step forward, unable to remain silent any longer. "Zantress, Varnok is right. The Solari way isn't about a specific place—it's about how you live. The Alliance won't back down with Kallus's Writ in play, and the Coalition won't retreat now that they've committed to protecting you."

I gesture toward the stars beyond our viewport. "If shots are fired today, the fragile peace we've all worked so hard to build will shatter. Is Jwoon X worth restarting the Centuries War?"

Zantress closes her eyes, and for a moment, she looks impossibly tired. When she opens them again, she looks at Drach.

"What say you, old friend? You came to protect us, but perhaps the greatest protection would be to help us find a new home."

Drach's massive hand comes to rest on Zantress's shoulder. His voice, when he speaks, is gruff but gentle. "The Solari taught me that home is not where you stand, but who you stand with."

He turns his gaze—both his natural eye and his cybernetic one—to Varnok. "I still don't trust you, Vakutan. But I trust war even less."

A small smile forms on Zantress's face. "Perhaps there is wisdom in what you say, Ambassador Gellar. And you as well, Varnok the Annihilator." She straightens her shoulders. "I will consult with the Solari elders. If they agree, we will accept Kallus's

offer and seek a new world."

Relief floods through me, making my knees weak. I reach for Varnok's arm to steady myself, and his warm scales press reassuringly against my palm.

"Thank you, Zantress," I say. "I'll contact Kallus immediately to finalize the terms."

"One condition," Zantress says, raising a finger. "The Solari must have time to perform the proper farewell ceremonies to Jwoon X. Our departure must honor the sacred bond between people and place."

"Of course," I agree quickly. "I'll make sure that's part of the agreement."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Zantress nods. "Then we have the beginnings of peace."

The transmission ends, and I turn to Varnok, my heart swelling with pride and something deeper—something I'm finally ready to acknowledge.

"That was... incredible," I whisper, reaching up to touch his face. "You just prevented a war."

Varnok's eyes soften as he looks down at me. "I've started enough of them. Figured it was time to stop one."

Gas clears his throat loudly from the pilot's seat. "So, uh, should I set course back to Armstrong to finalize this deal, or do you two need a moment to celebrate not restarting the bloodiest conflict in galactic history?"

I laugh, the tension of the last few minutes finally breaking. "Armstrong, Gas. But maybe take the scenic route."

Varnok's arm wraps around my waist, pulling me against his solid warmth. "My jalshagar," he murmurs against my hair. "A diplomat who fights with honor and a warrior who makes peace. Who would have thought?"

I lean into him, feeling the steady beat of his heart against mine. "I think we might be onto something here."

"Yes," he agrees, his voice rumbling through me. "I believe we are."

I watch the Ataxian fleet break formation, their ships gracefully peeling away from Jwoon X's orbit like a flock of birds changing direction. Relief washes through me, but it's tinged with bitterness.

"They're withdrawing," I say, watching the tactical display as the Coalition vessels enter superluminal travel one by one.

Zantress's face appears on our comm screen again. "We will begin preparations immediately. Our elders have agreed that preserving life is more important than preserving location." Her expression remains solemn, but there's a quiet dignity in her posture. "The farewell ceremonies will take three standard days. After that, we will be ready to depart."

"I'll make sure Kallus honors every part of the agreement," I promise her.

When the transmission ends, Gas spins his chair around, his golden fur bristling with indignation. "So that's it? Kallus tries to have you killed, nearly starts another war, and walks away with exactly what he wanted?"

He punches numbers into the nav console with more force than necessary. "A hundred billion credits sounds like a lot, but it's nothing compared to what he'll make once those mines are operational. We're talking trillions over the next decade alone."

I sink into my seat, the weight of his words settling on my shoulders. "I know. But what choice did we have? The alternative was war."

"There's always a choice," Varnok says, his voice surprisingly calm. He's standing by the viewport, his massive frame silhouetted against the stars, arms crossed over his chest.

I raise an eyebrow. "What are you thinking?"

Varnok turns, and there's a gleam in his purple eyes that I'm starting to recognize—the look he gets right before he does something either brilliant or catastrophically reckless.

"Kallus hasn't gotten away with anything yet," he says, his lips curving into a predatory smile. "I have an idea."

Gas groans. "Last time you had an 'idea,' we ended up naked in a Fratvoy prison with nothing but our dignity to cover us. And even that was in short supply."

"This is different," Varnok insists, moving toward us with purpose. "Quinn, you said yourself that Kallus tried to have you killed. We have Daria's testimony?—"

"Which isn't enough on its own," I remind him.

"Not on its own, no." Varnok leans forward, planting his massive hands on the console. "But what if we could get Kallus to confess?"

I straighten in my seat. "How exactly would we manage that?"

"The same way I've won half my battles," Varnok says, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial rumble. "By making the enemy think they've already won."

Gas's eyes widen as understanding dawns. "Oh no. Oh no no no. Whatever you're thinking?—"

"I like it already," I interrupt, leaning forward to match Varnok's posture. "Tell me more."

Varnok's grin widens, and I feel that familiar thrill run through me—the one that reminds me why, despite all logic and reason, this warrior and I fit together so

perfectly.

"First," he says, "we need to make a call to Prime Minister Serenity."

CHAPTER 18

VARNOK

I stride through the crystal doors of The Celestial, the most expensive restaurant in Christmasville. The maitre d' steps forward to intercept me, his eyes widening at my size.

"Sir, do you have a reservation?" His voice quivers slightly.

I flash my teeth in what humans call a smile. "I'm joining a friend."

Before he can protest, I spot Kallus at a corner table, surrounded by Christmasville's elite. His scales gleam under the soft lighting as he raises a glass of amber liquid, basking in his victory.

Perfect.

I move through the dining room, ignoring the hushed whispers that follow me. Vakutans aren't typically seen in establishments like this unless they're providing security. I'm providing something else entirely tonight.

Kallus notices me approaching, his expression shifting from surprise to amusement as I pull out a chair across from him and sit down. The delicate furniture creaks beneath my weight.

"Well, well. The famous Annihilator graces my table." Kallus gestures expansively.

"Please, join me. I'm feeling generous tonight."

"I bet you are." I lean back, making myself comfortable. "You got everything you wanted, didn't you?"

Kallus signals a server, who places another glass of the amber liquid before me. "We all got what we wanted, Varnok. The Solari get their compensation, the Coalition avoids embarrassment, and the Alliance maintains its industrial interests." He raises his glass. "A triumph of diplomacy, wouldn't you say?"

I don't touch the drink. "Except the Solari. And me." I lean forward, my voice dropping to a rumble that causes nearby diners to glance nervously in our direction. "There's still the matter of you trying to kill the woman I love."

The smile doesn't leave Kallus's face, but his eyes harden. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Perhaps the Ambassador's ordeal has affected your judgment."

"My judgment is fine." I pull my compad from my belt and place it on the table between us. "Go ahead, Quinn."

Kallus's expression doesn't change, but I notice his hand tightening around his glass.

Suddenly, every holo-display in the restaurant flickers. The soft music cuts out. Then Quinn's voice fills the space, clear and authoritative.

"Citizens of Armstrong, this is Ambassador Quinn Gellar."

Outside, through the crystal windows, I see the massive public displays in Christmasville's main square light up with the same transmission. Pedestrians stop to watch.

The displays show Kallus in a private room, speaking to two Vakutan mercenaries—the same ones who tried to kill Quinn and me.

"I want them both eliminated," recording-Kallus says, sliding a credit chip across the table. "The Ambassador first, then her bodyguard. Make it look like an accident if possible, but I need them gone before the negotiations conclude."

"And if we're caught?" one mercenary asks.

"You won't be. But if the impossible happens..." Recording-Kallus smiles coldly. "You don't know me. You've never met me. And there will be no evidence to suggest otherwise."

The real Kallus lunges to his feet, knocking over his chair. "This is a fabrication! Computer-generated nonsense!"

I remain seated, watching as Armstrong Security officers enter the restaurant, their uniforms crisp and their expressions grim.

"The beauty of QE recording devices," I say casually, "is that they're impossible to detect. Quinn had one installed in her brooch after the first assassination attempt. Seems you got sloppy when you thought you were winning."

Kallus looks around wildly, then makes a break for the kitchen. He doesn't make it three steps before security officers tackle him to the ground.

Quinn appears at my side, her blonde hair gleaming under the restaurant lights. She places a hand on my shoulder as we watch Kallus being cuffed and read his rights.

"Looks like justice to me," she says softly.

I cover her hand with mine, feeling the warmth of her skin against my scales. "His head on a pike would be justice," I grumble. "I'll have to be satisfied with him being imprisoned."

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Quinn leans down, her lips brushing my ear ridge. "Compromise. It's what relationships are built on."

I laugh. My jalshagar. My diplomat. My Quinn.

I lead Quinn through the twinkling streets of Christmasville, her small hand tucked into mine. The city lives up to its name tonight—holographic snow drifts down between buildings, landing on Quinn's golden hair before dissolving. Storefront displays flash with multicolored lights, and costumed elves distribute sweets to passing children.

"Where are we going?" Quinn asks, her blue eyes reflecting the lights around us.

"Patience, Ambassador." I squeeze her hand gently. "Some battles require strategy."

She laughs, the sound warming me more than any plasma rifle ever could. "Is this a battle?"

"The most important one of my life."

We turn a corner, and the Great Memorial comes into view. The massive fountain stretches nearly a hundred feet high, its waters cascading in precise patterns that catch and amplify the lights beneath. The monument was built after the Centuries War ended, dedicated to all who died fighting and to the peace they never lived to see.

Quinn's breath catches. "It's beautiful."

"They say it represents the tears of all mothers who lost children in the war," I tell her, guiding her closer. "Both Alliance and Coalition."

We stop at the edge of the fountain. Hundreds of small flames burn on floating platforms across the water's surface, each representing a major battle in the Centuries War.

"I fought in seventeen of those battles," I say quietly, pointing to the flames. "I was proud of it then. Now I wonder what it was all for."

Quinn leans against me. "It was for this. For peace."

"Maybe." I turn to face her, taking both her hands in mine. "Or maybe it was to lead me to you."

Her eyes widen. I'm not known for poetry or sentiment. I'm the Annihilator, destroyer of Coalition forces, breaker of enemy lines. But for her, I find words I never knew I possessed.

"Quinn Gellar, I've spent my life fighting. It's all I know. All I'm good at." I take a deep breath. "But when I'm with you, I want to build something instead of destroying it."

The water behind us shifts patterns, casting us in a soft blue glow. Quinn's eyes shine with unshed tears.

"I love you," I say, the words feeling strange yet perfect on my tongue. "I didn't know what that meant before. I thought it was weakness. But it's not—it's the greatest strength I've ever known."

A single tear slides down her cheek. "I love you too, Varnok. I think I have since you

carried me out of that station."

I lift her chin with one finger, marveling at how delicate she is, how much strength exists in her small frame. "Stay with me. Always. We'll figure out the rest—your career, my... whatever I am now. But we'll do it together."

Quinn rises to her tiptoes, pressing her forehead against mine in the traditional Vakutan gesture of devotion. "Of course," she whispers. "I'm yours, after all."

I capture her lips with mine, tasting the sweetness of her mouth, feeling the warmth of her body against me. Around us, the Great Memorial shifts again, its waters forming a heart shape that pulses with light.

I pull back just enough to speak. "Jalshagar," I murmur.

"Two bodies, one soul," she translates, her fingers tracing the ridges on my face.

For the first time in my life, I understand what peace truly means. It's not the absence of war. It's this—this moment, this woman, this love that burns hotter than any battlefield fire.

I am Varnok the Annihilator no more. With Quinn, I am simply Varnok. And that is enough.

The chill of the night air clung to us as we made our way back to the Superior Gardens, our hands entwined. The city's festive lights cast a kaleidoscope of colors upon Quinn's face, painting her in hues of joy and contentment. I squeezed her hand gently, my heart thrumming with a newfound sense of purpose.

We entered the hotel, the opulence of the lobby a stark contrast to the simplicity of the moment we had just shared at the Great Memorial. The staff, led by the ever-

meticulous Odex, Roleach, afforded us a wide berth, sensing the gravity of the connection between us.

In the privacy of the elevator, Quinn leaned into me, her head resting against my chest. I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair. The ascent to our suite felt both an eternity and a fleeting instant.

Once inside our room, the door closing behind us with a soft thud, I turned to face her. Her eyes met mine, a silent invitation hanging between us. I stepped forward, my hands finding the zipper of her dress.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

With deliberate slowness, I peeled the fabric away from her body, revealing the soft, creamy skin beneath. I kissed the nape of her neck, my lips trailing down her spine as the dress pooled at her feet. My hands explored the curve of her waist, the swell of her hips, committing every inch of her to memory.

She stood before me in her undergarments, her body a testament to the beauty and resilience of all life. I knelt before her, my fingers hooking into the waistband of her panties, sliding them down her legs. My lips followed the same path, pressing kisses to the inside of her thighs, feeling her tremble beneath my touch.

I parted her gently, my breath hot against her most sensitive area. My tongue darted out, tasting her, savoring the sweetness that was uniquely Quinn. She let out a soft moan, her fingers threading through my hair, guiding me, urging me on.

I explored her with a tenderness that belied the strength in my hands, each flick of my tongue eliciting a gasp or a whimper from her lips. I reveled in the power I held over her body, the ability to bring her such exquisite pleasure. Her hips bucked against my mouth as I brought her closer and closer to the edge, until finally, she shattered, her cries of ecstasy echoing off the walls of our suite.

As she came down from her high, I stood and gathered her in my arms, carrying her to the bed. She looked up at me, her eyes glassy with satisfaction, a contented smile playing on her lips.

"Your turn," she said, her voice husky with desire.

She sat up and reached for the clasp of my pants, her fingers deftly undoing the

fastening. I shrugged off my shirt, standing before her in all my Vakutan glory. Her eyes roamed over my body, taking in the sight of my ridged abdomen, the broad expanse of my chest, the thick muscles of my arms.

She pulled my pants down, my cock springing free, fully erect and aching for her touch. She wrapped her delicate hand around me, stroking me with a confidence that sent shivers down my spine.

Leaning forward, she took me into her mouth, her tongue swirling around the tip before she took me deeper. The sensation was exquisite, a dizzying combination of warmth and wetness that threatened to undo me.

I threaded my fingers through her hair, not to guide her, but to feel connected to her in every possible way. She increased her pace, her hand and mouth working in unison, driving me wild with desire.

I could feel the pressure building within me, a volcano on the brink of eruption. But I wanted this moment to last forever, to bask in the intimacy we shared.

"Stop," I said, my voice barely more than a growl.

She released me, looking up with a question in her eyes.

"I want to be inside you," I explained, my need for her overwhelming every other thought.

She lay back on the bed, her legs parting in silent invitation. I crawled onto the bed, positioning myself between her thighs. With one swift motion, I entered her, filling her completely.

We moved together in a dance as old as time, our bodies perfectly in sync. Each

thrust brought us closer, not just physically, but spiritually, emotionally. With every passing second, the bond between us grew stronger, more unbreakable.

I felt her tighten around me, another orgasm building within her. I increased my pace, driven by a primal urge to claim her, to make her mine in every sense of the word.

She cried out as her climax hit her, her inner walls convulsing around my cock. The sensation was too much for me to bear, and with a roar, I joined her, spilling myself inside her.

We lay there in the aftermath, our bodies slick with sweat, our hearts pounding in unison. I rolled onto my side, pulling her close, never wanting to let her go.

"Jalshagar," I whispered into her hair, the word carrying the weight of our shared destiny.

"Two bodies, one soul," she repeated, her voice soft and filled with emotion.

In that moment, I knew that everything I had ever done, every battle I had ever fought, had led me to this woman, this moment, this perfect union of two hearts.

We drifted off to sleep, our bodies entwined, our souls intertwined. And as the first light of dawn crept through the windows of our suite, I knew that no matter what challenges lay ahead, we would face them together.

For I was Varnok the Annihilator no longer. With Quinn by my side, I was reborn—a warrior of peace, a protector of love, a partner in the truest sense of the word.

And as we awoke to a new day, a new future stretched out before us, filled with promise and hope. Together, we would build a life that transcended the boundaries of our past, a life that would shine as brightly as the twin moons of Armstrong, a

testament to the power of love and the enduring spirit of jalshagar.

CHAPTER 19

QUINN

The soft, ambient lighting of the suite cast a warm glow over Varnok's skin, turning his red scales into a tapestry of crimson and gold. His purple eyes held mine with an intensity that made my breath catch in my throat. I could feel the heat radiating off his body, a stark contrast to the cool sheets beneath me.

As he moved atop me, his powerful form both awe-inspiring and intimidating, I knew I was in the presence of a being who was as much a force of nature as he was a man. His every touch was electric, sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through my veins.

Varnok's hands explored my body with a reverence that belied his usually brash demeanor. He traced the contours of my curves with a gentleness that seemed at odds with his dominant nature, yet somehow, it only served to heighten the raw power he exuded.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

With a fluid grace that belied his massive size, Varnok flipped me onto my stomach, his hands gripping my hips as he pulled me toward him. I felt the head of his cock tease my entrance, the anticipation building within me until I thought I might burst.

And then, with one powerful thrust, he was inside me, filling me completely. I gasped, my fingers clutching at the sheets as he set a punishing rhythm, each stroke sending waves of pleasure crashing over me.

Varnok was a master of my body, commanding it with an expertise that left me breathless. He switched positions with the grace of a predator, each new angle stoking the fire within me to new heights.

In one fluid motion, he lifted me onto all fours, my back arching as he entered me from behind. I could feel his body coil like a spring, each thrust driving him deeper inside me, the friction between us building to an almost unbearable intensity.

His hands roamed over my body, cupping my breasts, teasing my nipples, until finally, they found my hair. He fisted a handful of my blonde locks, using it as leverage to pull me back against him, the slight sting of pain only serving to amplify my pleasure.

I could feel the orgasm building within me, a tempest that threatened to tear me apart. My cries of ecstasy filled the room, a symphony of passion that seemed to spur Varnok on.

With a final, powerful thrust, Varnok reached his climax. I felt him swell within me, his hot seed filling my pussy as he roared his release. And then, in a move that was

both shocking and exhilarating, he leaned forward and sank his teeth into the flesh of my shoulder.

The sensation of his bite sent me over the edge, my orgasm hitting me with the force of a supernova. I writhed beneath him, my body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me, each one more intense than the last.

Varnok released my shoulder, his tongue darting out to lick the wound, a low growl of satisfaction rumbling in his chest. I collapsed onto the bed, my body spent, my mind floating in a haze of post-coital bliss.

As we lay there, our bodies intertwined, I could feel the bond between us solidify, a tangible thing that transcended mere physical attraction. We were two halves of a whole, two souls that had been destined to find one another in the vast expanse of the cosmos.

Varnok rolled onto his back, pulling me close to him, my head resting against his chest. I could hear the steady beat of his heart, a comforting rhythm that lulled me into a state of peaceful contentment.

"Quinn," he said, his voice a deep rumble beneath my ear, "you have no idea how much you mean to me."

I tilted my head back to look up at him, my blue eyes meeting his purple gaze. "I think I have some idea," I replied with a smile, tracing the line of his jaw with my fingertip.

He returned my smile, his teeth a sharp, white contrast to his red scales. "You are my jalshagar," he said, the word heavy with meaning and emotion. "My heart beats for you, and you alone."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, my heart swelling with a love so profound it took my breath away. "And you are mine," I whispered, my voice choked with emotion.

We lay there in silence, comfortable in one another's presence, content to simply be together without the need for words. The world outside our suite faded into insignificance, the problems and conflicts that had plagued us seeming trivial in the face of our love.

Varnok's hand found mine, our fingers intertwining, a silent promise of support and solidarity. We were two very different people from two very different worlds, but in this moment, none of that mattered. We were united in a way that was both beautiful and miraculous.

As the night wore on, we talked and laughed, sharing stories from our pasts, our dreams for the future. We spoke of peace and unity, of the work that lay ahead of us, and how we would face it together, as partners, as equals, as lovers.

Eventually, exhaustion claimed us, and we drifted off to sleep, our bodies still entwined, our hearts beating in unison. And as I closed my eyes, I knew that no matter what trials and tribulations lay ahead, as long as we had one another, we would face them with courage and determination.

For we were Quinn Gellar and Varnok the Annihilator, two souls forged in the fires of adversity, destined to navigate the stars side by side, our love a beacon that would light our way through the darkness.

I awoke to the gentle rhythm of Varnok's breathing, his powerful chest rising and falling beneath my cheek. The soft, ambient lighting of the suite had taken on a softer hue, the transition from night to dawn casting a serene glow over the room. I lay there for a moment, simply drinking in the sight of him, this magnificent creature who had

come to mean so much to me in such a short amount of time.

Varnok's eyes fluttered open, and he gazed at me with a warmth that made my heart flutter in my chest. "Good morning, my jalshagar," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

I smiled, lifting my head to press a tender kiss to his lips. "Good morning," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close as he deepened the kiss. His tongue danced with mine, a sweet, languid exploration that left me breathless and yearning for more.

As we broke apart, Varnok pressed his forehead against mine, his purple eyes searching mine with an intensity that took my breath away. "You know," he said, his voice soft and contemplative, "I never believed in fate until I met you."

I felt a smile tug at the corners of my lips, my heart swelling with a love so profound it was almost overwhelming. "And I never thought I'd find someone who complements me so perfectly," I replied, my fingers tracing the contours of his jaw.

Varnok's hand found mine, his fingers intertwining with my own. "We are two halves of a whole," he said, his voice filled with awe and wonder. "Together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish."

I nodded, my mind filled with thoughts of the future. The galaxy was a chaotic place, rife with conflict and strife. But with Varnok by my side, I knew we could make a difference, could bring about the peace and unity I had dedicated my life to achieving.

"I see a future where my skills as an ambassador are needed more than ever," I said,

my gaze never leaving his. "There is so much work to be done, so many wrongs to be righted."

Varnok's grip on my hand tightened, a fierce determination burning in his purple eyes. "Then I will be there, at your side, protecting you as you serve the galaxy," he vowed, his words ringing with the weight of his conviction. "Where you go, I go. Your battles are my battles, your dreams are my dreams."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:45 am

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, my heart filled with gratitude and love for this incredible being who had pledged his life to mine. I climbed on top of him, straddling his hips as I leaned down to capture his lips in a searing kiss.

Varnok's hands roamed over my body, his touch igniting a fire within me that only he could quench. I could feel his cock hardening beneath me, a tangible reminder of the passion that simmered just beneath the surface of our connection.

With a grace born of our deep, intimate knowledge of one another, I reached down to guide him inside me. I gasped as he filled me completely, the sensation of him stretching and claiming me sending waves of pleasure coursing through my veins.

I set a slow, languid rhythm, each movement designed to draw out our pleasure, to forge an even deeper connection between us. Varnok's hands gripped my hips, his eyes locked on mine as we moved together in perfect harmony.

Our lovemaking was a dance of passion and tenderness, a celebration of the bond that united us. I could feel the tension building within me, a slow burn that threatened to consume me whole.

Varnok's hands moved to cup my breasts, his thumbs teasing my nipples into hard peaks as he matched my rhythm with powerful thrusts of his own. I could feel the orgasm building within me, a tempest that threatened to tear me apart.

With a final, powerful thrust, we tumbled over the edge together, our cries of ecstasy mingling as we rode the waves of our shared climax. I collapsed onto Varnok's chest, my body spent, my heart beating in time with his.

We lay there in silence, our bodies still intertwined, our breaths slowly returning to normal. As I closed my eyes, a thought flitted through my mind, a question that brought a smile to my lips.

What would we name our first child?

The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying, a reminder of the future that lay ahead of us. But as I drifted off to sleep in the arms of the man I loved, I knew that whatever challenges we faced, we would face them together.

As long as we had one another, there was nothing we couldn't overcome. For we were Quinn Gellar and Varnok the Annihilator, two souls forged in the fires of adversity, destined to navigate the stars side by side.